

How To Feel Weird About Everything

“Nothing is funnier than unhappiness.” – Samuel Beckett

The works in Brian Cirimo’s exhibition *Funny Feeling* at Hawk + Hive, vibrate with the kind of charged ambivalence that makes everyday life curiously electric—part comedy, part existential angst, teetering on the brink of some potential revelation or calamity. His 28 oil paintings introduce a peculiar cast of stylized human figures, in both domestic and outdoor scenes, that blend the commonplace with the uncanny. They read like visual short stories, illuminating the oddity of human existence; witty, unsettling and surprisingly poignant.

Cirimo’s figures often seem caught in a state of introspective confusion, their large, heavily lidded eyes and exaggerated forms are certainly cartoonish but there is more to them than slapstick or satire. These are characters navigating complex emotional landscapes marked by alienation, intimacy (or perhaps the lack of it), and melancholic reflection. In *Cloud*, a soulful character is submerged neck-deep in water gazing back at the land, a forlorn-looking chihuahua bobbing beside her. *Daisy* presents a grotesque—but strangely lovable—disembodied head, positioned absurdly beside a tiny flower. In several paintings figures are curled into vulnerable, fetal-like postures beneath tables or within confined spaces. In *Back-To-Back* two figures lie facing away from one another, seemingly lost in their individual dreams, while an elongated tabby slinks beneath the bed. These narratives are highly ambiguous but there’s a looming sense that all may not be well. Despite this underlying unease, there is a gentleness in the works that suggest the artist is empathetic to the private anxieties of his cast.

Humor sits alongside melancholy here—Cirimo’s wants us to be in on the joke, to relish his protagonists’ odd predicaments. There is a balding superhero in a cape that looks like a table cloth, flying nowhere with his nose squished against the wall. Another figure, marked with a heart tattoo, plucks daisy petals only to land on the disheartening conclusion: “Loves Me Not”. In “The Shower Scene,” a naked and catastrophically sun-burned figure is exposed by an unseen hand drawing back the curtain. This atmosphere of uneasy amusement raises the question; what exactly is going on here? Cirimo provides hints but the narratives are predominantly left open to interpretation. Thomas Ford of Western Carolina University, who studies the psychology of humor, notes that “having a good laugh is inconsistent or incompatible with anxiety and fear.” Cirimo’s paintings reflect this tension, suggesting humor in the face of discomfort might be the way to salvation.

An earthy, muted palette dominates this collection, punctuated by bursts of vibrant color that seems, at times, to underscore the dramas unfolding on the canvas. The surfaces are precise and carefully controlled, a long way from Cirimo’s art school flirtation with Abstract Expressionism. He paints in oils, creating areas of flat color, and others with subtle gradients, employing fine detail selectively, and most often in his depiction of hair - both of the facial and head varieties. Circular canvases recall Renaissance tondos, inviting comparisons to devotional imagery, connecting the modern psyche to a longer lineage of emotional exploration in art. His use of unusual perspectives, dynamic viewpoints, and tight cropping intensifies the humor and surreal intimacy of the paintings.

Cirimo’s creative process is an act of imaginative conjuring. Rather than painting directly from life, he draws upon instinct, long-practiced craftsmanship, and a trove of source material that he describes as “the vast profundity of American music, history, literature, western painting, film, comic strips, and cartoons.” It is, he says, his ambition to make paintings “that encapsulate characteristics of the human condition, such as life and death, love and loss, evolution and creationism, comedy and tragedy, conflict and harmony, and morality and immorality.” He cites Philip Guston and Bob Dylan as key influences that have shaped his career. Guston’s later figurative works profoundly impacted his visual language. Similarly, Dylan’s lyrics with their vivid imagery, symbolic narratives and elusive metaphors, have been pivotal to his creative development.

Deciding upon a title for this exhibition, Cirimo spent time looking at the collection, and concluded that each of his characters emanated a "funny feeling"—that intuitive moment of recognition when something feels slightly off-kilter. His work deftly captures that moment, when humor gives way to something more profound—a recognition of our collective fragility and perhaps resilience. The works in *Funny Feeling* embrace the weirdness of being human. With playful precision, Cirimo constructs narratives that are at once amusing, curious, and deeply relatable, inviting viewers to recognize themselves and the people they know.

Jayne Parker

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