

Press Release

November 23
December 21, 2024

Opening
Saturday, November 23, 2024
from 11am to 8pm

Still Complaining Forest

Olaf Breuning

Ecological disaster isn't obvious subject matter for comedy. Don't misunderstand me, if humanity were wiped out, I'd find it hilarious, but I'm not a good person. Yet even I don't find it funny when, through no fault of their own, jungles, animals and indigenous people are wiped out by the effects of industry and consumerism. Then again, I don't imagine environmental catastrophe in terms of a big globe tipping over a precipice (*The Edge*, 2024), like a boulder in a Loony Tunes cartoon about to flatten a character below. That's because I don't have the comic imagination of Olaf Breuning.

Breuning has made a career of challenging the belief that critique and comedy do not go together. His paintings, sculptures and elaborately staged photographs satirise the more corrosive aspects of modern life, from man's encounter with nature to the effects of technology on it, all while getting people to dress in silly costumes or show their bums. One example of his arse art is *Text-Butt* (2015), a cardboard cut-out of a behind with SMS text bubbles coming out of the crack. On the surface it's a crude joke about talking out of one's ass, or farting out messages. Deeper down, it's about the unacknowledged effects of hyper-connectivity on the gut: the nervous effects of being always on-call. *Text-Butt* might even be included with a number of Breuning's works which address the philosophical split between abstract consciousness and physical sensuousness—Descartes via the derriere. The invitation to such philosophising might also be a joke at the arrogance and pretentiousness of the art critic, who inflates the cultural significance of what is just a funny picture of a bottom.

Much of Breuning's work explores the word-image relationship and like text-art—think Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Ed Ruscha—draws upon signs from advertising (billboard style slogans), and popular culture (Bigfoot, animation) to, at least on one level, communicate clearly and immediately with a wide audience about existing political structures. But Breuning eschews cool conceptualism for absurdism and often vulgar joking; his word-image relationships belong more to the world of the cartoon, another mainstay of his practice.

In preferring to combine his ecological mission with entertainment and accessibility, Breuning's work seems to align with the post-critical tendencies of the last two decades. Thinkers such as Rita Felski and Bruno Latour, have argued that critiques of ideology and language have become too elitist, self-referential and pessimistic in their problematising of ideas, forgetting pleasure and attachment, which are particularly necessary when addressing urgent problems. Latour argues that critique has had an adverse effect on environmental campaigns, by undermining the idea of universal truths or essences which have opened the way for climate change deniers to claim that the facts of global warming are social constructs, open to debate. But I don't think anti-environmentalists are busy reading Derrida and Foucault, and in any case, wouldn't such thinkers lead us to question the powerful interests behind their denials? Breuning's art shows us that critique doesn't mean sacrificing pleasure. His work is irreverent—a playful poking fun at issues, even as he rallies around them. He approaches environmental concerns with seriousness, in the sense of being important and worthy of attention, but he does not take ecological representations seriously, approaching them without the solemn reverence and unquestioning regard that seriousness implies. In short, if someone were to ask of Breuning's funny work "is he sincere or not?" we would have to answer both

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“yes and no”.

The naivety of Breuning's cartoon exaggerations ensure us of his sincerity—he truly cares and isn't capable of duplicity. Even so, this grotesque overstatement inserts a touch of irony that pulls apart image and text, picture and message. *Leave Me Alone* (2024), a photograph in which Bigfoot and family stare anxiously at the camera, mid-migration, stands in for the plight of indigenous people forced out of their homes by capital extraction. Yet even as Breuning uses the pop culture figure to appeal to the viewer, the image offers a critique of a mass media more interested in a fictional avatar of early man, than in the real struggles of first nations peoples. *Gasoline* (2024) with its demonic red figure surrounded by flames, suggests both the damaging effects of fossil fuels and the reductive moralism which turns environmental problems into issues of good and bad consumption, encouraging a fatalistic stance that man must inevitably pay for his sins against nature.

Biblical signs recur in *Wave Land* (2024), a painting in which teardrop shaped rain produces huge waves threatening to engulf the land. Here Breuning nods to Arte Povera in using nature to depict nature, with his rudimentary woodblock printing circumventing industrial production. The childish images with floods of tears poke fun at the sentimentalism and infantilism of environmental imagery—think of the Keep America Beautiful adverts featuring Native Americans crying at the sight of littering—even as the work appeals to those same simple values. Then there is *Sunny* (2019), a video showing a young blonde boy staring into the camera, the earth in his eyes, until both planet and child start to burn up. It's a moving scene, despite looking like an outtake from Michael Jackson's much mocked 1995 music video *Earth Song*. The looped image, devoid of other narrative context, leaves unresolved whether the child is the victim or cause of planetary future destruction—does the son fly too close to the sun?—while the choice of a blonde blue eyed kid suggests the normative, heterosexist and frankly Aryan imagery of campaigns to save the planet “for future generations.” We may even ask if the formulaic, repeating image doesn't suggest the failure of this familial cliché. So much is at stake here: not only the future of the planet, but the kind of planet we want to survive. In short, Breuning seems to tell us that the issues are too serious to be taken so seriously.

Paul Clinton