

GALLERY-GOING

Words of Wisdom and Wit

By DANIEL KUNITZ

The criteria shaping "Lots of Things Like This," a new exhibition at apexart curated by the author Dave Eggers, are as simple and deadpan as its title. Mr. Eggers sought work containing an image, some words, and a sense of humor — work that, for the most part, falls on a continuum between comics and graffiti. He has unearthed more than 100 examples by artists both notable and nearly anonymous, as well as some by a number of people not generally known as visual artists at all. His gleanings prove delightful and diverting, yet also grounded by a solid historical awareness.

Given the vernacular character of these pieces, it is perhaps inevitable that scatology, at times gratuitous, abounds. A schematic black phallus jutting across a sheet of paper above the words "Forget the Meaning. Just Enjoy" sets the tone. It's by the Southern California artist Raymond Pettibon, of whom one of the whimsical accompanying biographies notes, "fewer of his works were funny-funny than we had remembered."

Just enjoying this exhibition is easy; ignoring the meanings — which can be pointed, especially in Mr. Pettibon's agile hands — is less so. Another of his drawings depicts a woman, naked but for high heels, wielding a bloody ax over a man's severed head. It is coupled with the words, "Perhaps the fact that I hadn't had sex in 3 days left me vulnerable." A drawing by the playwright David Mamet, who turns out to be quite skilled in this sort of cartooning, satirizes the efforts of companies trying to promote their products as eco-friendly. A generic-looking bottle advertises "Not Tested on Animals," and then in small print toward the bottom adds, "Tested on Orphans."

Although the walls of this small space are crowded with examples, the range and variety of works establish a lively viewing rhythm. There are visual jokes, for instance, such as artist Steve Pow-

LOTS OF THINGS LIKE THIS

apexart

ers's cup stain, which was made directly on the wall, itself a small feat of production acrobatics. "With This Ring I Thee Wed," reads the adjacent text.

One might group the visual jokes within a larger category amply represented here: absurdist humor. For example, artist Tucker Nichols — who, along with several others, also helped organize the show — drew a line toward the top of a sheet of paper, labeling it "Almost Canadian." Jason Logan contributes two small circles below the word "Choose"; beneath the yellow circle is written "Hold On," beneath the blue "Let Go." The late poet Kenneth Koch's literate comics provide a more intellectual version of the absurdist joke. In one panel, rows of numbered tombstones appear beneath the title "Civilization...and its discontents." If you want to know exactly who is discontented, you're advised to "see identification key on next page."

Many of the pieces here fall into a category I call the somewhat poignant aperçu (or, if you prefer, bumper-sticker philosophy). Still, the glibness of this type of work is often redeemed by charming execution. The Canadian collective Royal Art Lodge, for example, hangs a small painting — folk-art style — of a cat with two mice caught by their tails under one paw and some snakes under the other. "Pay Your Way," reads its homily. A print by the equally Canadian singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen reproduces a drawing of a disgruntled man, probably a self-portrait, in a gray fedora and wearing an open-neck green shirt, and subtitled "One of those days when the hat doesn't help."

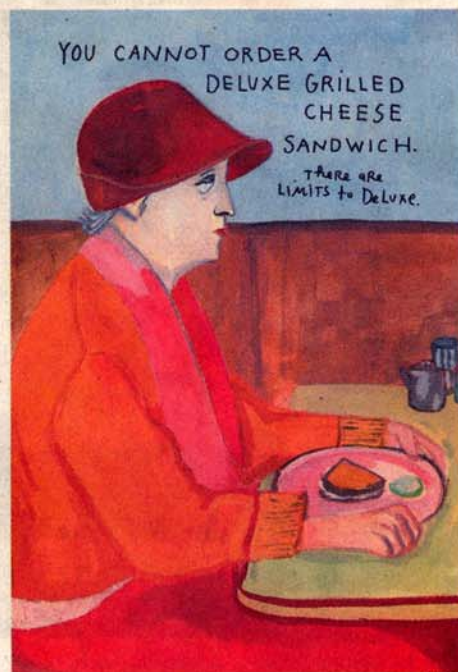
The variety of styles on display is almost matched by the variety of means. A clutch of sheets by the poet and singer-songwriter David Berman offers humble ink drawings, such as two stick figures with stubby mustaches standing on a

sort of pier, which is called "Spring Break Hitlers." By contrast, illustrator Maira Kalman pairs lushly colored gouaches. In the first, we see "Cheeseburger Deluxe," a burger replete with fries and a pickle. In the next, a woman in red, with a maroon hat, sits at a diner booth before her lunch, below the caption "You Cannot Order A Deluxe Grilled Cheese Sandwich." The Australian polymath Quenton Miller traveled to America for the first time in order to create his wall drawing, a variation on graffiti and narrative comics, called "What brings you out in these conditions?" Standing in an abstract, black and gray landscape, a man answers, in a thought bubble, "I'm looking for my lost dog." Elsewhere, the dog has his own thought bubble: "I have found my current owner to be unsatisfactory."

For Mr. Eggers, the sorts of pieces gathered here do not represent the mere effluvium of modern life: He knows well that humorous word-image pairings are as old as the ancient Greeks. Thus his show ends with a selection of relatively recent precursors, grouped under a banner taped to the wall, reading, "Blame Them." It includes a reproduction of Francisco Goya's drawing "Se quieren mucho," meaning "They love each other very much," in which two winged ghouls or angels embrace; a reproduction of Marcel Duchamp's infamous "L.H.O.O.Q.," the Mona Lisa defaced with a beard and mustache, and an abstract Georges Braque lithograph reading, "I laugh marvelously with you. That is my unique good fortune." Other precursors seen here include René Magritte, Andy Warhol, Saul Steinberg, R. Crumb, and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

A prie-dieu has been placed ironically before this wall of past masters. However, no piety is required to relish this wonderful anthology: only an open mind and the ability to laugh.

Until May 10 (291 Church St., between Walker and White streets, 212-431-5270).



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Maira Kalman, 'There are Limits to Deluxe' (2007).