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Julia Wachtel : Kunsthalle Bergen, Norway

Brightly coloured portraits of cartoon men with round faces and rotund midriffs rollick beside paintings of black and white wooden sculptures that resemble pillaged archaeological artefacts. All in all, nine works, each about 60 cm high and hung almost touching one another, form Julia Wachtel's intriguingly titled series 'Emotional Appeal' (1986) (originally displayed at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1991 as a full set of 12 paintings). As I stared at them, I wondered what these ugly, embarrassing, perhaps intoxicated guys - their portraits mainly sourced from greeting cards - were trying to tell me. The fat guy on the end holds a trombone across his bare midriff, his gut busting out of lime green trousers (*Horn Player*, 1986). A skinny, ginger haired man is wrapped in a white bandage, restricting his arms like a straight jacket, whilst his mouth is sealed with two Band-Aids and his left leg weighed down by a ball and chain (*Speechless*, 1986). In between them, an Inca-like fertility goddess figurine, with large ears and stumpy legs, head held high (*Mouse*, 1986).

Even 28 years after she painted them, Wachtel's combination of renditions of cartoons and sculptures is both funny and baffling in its weirdness. Humour - and, specifically, caricature - is a multi-purpose tool: it can be used to speak the unspeakable, to refer to highly problematic issues, or to keep us going when things are literally falling apart around us. The best satire dissects and reduces its subject matter - often as a kind of behavioural assassination - to a series

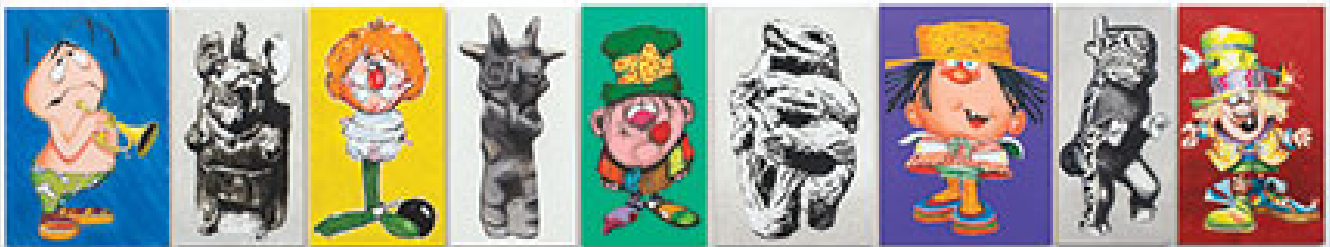
of signifiers, some of which are literal; others, like the representations of caricature Wachtel uses in 'Emotional Appeal', rely on our intuition and emotion to be interpreted. Yet they can also be down right mean, and more revealing of the person who created them than anything else. Here, Wachtel's sad, slightly grotesque men and the supposedly 'primitive' figures, construct a kind of anthropological commentary on the reductive stereotypes conveyed in this pairing of imagery. Wachtel herself, in an interview with Bob Nickas in the exhibition's accompanying publication, dissects the idea that these idol-like figures represent 'naive' emotions, or some form of 'authentic and unmediated expression', and goes on to state: 'I feel that this view of them as pure unsophisticated and unsocialized is a complete misreading, and is an interpretation filled with racist and materialist overtones'.

Alongside 'Emotional Appeal', the exhibition included two large works that paired screen-printed photographs with painted cartoon characters - *Landscape No 7 (?)* (1990) and *Landscape No 4 (Inside and Outside)* (1990) - part of a larger series of 'landscapes' in which Wachtel juxtaposed political imagery from 1980s media, such as the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and Tiananmen Square massacre, alongside slightly hysterical caricatures of little men. The former is a screen print of a woman in a white dress holding a crucifix, being followed by armed police. The latter comprises seven panels, five of

which depict screen prints of a pro-Palestinian demonstration, in monotoes of black and white, green and orange, interspersed with two identical panels of a little dude in a multi-coloured suit laughing his ass off.

Wachtel's work has been diseussed within an art-historicallineage that began in the context of appropriation art of the 1980s. In some ways, her work is akin to the darkly subversive use of popular culture and objects as a form of social commentary by artists like Mike Kelley. However, it seems more pertinent to consider her work in relation to everyday life today, as we are bombarded with imagery more than ever: the highly constructed aesthetics of acts of terror, the staged forms of 'affect' disseminated via our news sources, the multiple, performed selves both famous and non-famous people create, all co-exist in a kind of neverending virtual schizophrenia. Fundamentally, Wachtel's work was getting at questions of how we can read and interpret the act of representation critically, in order to consider how it may or may not function as a form of 'authenticity' and 'truth', and how to make sense of it when all these representations exist simultaneously with little hierarchy. In that sen se, her 'Emotional Appeal' is more urgent than ever.

Kathy Noble



Julia Wachtel, 'Emotional Appeal' (detail), 1986, installation view