

# BROOKLYN RAIL

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## THE 33RD LJUBLJANA BIENNIAL OF GRAPHIC ARTS: *CRACK UP - CRACK DOWN*

by Holly Bushman

The 33rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts *Crack Up - Crack Down*, curated by the collective Slavs and Tatars, is currently on display across nine venues in the Slovenian capital. First convened in 1955 by Moderna Galerija director Zoran Kržišnik, the Ljubljana Biennial was conceived as an exhibition of prints from states with which Yugoslavia maintained diplomatic or cultural relations. Following the founding of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961 the Biennial became an important showcase of works from NAM member nations, and the democratizing potential of the graphic in line with the Movement's "struggle against imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, and all forms of foreign aggression" (as Fidel Castro put it in a 1979 speech to the United Nations) was heralded: an emphasis on reproducibility, affordability, and ease of circulation made the medium a fitting subject for an exhibition with international exposure.

Presently the role of "the graphic" as artistic medium and political mechanism demands renewed scrutiny. In their introduction to this year's Biennial Slavs and Tatars propose assessing the graphic as an agency, a means of communication capable of dictating propaganda or catalyzing revolution, a democratizing potential shared—albeit subversively—with that of the satirical. This iteration of the Ljubljana Biennial seeks to integrate these themes, weaving together an investigation into the political implications of satire with an affront on medium specificity in the contemporary moment. The result is an exhibition which, at once humorous and profound, forces a reappraisal of our contemporary modes of communication. How has the "memeability" of the mediated present influenced (or detracted from) satire's potential for generative subversion? And how is this renewed visual fixation reflected in the realm of art?

The Biennial's nexus is the International Centre of Graphic Arts (MGLC), which features works by the bulk of the 32 artists included in this year's exhibition. Of note at the MGLC are works by Woody De Othello and Martina Vacheva, two members of a roster of artists whose contributions span a variety of mediums and messages. De Othello's sculpture *Warm Welcome* (2019) is, quite literally, a welcome into the discursive nature of the biennial: his warped ceramic assemblage of padlock, hinges, and doorknobs rests on the gallery floor as both memento of entry and confrontation with the "access" promised by graphic material. Vacheva's works confront folklore, exploitation, and gender roles. Two small ceramic sculptures, both archetypes of masculinity (*Uncle Greedy* [2018] and *Hercules* [2019]) see the figure distorted to the point of caricature, though Vacheva's use of medium suggests a subtle fragility. *Bulgarian Rose Queen* (2019) is a painting of whimsical yet incisive commentary, in which three women in flowing pink gowns stand between a backdrop of a field of roses and a reclining male figure. The man gropes the breast of the central woman while clutching a rose in his teeth, alluding to the exploitative nature of the beauty pageant while mocking the hypermasculinity that has forced its way into the center of the scene.

While the MGLC serves as a point of departure, a collection of smaller venues close to Ljubljana's city center offer more intimate confrontations with medium and messaging. In the DobraVaga gallery, located in a Jože Plečnik-designed building on the Ljubljanica River, Zhanna Kadyrova's *Market* (2017–2019), an iteration of a work the artist has installed in several venues worldwide, is on display. Ceramic oysters and steaks of salmon are for sale for €1 per gram. The offerings sit on a bed of glass ice, next to an antique scale where interested parties can weigh their purchase. While engaging objects in their own right, Kadyrova's seafood together with the larger display crystallizes the ephemerality of a spoil-prone purchase while bucking convention of the sale and distribution of art. Galerija ISIS hosts works by Nicole Wermers, including three works from the series "Givers & Takers" (2016). Each piece examines hygiene, purification, and the domestic: Wermers has created objects which recall the porcelain forms of a public restroom, such as the streamlined body of an urinal or an automatic hand dryer, which hang inverted on the gallery wall. Above each is installed a readymade kitchen hood. The quick expulsion of the abject in the works comments on a contemporary obsession with cleanliness to the point of sterility; Wermer's forms also suggest a near-stifling loss of affect.

Works by Xiyadie and Amanda Ross-Ho are displayed at Galerija Equina, and in particular confront the communicative nature of the graphic. Xiyadie's intricate papercuts are at once objects which harken to vernacular graphics (papercutting is a form of folk art popular in the artist's native Shaanxi Province in north-western China) and narrative scenes which, interpreted alongside their titles, suggest moments from the life and imagination of the artist. A series of small monochromatic works such as *Fish on a chopping board (Human suffering, depression, and helplessness are like a beheaded fish on a chopping board, but at this very moment we are still happy)* (2018) and *Boiling (A boiling pot resembles the helplessness and suffering of humanity)* (2018) are meditations on queer experience in the realm of the mundane and domestic, while two larger multicolored pieces (*Don't worry, mom is spinning thread in the next room [A love scene, when a high school student is at home writing homework]* and *Sorting sweet potatoes [Dad, don't yell, we're in the cellar sorting sweet potatoes]* [both 2019]), depict moments of clandestine sexual joy as part of a broader landscape of opulence. In contrast, Ross-Ho's "Hurts Worst" (2018–ongoing) a series of large-format textile assemblages depicting extremes of various Pain Rating Scales, hang on opposing walls. The expressive, brightly colored faces appear grimly comical: divorced from their medical context, and isolated from their less-pained predecessors, we are confronted by extremes which suggest the obscurity of ultimate agony.

Viewed in conversation, Xiyadie and Ross-Ho's works characterize varying interpretations of the traditionally graphic as it informs our contemporary relationship with the medium: where Xiyadie's papercuts direct our attention to the ways in which traditional craft can be reactivated, Ross-Ho's assemblages play on the ubiquity of recognizable imagery as commentary on collective trauma. In the broader context of the Biennial, a shift from forms and materials once implicitly graphic towards a generalizing stance on the medium is evident throughout, and these works serve to illustrate one end of a rich spectrum. Here, then, Slavs and Tatars has assembled a Biennial which suggests a democracy of graphic form: from works on paper which recall the ease of transport and dissemination once central to the exhibition, to readymades as equally compelling conduits of artistic messaging, one finds little difficulty accepting this broadened scope in order to parse the satirical.

Yet parsing satire from works that are outwardly artistic recalls the duplicitous nature of the concept itself: satire can bring subversive humor to the masses, or (as the proliferation of memes in far-right corners of the Internet confirms) work as divisive force and approach the propagandistic. While much of the art included in this Ljubljana Biennial outwardly addresses the political, one is left to contemplate the role of the works as manifestations of their messaging. Perhaps the best approach is to lean into the expansive nature of the graphic. We may read the works included in the Biennial as explicitly political statements, primed for proliferation via Instagram sharing. Or we may understand the exhibition in media res, allowing curiosity and compulsion to lead us towards new modes of inquiry and experience.

In addition to new and recent works the Biennial features archival material across several venues, which imparts historical precedents for the satirical at the heart of this year's exhibition. On the ground floor of MGLC a display showcases printed matter from prominent satirical publications which weathered Slovenia's transition from Austro-Hungarian administrate to member of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, namely works by the satirist Hinko Smrekar. Smrekar's woodblock series "The Seven Deadly Sins" (1927) is also featured in a room of the National Gallery of Slovenia, an offering which also acts as advertisement for a major retrospective of Smrekar's work to be opened in the same space in 2020. Moving beyond the realm of printed matter, selections from the Yugoslav cult comedy program *Top lista nadrealista* are screened at the ZVKDS Gallery. As noted in the exhibition catalogue, *Top lista nadrealista* is a sketch comedy show worthy of a place in the canon of satire alongside Monty Python and Ali G." With sketches foreshadowing the Balkan Wars and the current environmental crisis one would expect a degree of solemn hindsight in revisiting the show, but its inclusion instead serves to remind us that the potency of satire as a mode of critique is often thanks to the fact that it can be really, really funny.