

# THRU THE MIRROR

What is a cartoon if not a mirror? The brightly colored animations of our childhood reflect our society – twisted, distorted, simplified, and caricatured. We grew up watching good fighting evil and men wooing women. An endless cycle of glee and revenge in a world where tunnels are painted onto rocks, eyes pop from their sockets, muscles bulge, and carpets talk.

This is a world that is both irresistible and grotesque. It opens a window into our society's obsessions and hang-ups, our persistent stereotypes, and ideals. In the exhibition *Thru the Mirror*, the works by Özgür Kar, Martha Colburn, Joyce Pensato and Catherine Biocca play with this cartoon world that has wormed its way into our consciousness. The artists illuminate the raw reality behind the visual language of cartoons and borrow from it to make striking comments about the society we live in.

Take the talking skeleton in *Bearer of the bad news* (2021) by Özgür Kar who reminds us of the futility of our existence. The character resembles the mocking skeletons in medieval illustrations of the *danse macabre*, or the cheerful skeletons with rattling bones in 'The Skeleton Dance' (1929), an early Disney short. Only this skeleton is immobile, trapped in a box. It is not taunting us or celebrating the afterlife by scaring us mortals. Rather, it confides in us with an existentialist message that is all too real. We can take it from this character because he seems resigned to his fate, and, like us, just a little confused at the state of the world.

Death comes easily in cartoons, and Martha Colburn knows this. In her film *Dolls versus Dictators* (2010) a strange cast of characters from the archives of the Museum of the Moving Image in New York combats the evil dictators who ruled when the film was made. Charlie Chaplin, Pee Wee Herman, and the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers become avenging angels in a 'child-friendly' world in which eyes shoot rays and feathers cut into flesh. The violence seems outlandish but is actually not far removed from the realities of dictatorial regimes like that of Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov, who did not shy away from boiling his opponents.

In Joyce Pensato's work *Fuggetabout It IX* (2012) we encounter the raw realities behind cartoons. In the debris of her Brooklyn-based studio, we

are faced with large-scale, dark renderings of popular characters, dripping with paint. We recognize Mickey Mouse, Batman, Bart and Homer Simpson and yet we don't. This is what characters look like when they slip from the screen and enter our own conflicted and cruel world. Or rather, Pensato's world. By zooming in on characteristics such as thick lips, googly eyes, and bushy eyebrows, Pensato, daughter of Sicilian immigrants, called to mind racist caricatures, revealing the insider-outsider dynamics in American society.

Animation literally enters our physical world in *Catherine Biocca's* installation *Magic Carpet* (2017). In an environment where 2D cartoons and our own 3D environment collide, we are witness to a dialogue between two figures: a stone and a magic carpet (an unlikely father and son). The stone wishes to learn how to fly like the carpet and is asking for advice. The carpet is dismissive, causing the stone to sweat with frustration. What seems a light-hearted, absurd exchange, in fact confronts us with a disturbing trait of human nature: Schadenfreude, the capacity to enjoy the suffering of others that is so important in the entertainment industry.

*Thru the Mirror* takes its title from a 1936 Walt Disney cartoon. The short features Mickey Mouse who steps through a mirror in his dreams, just like Alice in Lewis Carroll's 'Through the Looking-Glass'. Mickey encounters talking furniture, and upon meeting a deck of cards, aggravates the King of Hearts. He must flee for his cartoon-mouse-life. The works of Özgür Kar, Martha Colburn, Joyce Pensato and Catherine Biocca illuminate the resonance between this slapstick universe, a place of cheerful cruelty, and our experience of the world.

Cartoons, much like mirrors, show us the world not quite as it is. It is a topsy-turvy world where everything is skewed. But it's precisely these shifts that make us see clearly.

Beneath the full-color surface of cartoons, through the mirror, lurk our darkest truths.

*Thru the Mirror* is curated by Aveline de Bruin.

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