

SET-UP

Kyle Beal

**Curated by Tarin Hughes
January 11 - March 2, 2014
The Elora Centre for the Arts**

Philosophy For Dilettantes

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what really
happend in Plato's
cave**

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UNTITLED

20”h x 16”w Graphite on paper, cotton rag mat, gold frame, glass. 2013

Set-Up, Kyle Beal

January 11 – March 2, 2014

The 2013/2014 exhibition season at Elora Centre for the Arts has incorporated artists, practicing in varied media from video installation to drawing, who are preoccupied with daily realities, domestic landscapes and simple pleasures. Kyle Beal's *Set-Up* focused on the artist's preoccupation with humour and comedy; utilizing language and wit he hinted at internal and domestic relationships, he revived the meaning of handwritten notes, he riffed on comedic tropes.

Beal's practice is complex, with multi-layered references to the Sitcom (as Patrick McEown elaborates in the following essay), newspaper comics, printing techniques, traditional art making and every day tools like sticky-notes and bic pens. In true po-mo fashion Beal handily accesses a variety of mediums in order to develop his practice; *Set-Up* surveys some of this diversity incorporating sculpture/installation, signage, drawing and a limited edition printing-press multiple.

The bulk of *Set-Up* rotates around Beal's sticky-note drawings, balancing a connection to historical trompe l'oeil works that incorporated letters, writing implements and other ephemera. Many traditional trompe l'oeil paintings symbolized the subject, hinting at their occupation, connections and intellect. Similarly, Beal sets a scene, depicting a common surface (a counter top, a kitchen table, a wall) upon which "sticks" a note with a quick-witted message or cartoon, indicating a larger exchange at play.

Beal's installations, drawings and participatory multiple reveal a double dialogue, both through the normative artist/viewer interaction and through the artist's development of himself as comedian; staging, writing and drawing for and to someone.

Tarin Hughes

Artistic Director, ECFTA



Exhibition view of *Set-up*

Now You See It, Now You Don't: The Sitcom's Elusive Object

Patrick McEown

In true prop-gag fashion, Kyle Beal's *Knock-Knock* invites and confounds, directing attention to the solicitous gesture and thwarting its reward. But while the squirting boutonniere and the palm buzzer draw clear lines between prankster and chump, *Knock-Knock* complicates that exchange and extends it into a seemingly endless quandary.

In this case the bucket and the door compete for the role of comedian and straight man, set up and punch line, but even this is misdirection, a ruse to concentrate your attention on a fixed spot while the act unfolds around and about you. This "bit" is, after all, around and about "you."

Despite being literally impassable, the door suggests figurative entry to a familiar thematic space, but crossing that threshold quickly proves to be more fraught than even the precariously balanced bucket would suggest. Like *Spy vs. Spy*, everything is booby-trapped. "Black is white. Up is down." Subject and object are caught in a perpetual game of Tom and Jerry. Who is acting upon whom, or rather what?

On the surface it appears to be simple shtick, the basic comedy of errors that underwrites every sitcom ever made. Or is it the rudiments of language, playfully reconsidered? Of course, it's both. Even so, this double knock is just the opening salvo to an as yet unproduced Freddie Ferguson sitcom called *The Art of Friendship*, languishing somewhere in a hypothetical future or past.

Given a few minutes to reflect, the shared ancestry of the sitcom and conceptual art practice should come as a surprise to no one. The astute observer will quickly recognize the features and mannerisms of vaudeville in both. If these are revealed as grease paint and false noses, all the better. Chicanery and counterfeit are the family's stock in trade. To different ends of course, as befits each branch of the tree.

Rising to prominence in the brief interval between the birth of cinema and the advent of television, vaudeville can be seen as a distillery of modern forms, concentrating a wide range of theatrical traditions and practices into an economical repertoire of gestures. Pantages being no Bayreuth, the resulting compression of time and space intensifies the excesses of these amalgamated traditions into a kind of pastiche or montage, rather than shoe-horning them into an edifying narrative. But enduring characters and types have emerged nonetheless. So while the television variety show is its most obvious legacy, vaudeville's humble origins and vernacular idiom also anticipated the ethos of the British post-war kitchen sink drama, which in turn provided one of the American sitcom's formal templates.

In terms of pure visual invention and sheer saturation of the mass cultural field during the same interval, the Funnies also provided an important crucible for comedic forms within tight limits, the straight-up vaudeville hijinks of *Mutt and Jeff* or *Barney Google* evolving into episodic domestic comedy/dramas like *Bringing up Father* and *Blondie*. It's a short jump from *Mutt and Jeff* or *Abbott and Costello* to *The Honeymooners* and from there it's a straight line to *All in the Family*, *Cosby*, *Seinfeld* and *The Simpsons* (by way of *The Flintstones*). In this trajectory, comics and animation remind us that the act of drawing and its implications are deeply embroiled in both conceptual art practice and the sitcom, with Chaplin and Keaton connecting Rube Goldberg to Fischli and Weiss through an absurd chain of cause and effect. The comedic resonance of an upturned urinal and the pithy poetics of a cartoon kitchen sink can share the same plumbing. Just ask Raymond Pettibon. *Vavoom!*

The banality and inhumanity of mass production is unquestionably a hallmark of modernity and a target for (or sometimes a symptom of) modern comedy. So while the antics between two characters in a tight space that we associate with a paragon of modernism like Samuel Beckett might take their cues from Ancient

Greece, what they share with the machine gun exchanges, or “bits,” between the Vaudevillian comedian and straight man seem redolent of technologies unknown in antiquity. Take Abbot and Costello’s “Who’s On First” routine. Please. Now compare it to *Waiting for Godot*. I’ll, uh...wait.

See? Both betray an almost mechanistic, fragmentary character in their repartee, despite the inherent humanism, but which is more entropic or existential? Which has a more elusive object? Which is more recursive to the point of imploding the narrow constraints of its premise and mise-en-scène? I offer no judgments, merely a counterpoint. Trying to draw definitive conclusions would be to miss the mark, if such a thing could be located at all. Abbott and Costello’s routine is certainly more condensed, the pressure of strict time serving to amplify the tension and kinetic affect of the piece. Beckett extends the intervals to conjure more space for reflection and reverberation. There’s a lot more time/space between “knock, knock” and “who’s there?” And who IS there? Let’s just say who is there.

In this kind of disappearing/reappearing act, the comedian’s counterpart is the stage magician, whose craft relies on sleight of hand accomplished by misdirection and strict control over lines of sight that the proscenium allows. Consider now the drama of Richard Serra’s *Hand Catching Lead* (1968) and how the anticipation of the event relies on the tight framing of the picture and an unspoken contract with the audience, namely that the camera is consistently aligned with the viewer’s orientation of up and down, reinforcing the illusion of gravity within the artifice of film (unlike say, Bruce Nauman’s work from a similar time period, where the medium’s veracity is routinely realigned on new terms). Sure, there’s the magician’s hand, but where’s the sleight, where’s the misdirection? The answer might be to ask which is the disappearing object, the lead or the hand? Ostensibly to do with one thing, the act of the hand catching and commanding materials, it is also figuratively and literally about the elusive object, which results in the hand being the surface drawn on by forces beyond its control.

Similar to Freud’s *Fort/Da* game, it’s a primal drama—entrance, anticipation, intersection (catch and release or miss), exit and repeat—whose tension depends on concision with framing, timing, and economy of elements. It is clumsy and elegant at the same time, or comedic and eloquent, if you prefer. It’s a disappearing act, not of the lead or the hand, but both, active subject and passive object status vacillating from one to the other. Now you see it, now you don’t. In the absence of the sovereign object, all that’s left is the act. This unstable object/subject relationship may be said to extend to the viewer who is, in turn, inducted into the process. Who or what exactly is being acted upon here? Where is the balance of agency in the exchange?

Which brings us to the acrobat or juggler. Again bound by forces of gravity, but temporarily confounding our belief in them. Objects and bodies are transformed into continuous spinning whorls across the spectator's field of vision. The movement isn't so much a consequence of bodies so much as bodies seem a consequence of their movements, contained and intensified—measured and scaled—by the shallow space of the proscenium arch.

All of this is combined into narratives of broad physical comedy like Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) or Keaton's *One Week* (1920), which is especially notable for its staging of the domestic space as a precarious and permeable object, constantly being reconfigured as a conduit for dramatic entrance or exit, until one final entrance/exit disintegrates its conceit as an object altogether. All that's left is its negative space.

True to spirit of *One Week*, the domestic setting and home economics are crucial to the appeal of the sitcom and the notion of striving that underwrites it. The object/space of the home is at once comforting and unstable, perennially a source of worry in the form of mortgage payments, repairs, expiring leases and evictions, only as permanent as the props and studio set that comprise it. Or more precisely, the writer's obligations to the audience. The sentimental narratives that fill it with overtures to the reliability of family and friends obscure its transitory nature. The reality of the sitcom home/set speaks to contemporary concerns about architecture as a series of functional systems (or even just a spectacle of systems) that facilitate labour or leisure, rather than a site for dwelling in the Heideggerian sense.

But if the physical site of the sitcom is just the housing for a mechanism—a veritable vanishing cabinet—then the fuel that drives the mechanism is also chimerical. Hitchcock called it a *MacGuffin*. Larry David called it a "chocolate babka" in the *Dinner Party* (1994) episode of *Seinfeld*. In either case, the object in and of itself is of little or no importance, it may not even appear, but simply provides a pretext for the antics that ensue. The entropic futility of the chase may even be made obvious to the viewer at the outset, but the momentum of watching the characters unravel under pressure is irresistible. It's like proxy psychoanalysis as the on-screen libido tips over into the death drive, thereby turning a half hour on the couch into a half hour "on the couch."

But even if the sitcom's props are ruses and the set is simply a conduit for action, neither of these is neutral. Staging areas vary depending on a given show's agenda and target audience, most often between living room and kitchen. In *Roseanne* the kitchen is more prominent and politicized with respect to its address of gendered labour. In *Seinfeld* Jerry's kitchen and living room are condensed to reflect the urban setting and the bachelor life the character

character “enjoys.” As a result, the drama is concentrated in a very tight space, much more classic vaudevillian. The kitchen door is literally *Entrance: Stage Right*.

In sitcoms doorways are thresholds between different precincts of the house that speak to varying ratios of private to public. Kramer’s habitual transgression of Jerry’s kitchen renders the notion of a door as entirely notional—more like a switch to be flipped than an obstruction—and privacy itself becomes a running gag. The door as an invisible fulcrum is pointedly dramatized in HBO’s short lived series from 2006 *Lucky Louie*, where the premise of an entire episode is built around the problems of removing the door to Louie’s apartment. In the absence of a door, entrance and exit become problematized, instead of taken for granted. The threshold becomes a focal point. Broad theatricality condensed onto the domestic stage affectively implies larger forces at play beyond the stage doors and the artifice of drama. Privacy and intimacy are cast in perpetual tension with the collective jostle of the public sphere, one always threatening to burst its seams and spill into the other. But little of it is denied display for the sitcom viewer. That barrier is mostly transparent. Nonetheless, to the degree that we identify “I” with “home,” the question of which side of the door you’re on becomes significant. As in signifier/signified significant. Even if you’re simply watching two people on either side of that divide, it begs the question of where “you” are in that exchange.

So what happens when a door in (or to) a sitcom doesn’t open or can’t be opened? What happens when the object doesn’t vanish behind its function, but insists on itself (even as artifice) to the point where everything else disappears? Sure, if that bucket wasn’t there I bet you’d be tempted to reach out and turn the knob, hinges be damned. But then you’d be in the show. Or would you? Here, let’s try a read-through.

“Knock, knock...”



Freddy Fergusons

**Freelance
Funnies**





THE HECKLER

30”h x 24”w x 2.5”d. Aluminum, ink jet on transparency mounted to Plexiglas mirror, window tint. 2012/ 2013

< Previous page:

KNOCK- KNOCK

90”h x 32”w x 2.5”d. Glass, 23k gold leaf, wood, tin bucket, micro-controller, custom programming, various. 2013



Freddy Ferugons
Freelance Funnies

123 Burr Oak Street Kalamzoo MI USA 49001
tel: make-u-laugh / 625-385-2844



April 1. 2013

To whom it may concern,

Are you looking for a new weekly half hour situational comedy on your network that would tickle the funny bone of America and be a real ratings smash! Well if so then have I got the idea for you!

Series Name: The Art of Friendship

Format: A half-hour weekly comedy.

Outline: A comedic characterization of two twenty-something friends from a Midwest art college sharing an art studio in New York City. One is super successful and while the other struggles. Together with a close cast of friends, lovers and art world insiders, they find out what it is to be successful, to grow up, and ultimately what friendship is all about.

The set-up is that of two friends occupied in the visual artist sharing a studio in New York City. The comedic conceit is that one of the friends is a superficial and somewhat ditsy but highly successful painter- Bennett (Ben)(#1); the other principal character is a seemingly more thoughtful and talented artist but unsuccessful - A classic starving artist type Larry(#2). The two principals set up a timeless 'odd couple' scenario. The majority of the action takes place in the shared studio, it allows for the conversations interplay between the two,as well as setting a location for various other characters to enter, furthering weekly plot-lines and adding comedic moments.

**Some of the other characters could include:

#1's superficial and craven art dealer Barry Bela, who is only interested in stroking the ego of #1 and securing more paintings to sell. The Art dealer character could also act as a source of torment and foil to #2. Think of the relationship between on series such as Seinfeld between Elaine and George, or perhaps a dynamic between the three of them similar to M.A.S.H's Hawkeye, Trapper John, and Major Frank Burns.

**Girlfriends for both #1 and #2. A contrast (and further plot-lines) could be set up between these ladies so that the girlfriend of #1 is perhaps more sensitive and understanding of #2's struggles and failures, while his own girlfriend is only somewhat supportive and looks to character #1 as something to be emulated and drawn to the power that both he and his art-dealer have in the arts industry; she could also perhaps work at the gallery that wont show her boyfriend.

Pilot:

Prologue:(Set five years in the past.) At their graduating exhibition #1 is approached by a high powered New York Art Dealer to have gallery representation and invited to move to NYC and become the Art Worlds next big thing. #1 coaxes #2 into coming alone for the adventure, sure the #2 will find a gallery and success once there.

(Set in the present) #1 life has gone as promised and more, insinuating himself into the high octane and often superficial world of commercial art, while #2 has yet to find similar success and continues to struggle in the studio the two share while also working a number of dead-end jobs with other artists and creative types to support himself.

A plot- #1 has a exhibition coming up at his gallery. During a studio visits with his gallerist, #2 forces the gallerist to look at his own work, with the gallerist offering vague compliments but an invitation to come to #1' opening the following week, which #2 takes as a sure sign of encouragement and interest. Together #1 and #2 make plans to take the girls out for dinner before attending #1's big opening.

-----Commercial break-----

B plot- #2 expresses excitement and confidence to his fellow starving artist colleges which is met with scepticism, they all work for a shady moving company and the promise of cash in hand at the end of the week. Money which #2 needs to pay his bills, and take his girlfriend to dinner. Meanwhile #1 prepares for his exhibition working with the dealer, and suffering through backhanded compliments and thinly veiled insults about his friend #2's art prospects. Insecure as he is, he lets it all slide not wanting to jeopardize his own position.

-----Commercial break-----

B plot- The big day. Back at the moving job and finishing up, as the starving-artist gang take the last boxes from the truck and anticipate getting paid for the week, the truck screeches off, leaving them all empty-handed. They go there separate way, but not before inviting #2 to a party later that evening, which he confidently declines still upbeat about his gallery prospects.

A plot- We see #1 and the two girlfriends as they are walking up to the gallery, the conversation turns around what happened to #2 and why he didn't come to supper, as they enter the gallery they see, and the camera cuts to show #2 in a servers uniform serving wine and hors d'oeuvres being gleefully presided over the the art dealer. #2 looks embarrassed and his friends look on with pity, and later with playful mocking.

-----Commercial break-----

Tag- The episode ends with the four friends at the 'starving artists' loft party, pleased with the evenings successes and laughing at its indignities, but importantly doing so as friends willing to face the next challenge together.

-----End Credits-----

**Running gags and re-occurring comedic bits could include:

Each episode starts with #2 reading a letter of rejection from some prestigious gallery or museum to #1. #1's foolish advice, and misconceived, but well intentioned attempts to help his friend could then be the thrust of the plot, that will inevitably end in hilarity and more of the same results, which foreshadow next weeks episode.

The accidental destruction of a #2's artworks in the studio, or mistaking those artworks for other non-art objects such as furniture or trash.


The question of when either of them is going to get a 'real' job being constantly asked by different cameo and bit players and a weekly basis.

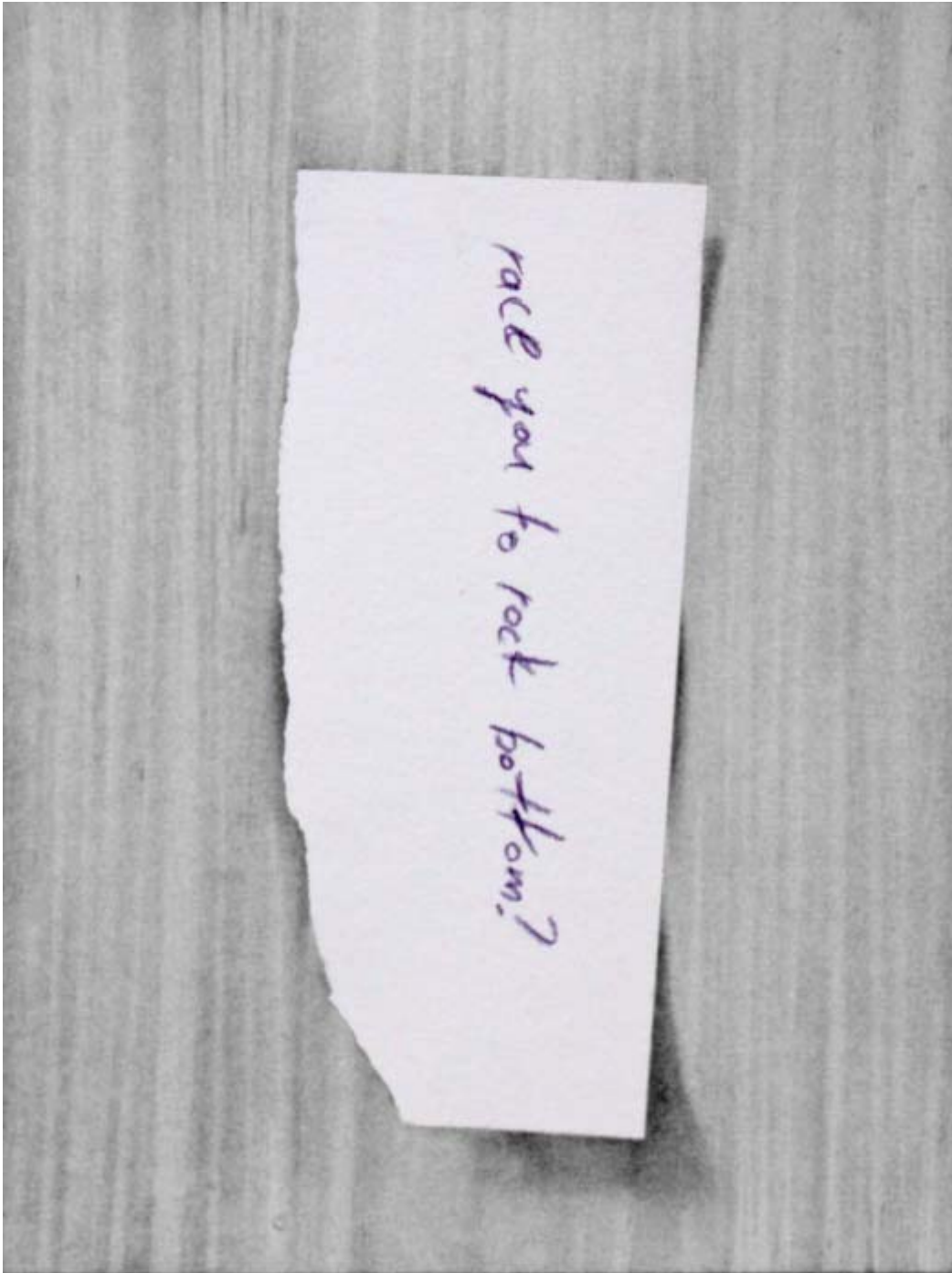
Real world Artists, Critics and Dealers making cameo appearances. Famous names such as Eric Fichtl, Jerry Saltz, and Marina Abramović

One-off, what-if and dream sequence episodes could take place in different eras of modern art, and even be stylistically realized in the flavor of different art historical moments and movements. For example: A dream sequence that takes place in a mis-en-scene of a Dali-esque landscape. Or what-if episode that takes place within the famous abstract expressionist hangout the 'Cedar Tavern' of the 1950's, to name but a couple notable and novel situations ripe to be mined for laffs.

This is a sure-fire recipe for hilarity, appealing too a broad audience of middle america with classic 'buddy series' and 'fish out of water' premises tried and tested within the sit-comgenre.. The 'Artist' angle provides excellent novelty and is largely untapped within the sit-com format, however the publics imagination and appetite has been whet with recent television with series such as 'Gallery Girls' and 'The Next Great Artist'.

Just joking around,


Freddy Ferguson



RACE YOU TO ROCK BOTTOM?
12" x 9". Charcoal and crayon on paper. 2012.



SIGH

12"h x 9"w. Graphite, ink and watercolour on paper. 2012



Exhibition View Left to Right:

LAST LAFF

9.5”h x 32”w x 2.5”d. Aluminum, vinyl on Plexiglas, LED's, micro-controller, electronic components, custom programming. 2012.

SIGH

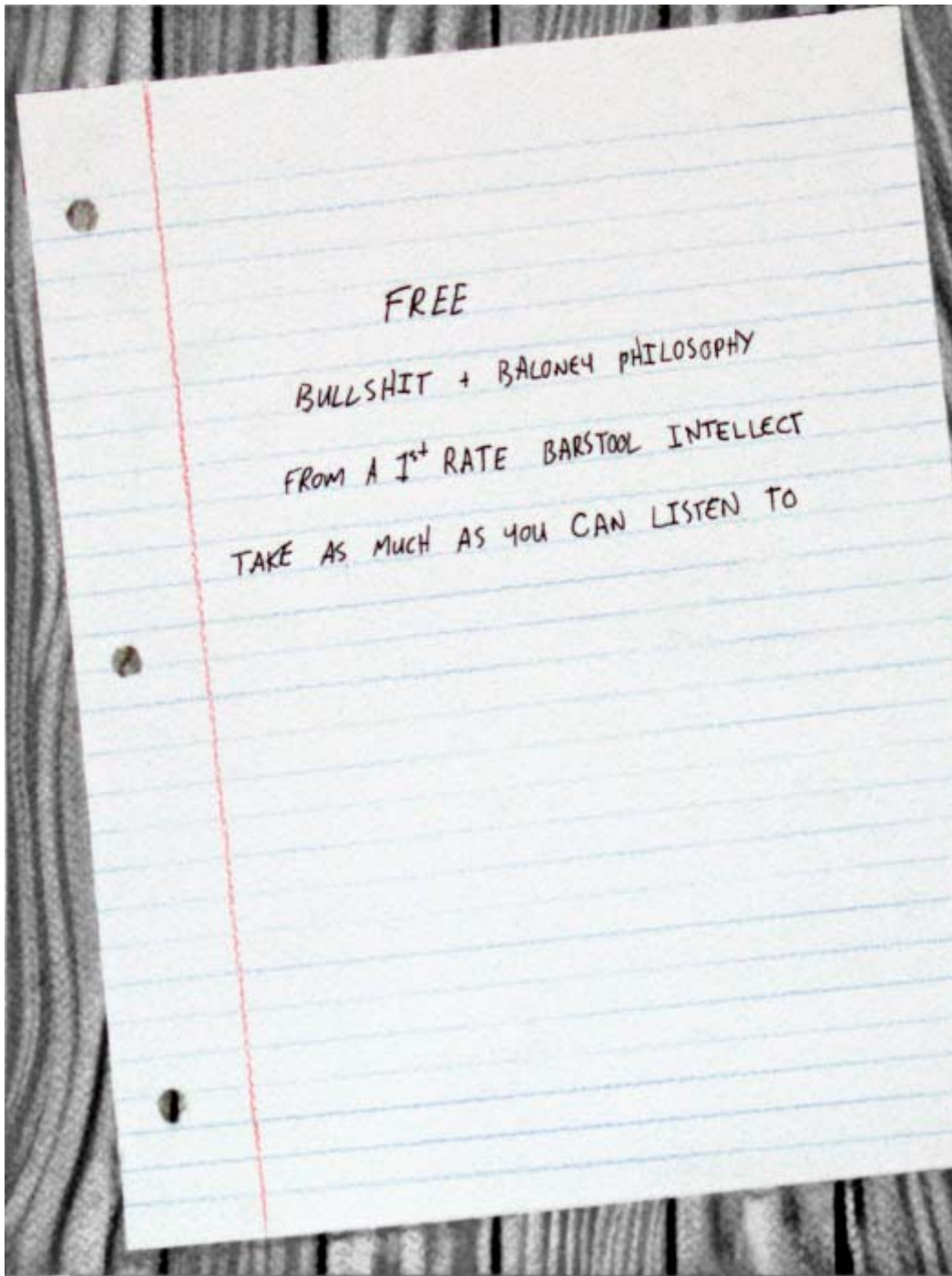
12”h x 9”w. Graphite, ink and watercolour on paper. 2012

Notes From The Kitchen Table *

Kyle Beal

This ongoing series of drawings started out simple enough; just sitting at the kitchen table brainstorming ideas. A classic location to generate ideas I suppose, it conjures an image of two friends planning out the next great invention, or less heroically a man and woman planning a family, or less heroically still, finding a creative way to save the house, or save the relationship. It seems almost cliché. One could argue, and perhaps I will, that the kitchen table is the anchor to so many types of relationships. A familiar trope well worn and most utilized (by my own accounting) in fiction and theatre; a result no doubt of the dramas and narratives that so easily spill off the top. This setting provides nourishment not just in the form of food, but also ideas, and conversation. Family and friends might gather around and discuss things both personal and external. The state of ones relationships be it between family members, lovers or firends are often

made and broken at this place, this table, at least in the way that I am setting it. So too, might notions and thoughts on the world at large begin to get addressed and contested between those same players. But this line of thinking starts to get away from almost cliché to just plain cliché. It pretends that it has all been laid out before even getting started. So I will say that this particular series of drawings were conceived elsewhere. More specifically- nowhere in particular. The kitchen table was where they began to take form out of necessity. That was the provisional space available to me at the time. The kitchen table was a stand in for a studio. Two aspects that are constant in my studio are drawing and language. The meat and potatoes as it were. The place where ideas like the ones in this series start is just through simple observations, walking around with open eyes, listening to others; especially when you are not part of the conversation. Really just taking things in and then making mental connections and calculations. This simple act, almost a non act really, is something like my daily bread. So when it came time to put pen to paper (or in this instance charcoal) I had a pretty good idea of what was to happen. A series of signs, and notes, small words that use economy and wit to create large ideas, and hypothetical relationships. Hand written notes, well they have largely passed by the wayside. Usurped by texting and emails mainly. As an aside, I recently overheard a person remark at the novelty and forgotten pleasure of writing with a pencil. A timely real life event that anecdotally affirms or at least suggests the notion that the act of a making a note has become somewhat anachronistic or at least quaint. A little like sitting down to make a drawing on a 12 x 9 sheet of paper. A size appropriate for this makeshift studio. So we are back to the kitchen table, as a common surface a public place within the house, a location to put a note for yourself or another- it will be seen. Everyone passes the kitchen table in a home. With the size somewhat dictated by the space available and somewhat by the intimate nature of the endeavour, a drawing starts to emerge. The formal properties of the drawings relates and reinforces this idea. A small yellow square of paper on a surface is inherently graphic. I imagine 3M designed the original product to be that way. Noticeable, but not offensively so. And so with a wash of watercolour I replicate that ubiquitous yellow square within the larger paper. The backgrounds are completed in charcoal, one of the oldest materials available for image making. Charcoal a byproduct created from the wood used to cook the food and illuminate the conversation in those pre-electricity times. So it seems fitting that what the charcoal is used to render is the domestic surfaces that frame the action, doors and door ways, walls, but predominately kitchen table tops. The drawings become a starting point to cook up relationships, tell half baked stories, and serve up small portions of laughter and drama



FREE

12"h x 9"w. Charcoal, ink and pencil crayon on paper. 2012.



TURNED ON

12"h x 9"w. Charcoal, ink and watercolour on paper. 2012



THE COMIC

30"h x 24"w x 2.5"d. Aluminum, ink jet on transparency mounted to Plexiglas mirror, window tint. 2012/ 2013

About the Contributors

Kyle Beal is a Calgary based Visual Artist. He graduated from the Alberta College of Art and Design in 2001 and holds a Masters degree in visual art from the University of Victoria (2004). His work has been featured in exhibitions throughout Canada.

Tarin Hughes was born in Charlottetown, PEI and has lived in Alberta, British Columbia, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Ontario and now, Saskatchewan. Hughes received her Honours B.A. in Art History from the University of Waterloo and as a student began her work in the community as Director/Curator of the University of Waterloo's Artery Gallery, a student gallery initiated by artist and Professor Emeritus, Art Green.

In the past she has worked as an Educator and Community Curator at the KW|AG (Kitchener, ON), Gallery Manager at the UWAG (Waterloo, ON), Curator and Community Programmer at Ross Creek Centre for the Arts (Canning, NS) and Education Coordinator at the Kamloops Art Gallery (Kamloops, BC). During summer 2013, Hughes volunteered with the National Gallery of Canada at the 55th Venice Biennale. Recently, she worked as the Artistic Director at Elora Centre for the Arts, curating exhibitions with Soft Turns (Sarah Jane Gornitz and Wojciech Olejnik), Erin Perry, Kyle Beal, David Jensenius, Maggie Groat and Barbara Hobot.

Patrick McEown teaches drawing at Concordia University in Montreal. He knows a thing or two about humour because he's also been a cartoonist and an illustrator for 28 years, 15 of those spent working in TV animation. He is, himself, only sometimes funny. But wordy...oh geez. Concision is for conceptual artists, he says.



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Photographs by Kyle Beal

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