

Uncontained Hilarity: On Libby Rothfeld’s Jokes

Troy Sherman

“We can begin by saying that in the joke form, wherever we find it, something is released or undone — that the joke unbinds something bound.”¹

—André Jolles

Bags, tubs, glasses, casks, barrels, holes, boxes, slots — Libby Rothfeld’s work is full of containers. Straight away, you can spot several in this exhibition. *Felix’s Community* (#5) has a bin with a bunch of salt shakers inside it, plus two cubbies holding a trash bag each. A pair of big aluminum drums makes up *The Punisher’s Collections*, and in those drums are sneakers. *Option #3* has a shopping basket on top of it that’s full of potatoes. *Walking (Mask and Hat)* features a hat (sort of a holder for the head).

Through the late 2010s, water bottles recurred in much of the work Rothfeld was making. More recently, she’s focused a whole series on those vacuum-seal bags you use for storing clothes in the basement. Other works that are not included in this exhibition (which brings together 10 pieces made over the last nine years) feature shot glasses, plate racks, plastic cups, dishes, totes, drawers, niches, and jugs.

Clearly, Rothfeld is obsessed with stuff that holds other stuff.

But this obsession goes way beyond obvious containers like bottles and bags. Rather, containment is a structuring principle for Rothfeld: in her work, objects that hold other objects stand in for a general conception she has about how meaning operates, and how art can intervene on its operations. The idea that something only becomes itself when we put it inside of something else is fundamental to the way Rothfeld’s art works. She demonstrates, through the weird systems of commonplace objects she creates, how very proximate the “right” and the “wrong” containers for things typically are. Rothfeld wields this proximity deftly, in ways that make her ostensibly wrong configurations of items and images come back around to seeming right, once we’ve spent enough time with them. An experience of her objects’ return to rightness is often one of hilarity.

Rothfeld, in her art, misuses all sorts of containers by way of making jokes about containment itself. When we misplace them, things that we think we understand turn

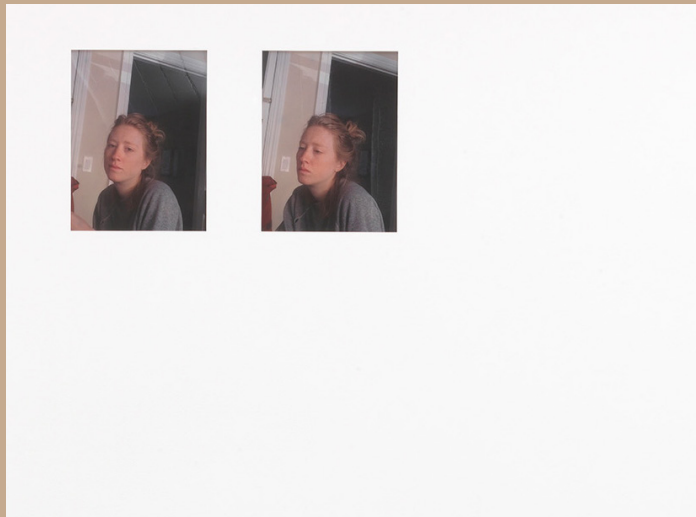
into things we don’t. A joke is a deliberate misplacement — a wrongly-contained figure or phrase that forces us to build for it a slapdash new “container” from scratch.

To be clear, the profusion of actual vessels throughout Rothfeld’s work shouldn’t confuse the fact that all of this is more metaphorical than literal: containers stand in for the general fact that context, which continuously shifts and vacillates, is a strong determinant of meaning. In this sense, all of the forms and formats, genres and concepts, through which we interact with and understand the world around us are somewhat like the shoe-filled, rotating tuns in *The Punisher’s Collections*. That is, conceptual categories are arbitrary conveyors of arbitrary conveyances that nevertheless work and keep on working, almost irrespective of what it

is they’re working towards. Why do these two drums have sneakers in them, and why do they keep spinning around? Because what else would they have or do?

One such nonliteral “container” Rothfeld frequently uses is the photograph, which holds a view of reality from one perspective at one moment in time. Photographs appear, with varying degrees of centrality, in more than half of the works in this exhibition. A salient example is *Maren A and Maren B*, a pair of pictures

(which appear to have been snapped seconds apart) of a woman gazing. On its own, either one of these photos might have been easily — and not so interestingly — interpreted as a straightforward representation of a person doing something nondescript. But both together focus our attention less on the action or person that’s depicted, than on the aspects of this depiction that have to do exclusively with the fact that we’re looking at it: the shard of black space that’s in the top left corner of the second photo but not the first; differing densities to the shadows that give each of the images shape. In this artwork, one person in one setting engaging in one continuous behavior has been cleaved and placed into two separate vessels for the sake of our viewing. That such a cleaving is even possible pokes fun at the notion that anything can ever be singular. And this teasing, in turn, puts us in mind of the containers that are trying and failing to hold these images so singularly inside themselves: the physical photo-objects.



Maren A and Maren B, 2016.

That each *Maren* is embedded inside the gallery’s wall, their surfaces flush with its, examples this further: these photos are receptacles (literally so, at least in part) for visual information about an event. But they’re poor receptacles, overflowing with all the contingency and multiplicity that attends anything real that ever happens. The emphasis on their physical substance — that they’re actual objects worked into the stuff of the gallery — drives this home. And insofar as photos themselves are ordinarily thought to relate straightforwardly to the realities they depict, the jocular relationship these pictures have with their subject incites some questioning about the bounds of the category of “photography” itself. (Categories like genres or mediums are, to repeat, conceptual containers.) Other of Rothfeld’s uses of photography function similarly.

The Stairs, for instance, is a tiny shot of an interior staircase ensconced in (and slightly recessed into) a relatively giant faux-stone frame. The extension of each side of the frame to nearly twice the dimensions of the picture it’s holding is patently silly, but it’s also consistent with Rothfeld’s use of photography: it couches the image in a way that’s almost more about the couching than it is about the image. *Walking (Mask and Hat)* achieves a similar effect through different means. In it, a large photograph of a person’s feet and legs is affixed with a ceramic monkey mask, and to the right of the photo-mask combo there hangs a brown hat. The picture literally fails to contain everything that’s in the artwork. *Sequence*, a slideshow, presents pictures of birds affixed with oddly specific-sounding human names. While, separately, an appellation or a photo of an animal is rather easy to understand, it’s harder to get why an owl would ever be called “Brad Delgado.” Representing and naming — two means of putting lines around an object — struggle with each other till it’s unclear what exactly the object is that’s being delineated. We deal with the resulting confusion by chuckling or shaking our heads.

The most complex work in the exhibition, *Felix’s Community* (#5), incorporates photography in a small way that has large implications for our experience of the piece. The sculpture is a short rectangular plinth with an assortment of bric-a-brac and a large, tiled numeral placed atop it. (Both tile



Felix’s Community (#5), 2020.

and bric-a-brac are important features of Rothfeld’s practice, present also in this exhibition’s *My Sister, My Daughter* and *Option #3*.) In one corner of the platform, recessed into its own tiny laminate box, is a snapshot of a half-eaten steakhouse dinner. As with the other instances of photography, this little picture is presented in a context that puts us in mind of the fact that what we get out of any image depends largely upon where and why we encounter it: how (we’re forced to ask) do all of the artifacts surrounding this picture relate to it, and how does it in turn relate to them as an object among objects? In other words, the problem of containment that Rothfeld’s photographs bring to the fore is not only firmly emphasized

here, but also extended out among all of the tchotchkes comprising the artwork. We don’t look at the drawing of a panting dog, for instance, in the way we normally look at drawings — that is, as a picture, enclosed and contained for our viewing — but in the way we look at salt shakers, bathroom floors, plastic bags, and dinner plates — things we hardly pay attention to at all. But reciprocally, the presence of these more “arty” objects (drawings, photos) reminds us that these items have been removed from their typically ambivalent contexts and plopped into a new one that’s entirely about acuity and attention: the art context.

It’s funny to see things existing unabashedly in places they don’t belong — filling up the wrong containers. This humor which mis-containment entails is the engine of the effect that Rothfeld’s art has on its viewers. But it would be a short sell to claim that her work is merely humorous. Rather, humor is Rothfeld’s means of making the

frightfulness of reality — of the ambivalence which things in the world have towards the humans that use them, of the silliness of our impositions of meaning and order onto the messy flux of reality — into something fun and full of prospects. Jokes, wrote the critic Robert Scholes, attack “inadequacies in language, in logic, in ethics ... and by the effectiveness of these attacks they relieve our tensions and make life pleasanter. By mocking what troubles us, the joke provides us with a very human form of consolation.”² Libby Rothfeld’s containers console.

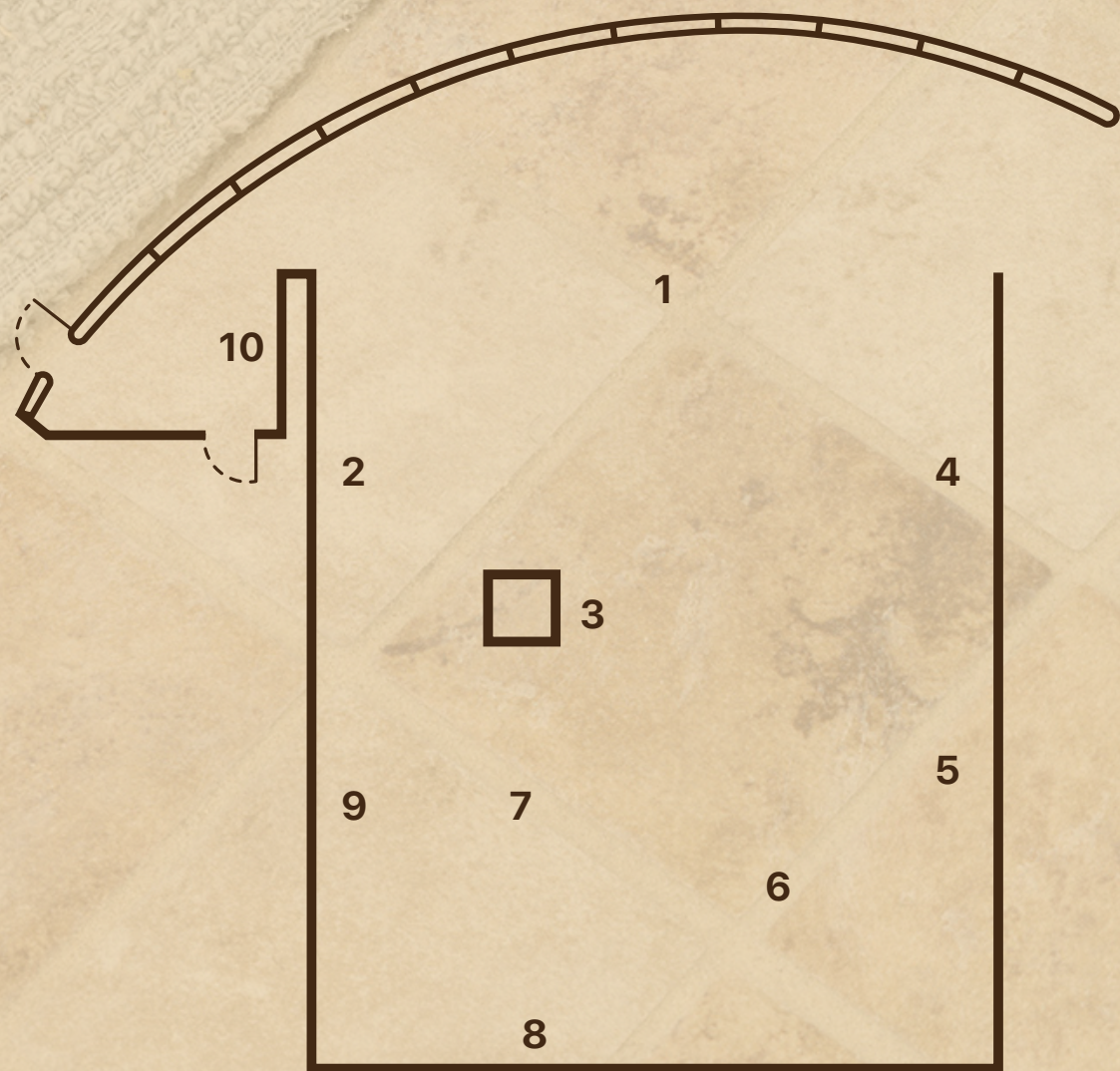
1. André Jolles, *Simple Forms: Legend, Saga, Myth, Riddle, Saying, Case, Memorabile, Fairytale, Joke* (New York: Verso, 2017), 193.

2. Robert Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 48.

Exhibition checklist

August 13-September 29, 2024

1. *Felix's Community (#5)*, Laminate, tile, grout, wood, plastic bags, Post-it notes, pencil, plastic, tub, resin, salt shakers, pepper shakers, hand sanitizer, face toner, ink-jet print, and acrylic, 2020.
2. *Customers*, HD video with sound, 2024.
3. *Maren A and Maren B*, UV print on acrylic, 2016.
4. *The Stairs*, Laminate, digital print, and wood, 2020.
5. *Untitled (Book Cover Series #1)*, Vinyl print, 2017.
6. *The Punisher's Collections*, Metal, sneakers, plastic, motor, polyurethane, drum, and wood, 2021.
7. *Option #3*, Tile, grout, plaster, towel, basket, and potatoes, 2016.
8. *My Sister, My Daughter*, Laminate, newsprint, ink, pumice stones, invisible tape, wood dust, wood glue, chewing gum, 2022.
9. *Walking (Mask and Hat)*, Vinyl print, ultracal cast from ceramic, and hat, 2017.
10. *The Alien*, Oil on canvas, 2023.



Libby Rothfeld
Selects: 2016-2024