



Coming out swinging, or rather flailing haphazardly and tripping up on its own enthusiasm, Arlo Mountford's exhibition is punningly titled *The flux of the matter*. This wilfully goofy combination of bad cliché and mythical art reference is a fitting entry into a substantial new body of work developed by Mountford, which merges a breathtakingly kaleidoscopic array of art historical references with an equally exhaustive survey of the various modes of comedy which have concurrently developed over the course of the last century. Strange bedfellows perhaps, but Mountford's collision of feted art and comedic traditions opens the way for a playful yet incisive revision of the terms under which we engage with art and the ways in which meaning is twisted by differing modes of communication.

Occupying the gallery's entrance and the viewer's immediate sightline, Mountford's *Samson Push Burden* is a slapstick reworking of Chris Burden's oft-cited 1985 installation *Samson*. Mountford's interrogation of this work signposts the artist's interest in the gallery as a site of contested discourse, meaning and ownership, but also pokes fun - at the capacity of art to critique it's own context, but also at the currency of such critiques in a broader artistic and cultural landscape. Burden's original installation placed a turnstyle at the gallery's entrance, through which viewers were compelled to pass in order to enter the space. Each cycle of the turnstyle caused a 100-ton jack to push two timber logs incrementally further against the gallery walls, thus threatening to literally destroy the host institution with the coerced participation/complicity of each viewer. Mountford's restaging of the work employs materials of dubious structural integrity, which cause the artwork itself to bend and buckle as it is pitted against the gallery, thus moving helplessly towards its own destruction over the course of the exhibition. Art can debate its own terms of reference endlessly and incessantly (and indeed, forcefully), but is anybody listening? The flaccid log, invoking a classical Freudian trope of physical comedy, subverts the earnest intent of the original work, but also breathes new life into it through broadening the context in which it can be read, and the cultural space it occupies.



Meanwhile, the screen-based work *Top 100 (February 2007)* humorously highlights the arbitrariness of ordering artworks – or indeed, any concept or commodity - according to linear, hierarchical value systems, whilst also acquiescing (with a good-natured shrug) to the very human impulse towards self-definition that these systems provide. For this work, Mountford has chosen what he deems an iconic work by each of his top 100 artists (which, being chosen at such a particular moment in time, seem to occupy a rather precarious position in Mountford's esteem - as music charts so readily demonstrate, number 5 with a bullet one week slides out of the top 100 with minimal fanfare the next). A defining colour from each of these works is then translated onto screen in RGB format and creates a seductively minimal, full-screen wash. Running on a continuous loop, each colour/artwork is randomly selected by a pre-programmed computer system, fading into the next, accompanied by the artist's voice enunciating the name of the corresponding artist in a *tres-60s* deadpan performance style. In a further twist, each colour/artist combination is punctuated by an earnestly-spoken verb, also randomly selected. The effect of this visual and spoken homage creates a kind of absurd but strangely compelling narrative which, whilst destroying any concept of a pre-existing, fundamental meaning or value in art, also creates moments of strange empathy or catharsis: in one possible combination, Pipilotti Rist *wounds* Fischli and Weiss, whilst you may also encounter Jean Francois Millet *stroking* Ugo Rondinone.

The 2-channel video installation *Or nothing* continues Mountford's ongoing experiments into animation as a means of probing the myths, misconceptions, and malpractices which arise around art. In this work, Mountford's now familiar generic characters become physical comedians in the best tradition of Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy et al, enacting several disastrous and humorous encounters with some of art history's most canonical works.



Invoking this golden era of comedy allows Mountford to critically revisit a plethora of artworks which have sought to dissolve the boundary dividing 'high' and 'low' culture (or works which have been redeployed as such by cultural discourses from commodity fetishism to art history) – a favourite subject of much postmodernist theory around the evolution of visual arts in the 20th century. The reverential treatment of art, perpetuated by historical discourse, museum practice and endless self-referentiality amongst other interpretive frames, meets its undoing in the various calamities which erupt from Mountford's slapstick spectacle, thus revealing the ambivalence and alienating distance which is inherent in these supposedly lowbrow moments. In these moments, art is no match for comedy, with its gleeful destruction of both boundaries and taste.

Yet despite its bluntly honest exposé of art's limitations and inconsistencies, Mountford's work maintains an open and even optimistic engagement with the possibilities for artistic practice. Though ever more fraught and contested as a site to generate meaning and action, Mountford's imagined encounters deconstruct the boundaries which are placed on art – often by its own processes and institutions – and argues that art still holds the potential to engage audiences and artists alike in unexpected, surprising and inspiring ways. What other option, when faced with such a monolithic and convoluted history, than to grin and dive right in?

Jeff Khan

Image Captions:

Front Cover: *Bonfire* (still), 2007. Back Cover: *Or nothing* (detail), 2007. Above Left: *Or nothing* (detail), 2007.

Above Centre: *Bear Attack* (still), 2007. Above Right: *Or Nothing* (detail), 2007