

# Tanya Leighton

Press Release

Math Bass  
'CLOWN ALLEY'

22 January – 5 March 2022  
Preview: Friday 21 January, 6–8 pm

Tanya Leighton, Berlin is pleased to announce Math Bass's 'clown alley', featuring new works that further the artist's interest in painting and sculpture as a kind of staging that influences how bodies move through space. In circus parlance, a *clown alley* refers to the "backstage" area, specifically the space between big top tents, where clowns would hastily perform wardrobe or prop changes. Hence, the exhibition's title intimates that Bass's latest body of work may be understood as props for a performance that is about to begin. However, the term *alley* is also suggestive of that other near-universal metonym for comedic entertainment: the brick wall of stand-up improv.

In a now infamous stand-up bit by Mitch Hedberg, 'The Improv Fairy Tale', the late comedian poses a question to the audience, "Now let me ask you this. Why do you think there's a brick wall behind comedians?" Hedberg continues, "Maybe in the old days, there was a wolf that did comedy, and he wasn't that funny. All the old clubs had straw in the back. But the wolf would have a bad set, and he'd huff 'n' puff and fuck shit up. Then we went to sticks. And once again, he huffed 'n' puffed ..." You get the idea. Mitch's bit highlights the strange cultural phenomenon that brick backdrops have become an enduring convention of comedy. And this connection seems to be of interest to Bass, indicated by the brick backdrops in two of their paintings, 'Through the Fog' and 'Clown Alley'. Both pieces make use of Bass's well-known clownish faces that they have configured and reconfigured throughout their career, as if like bricks themselves.

The themes of props and staging are further suggested by Bass's 'Tabernacle Curtain', which appropriates a 14th century rendition of the veil that concealed the 'Holy of Holies', the legendary 'Ark of the Covenant', which the Hebrew Bible describes was housed in the 'Tent of the Congregation'. For the Israelites, the veil functioned to conceal the voice of Yahweh, literally the Ten Commandments. But to the nonbeliever, the veil is not only a device that conceals a ceremonial "prop" but also is a kind of prop itself, drawing attention to the cultural practice of veiling and its power to endow things with an exalted status through concealment.

Echoing the themes of concealment and exaltation are Bass's 'Fruit Chair' series that unambiguously parody the rotating showcase display. Such revolving devices hinge on the action of revealing and concealing the products they feature in order to imbue objects with a kind of aura. Running through all of the above works, then, is a consideration of how certain modes of presentation condition the manner in which people relate to objects. And, at first glance, this interest could be seen to follow in a long tradition of critiquing the institutional mechanisms that grant art its alchemic qualities. But against this historical backdrop, Bass's dry humour does not seem so

caught up in pulling the curtain to expose bourgeois ideology. Indeed, missing from Bass's sensibility is a critical assertiveness that sucks the air out of the room.

Returning to a consideration of Mitch Hedberg's comedy might be instructive in reading 'clown alley'. Key to Hedberg's brilliance was his deadpan delivery of rambling non sequiturs that indulged in endless wordplay and turns of phrase. Riddled with stage fright, Hedberg would conceal his face under tinted sunglasses and shoulder-length hair as he subjected audiences to a meandering inner-monologue that somehow created an endearing (not to mention hilarious) persona. If being funny is a sign of confidence, then Hedberg's comedy hinged on radiating its opposite. As an entertainer, Hedberg felt like he could have been just plucked from the crowd. And for this reason, it is not so much the comedian's performances that were in the spotlight but rather the entire situation of comedy itself.

There is something of an affinity present in Math Bass's 'clown alley' for drawing attention to the humour of a situation without being overly prescriptive or moralizing. To be sure, Bass's comedy, like Hedberg's, pokes fun at the conventions of its own enterprise. But it also savours that enterprise's customs, captured by Bass's endless stream of formal permutations that make up the artist's visual vocabulary, hitting the viewer like a series of concise one-liners – jokes that demand no explication. The consequence of which is a disarming meditation that is both frivolous in its attitude toward Art and serious in respect to its passion for visual pleasure. Like comedy's brick-wall backdrops, Bass's jokes are just the props of the show.

Math Bass (born in 1981 in New York, NY) lives and works in Los Angeles. Their current solo exhibition, 'A picture stuck in the mirror' at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle includes a major kinetic installation alongside new paintings from the 'Newz!' series. The exhibition remains on view until 6 March 2022.

Bass earned their BA from Hampshire College and MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles. They have exhibited nationally and internationally at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles in 2018; Jewish Museum, New York, the Whitney Museum, New York, and Yuz Museum, Shanghai in 2017; the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo, Norway in 2016; and MoMA PS1, New York in 2015.

Their work is included in the permanent collections of Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego; Cornell Fine Arts Museum, Orlando; the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis; Kistefos Museum, Oslo; and Yuz Museum, Shanghai, China.

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The gallery is open Tuesday to Saturday, 11 am–6 pm and by appointment.