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# One-liners

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*University of Iowa*

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ONE-LINERS

by

Meredith Laura Lynn

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts  
degree in Art in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2011

Thesis Supervisor: Professor John Dilg

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Meredith Laura Lynn

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Art at the May 2011 graduation.

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I would like to thank my family and friends who have always been supportive of my silly, dumb, self-involved, and otherwise annoying artistic practices. Especially my mom.

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## INTRODUCTION

During my time in graduate school, my artistic practice has taken many forms and utilized a variety of media. For the purposes of this Thesis, I will be discussing my latest body of work, which I call “One-Liners”. While it is difficult to say if this work serves as a culmination of everything I have worked on for the past three years, it is currently on my mind, and so, it is documented here.



## ONE-LINERS

I had to read Samuel Beckett's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in high school. I did not think it was funny; I thought it was sad. And at that time, sad seemed like the opposite of funny. I reread it recently, and realized that I had been confused on both the origin and the nature of the comedy in the play. Beckett's work is funny not because of the distance between real life and the situation Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves, but rather because of the similarities between the imagined scenario and our repetitive, often horrifying, and anti-climactic reality. By Baudelaire's definition, the play is a grotesque: it both creates something new while at the same time mimicking what is found in the natural world. As I continue to grow up, I find this kind of comedy both the funniest and the most poignant. Things can be funny and sad.

I once heard a comedian say that jokes must tell something true in order to work. It is the capacity of humor to convey something that is inherently genuine that interests me, and my most recent series of paintings has been inspired by jokes. I am interested in the emotional complexity that humor utilizes and the ways in which comedy deals with and informs otherwise difficult subjects. Often the most painful and elusive sentiments to talk about are most easily expressed in a joke, and I find that for myself this is especially true. When I am uncomfortable or in a difficult situation, I communicate through humor. It is this ability of jokes to seize us at our most vulnerable that makes them such an engaging painting subject.

I work primarily on projects, and each endeavor relies on different media to meet its demands. I use books, prints, video, drawing, and painting media appropriate to the specific needs of the ideas. My latest project, which has taken the form of a group of paintings, has begun with a series of visual jokes or puns. From the starting place of humor, the paintings then branch out into more complex and often disquieting places.

I paint from videos that I take of my friends and myself enacting funny scenarios. For example, me wrapping a scarf around my entire head to exaggerate the claustrophobic feeling of winter in Iowa (see figure 1), or making a puppet mouth with my hand in front of a friend's face, forcing her to say absurd things through my hand-mouth (see figure 2). The idea starts as something silly, and then through the process of acting it out, the more disturbing elements of the joke become apparent. It is not until I am performing the joke that I realize the truth in it that makes it sad, unsettling, or subversive. Once these elements manifest themselves, I am able to make painting choices that emphasize the complexity of the situation. What begins with the simple act of wrapping a scarf around my face ends in an image filled with ambiguity; am I hanging myself? Is the scarf strangling me? Or, in the culmination of the act (the scarf entirely covering my face), is the image overtly political? (see figure 3). In another scenario, what begins as a smile on my friend's face has become a look of confusion and fear, as the mouth on my hand covers her own clenched teeth. The joke that serves as the inspiration for the painting is no longer funny, in most cases, and instead it serves as a catalyst for a layered, complex event.

The portrayal of a quest for one's identity and the vulnerability that process lays bare has always been a tenet in my work. I have found that my current project provides a fertile ground for these themes. The best jokes are the ones that leave the teller most vulnerable. By starting from a place of humor, the paintings are able to capture something of the gap between the performance of the joke and the truth of it, and in that space lies the vulnerability. I have been striving to understand how the humor that I use myself belies something defenseless and difficult, and from that has come the psychological complexity in these paintings (see figure 4).

## AFTERWARD

Beckett 's estate is notorious for dismissing the majority of requests to perform his work. And so I plan to be with the showing of these paintings. The next time you enter a gallery and do not see them, it is because I declined the offer.

See what I did there? I made a joke about a difficult subject.



Figure 1. *Scarf Series 1*. Watercolor on paper, 8" x 10". 2011



Figure 2. *New Mouth*. Watercolor on paper, 12" x 10". 2011.



Figure 3. *Scarf Face*. Watercolor on paper, 8" x 10". 2011.



Figure 4. *Fore(arm) Sight*. Watercolor on paper, 10" x 12". 2011.





Figure 5. *What if Nic Cage Had Died Young?*. Watercolor on paper, 10" x 13". 2011.



Figure 6. *Danielle 2*. Watercolor on paper, 9" x 11". 2010.



Figure 7. *Scarf Series 2*. Watercolor on paper, 8" x 10". 2011.



Figure 8. *Bang*. Watercolor on paper, 10" x 15". 2011.



Figure 9. *Mustache*. Watercolor on paper, 10" x 12". 2011.



Figure 10. *New Eye*. Watercolor on paper, 10" x 9". 2011.