

America's Absurdist Videos

Unusual Behavior Opens at CAF

by Elizabeth Schwyzer

When we look back at the dawn of the 21st century, we will remember it as the age of YouTube, Netflix, and reality TV; the era of 24-hour newscasts; and the first time a presidential candidate ran a winning campaign using Facebook and online video appeals. In politics and news, in information technology, and in arts and entertainment, it's the age of digital video.

This Saturday, November 14, a new show opens at the Contemporary Arts Forum (CAF) that explores the outer fringes of video art. *Unusual Behavior* showcases work by 11 mostly New York- and Los Angeles-based contemporary American artists. They re-appropriate the medium of video for outlandish performances, biting social commentaries, and absurd narratives. This is video as you've probably never seen it before.

Curator Heather Jenó Silva, who also coordinates CAF's monthly Forum Lounge performance art series, wanted to introduce Santa Barbara to the lesser-known, experimental edge of contemporary video art. She specifically was drawn to work that uses absurdity to uncover the darker elements in American culture. "Not a lot of scholarship has been done on the absurd," Silva explained over coffee recently. All of these artists, she explained, owe something to the Theater of the Absurd, the mid-20th-century movement in European drama that mixed vaudeville routines with nonsensical, grotesque, or disturbing images, as in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. "It's that idea that life ultimately is illogical—that there is no order," Silva said.

The films in *Unusual Behavior* range from home-video style to slick, professional production. Some are goofy, some are vaguely haunting, and some are downright disturbing. Many are self-referential, featuring the artists themselves. And all of them, from the most literal to the most abstract, provide some sort of commentary on modern American life.

Take, for example, Julie Lequin's film, "Car Talk." In it, French-Canadian Lequin plays three characters: herself, and Click and Clack, the hosts of NPR's popular talk show based on automotive troubles. Using a real question she sent in to the show, Lequin creates a farcical conversation full of wordplay and bad jokes, many at her own expense. The result is as comical as it is frustrating, especially for anyone who knows what it is to be at once a participant and an outlier in American culture. Lequin will also appear at CAF to perform live as part of Forum Lounge in December.

While "Car Talk" is a satire of public radio, Marie Losier's "Papal Broken Dance" is a surreal music video spoof. Those familiar with recent *Saturday Night Live* digital shorts like Justin Timberlake's "Dick in a Box" and The Lonely Island's "I'm on a Boat" will appreciate the six-minute slapstick video, featuring transgender artist Genesis P-Orridge standing in a boxing ring singing about love while men in old-fashioned singlets and women in tutus duke it out.

While Lequin and Losier's films provide carnivalesque entertainment that might appeal to young viewers, some selections in *Unusual Behavior* are not suitable for children. Among these is Tamy Ben-Tor's "Izaak," a nonlinear film that combines excerpts from the Old Testament with pornographic footage. Ben-Tor herself appears in the



Marie Losier's "Papal Broken Dance" is one of 11 films featured in *Unusual Behavior*.

film wearing a variety of crude costumes and prosthetics; there's an intentionally low-production value, kid-playing-dress-up aesthetic. "Izaak" touches on cultural, ethnic, religious, and gender-based stereotypes and leaves the viewer to make sense of the uncomfortable, frenzied rush of imagery.

And then there's "Blood Work," Julie Orser's delightfully slick send-up of the horror genre. At just three minutes, it's a gem of an art film, with one crisp sequence following another. Blood drips from a bare light bulb with an amplified splash, oozes from the base of a white leather handbag to the crashing minor chords of a piano, and splatters across a room to the sound of bowling pins being struck. The "blood" in question is thin and watery, making the film a pastiche of the gory horror genre rather than a horror film in its own right. And yet, when the camera pans across the faces of wide-eyed dolls to the sound of demented laughter, the hair on the back of your neck will stand on end; we're programmed, after all, to react to this stuff.

Whether it's transgender performer Kalup Linzy singing ballads about love and loss or Catherine Ross filming herself taking a nap on the uninhabited set of *Three's Company*, every film in *Unusual Behavior* unsettles our notions about reality in some way, forcing us to look again at what we thought we knew. Each of the films will play on a loop, so you can drop in for a quick taste or stay for the full cycle, which takes about 90 minutes. Either way, you'll find many of these films surprisingly accessible at the same time that they are challenging. "Art can be esoteric and hard to understand, and people will walk away feeling like they missed something," Silva said. "But video work can be kind of fun and enjoyable." Maybe that's because in the 21st century, more of us are conversant in the language of video than we are in painting, sculpture, or still photography. After all, if you ever watched *Jackass* or *America's Funniest Home Videos*, you've already got a good sense of what absurdity on film is all about.

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Unusual Behavior opens at CAF on November 14 and runs through January 17, 2010.

with an opening reception on Saturday, November 14, from 7-9 p.m. For more information, call 966-5373 or visit sbcaf.org.