With a dry wit and a love of stand-up comedy, Lindsey White is heir to a lineage of California artists who, since the 1960s and 1970s, have imported the humor and playfulness of vernacular photography into the realm of fine art. Members of that earlier generation, including William Wegman, Ed Ruscha, Robert Cumming, Marcia Resnick, and Ilene Segalove, riffed on the sight gags, wagging tongues, pet tricks, and other forms of amusement common to the American snapshot tradition, as well as the style and subject matter of banal commercial images. Although White is less concerned with the forms and conventions of everyday photography than were her predecessors, she shares their abiding conviction that art can be simultaneously serious and seriously funny.

As White and her forebears can attest, humor is mostly given short shrift in the art world, and it has long been so. In the hierarchy of painting genres established in the Renaissance, weighty subjects, such as important events from history, were ranked at the top, whereas light-hearted themes, including scenes from everyday life, were considered lower forms of expression. While contemporary artists don’t necessarily hew to that fusty framework, the preference for sobriety over comedy stubbornly persists. The continuation of this bias can be seen in how quickly viewers and critics dismiss humorous works as “too easy” or “one-liners,” glossing over the potential for meaning beneath the surface. The problem is compounded when the artist is female, as women have historically been considered less funny than men and have long struggled to be taken seriously in the art world.

White has not been deterred. In her most recent body of work, which includes photography, sculpture, and video, she explores the aesthetics of stand-up comedy and the related field of magic. Trained as a photographer, White sees comedians and magicians as kindred spirits—similarly sensitive people who notice things that others might overlook and call them to our attention. Photographs, jokes, and magic tricks alike can help us see the familiar in a new light, altering the way we look at the world. There is also, of course, a bit of the conjurer’s art in the making of a photograph, in how a blank piece of paper is transformed in the darkroom into an illusionary object. And much like the art world, comedy and magic are arenas traditionally dominated by men—boys’ clubs that are notoriously difficult for women to break into.

In her photographs White frequently employs the flat, even lighting common to the stage, rendering her subjects as graphic semaphores in shallow space. The backgrounds are often arresting fields of solid color: royal purple, tangerine orange, coal black. In Often Imitated, Never Equaled (fig. 02), for instance, two disembodied hands are posed in a gesture much like that of a magician in the middle of a trick. Everything has been stripped from the composition except the suggestion of some sort of sleight of hand. Similarly mysterious is her portrait
of the comedian Ron Lynch laughing maniacally (fig. 03). Wearing a boldly patterned sport coat and bowtie, he looks like a ventriloquist’s dummy come to life. The picture is at once comical and slightly menacing—a viewer might spontaneously crack up at the sight of Lynch and, at the same time, detect something threatening in the extremity of his mirth and the utter darkness behind him. Such ambiguity is also present in photographs with more detailed settings. A sense of unease is especially palpable in Studio 8 (fig. 01), in which a large, unidentified object wrapped in fabric hangs from the rafters of a theater. Is it a dead body in a tarpaulin? A giant caterpillar in its pupal stage? A magician about to perform an escape act, à la Harry Houdini? White does not tell us what it is or how to think about it. As with her other photographs, she leaves us to wonder, to interpret the visual cues for ourselves.

While her practice is grounded in photography, White also creates total environments that include both two- and three-dimensional objects. She has a deep admiration for Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers, who through dogged perseverance and sheer toughness opened the door for women comedians of succeeding generations. Several of White’s recent works pay homage, often obliquely, to these icons, including two related sculptural pieces featured in her SECA installation. Letterwoman Jacket, which comprises a gold varsity jacket hanging on a wooden armature, is lit by Z-A-N-E-Y Lights, a powerful bank of bulbs named after the banquet entertainer who invented the portable rig.

The garment in Letterwoman Jacket is decorated with patches White designed to resemble those collected by Girl Scouts. Instead of marking achievements such as starting a fire with two sticks or selling the most Thin Mints, however, they memorialize comedic landmarks: smashing a pie in someone’s face or sporting gag glasses with fake eyeballs dangling on springs. The jacket stands in for an absent performer, though it is unclear whether she has left for good, like Diller or Rivers, or she has yet to take her rightful spot.

Also included in White’s installation at SFMOMA are sculptural works inspired by everyday items—a novelty potholder, a handmade sign from a thrift store, a plastic piggy bank—which, when remade and decontextualized, become strange or dark. These “props,” as White characterizes them, are often emblazoned with kitschy phrases such as “Don’t Expect Miracles” and hung from the ceiling, lending them the theatrical quality both inherent to her photographs and enhanced by their modes of display. The portrait of Ron Lynch, for example, is printed on a giant sheet of aluminum like a street sign or a glossy advertisement for a comedy venue. Four photographs are arrayed in a structure similar to those that hold subway advertisements. To heighten the drama, a lighted marquee of the kind typically seen in the lobby of a cinema encases Studio 8. It serves as a macabre teaser, perhaps, for a performance “coming soon” to a theater near you.

—Erin O’Toole
In Conversation with Lindsey White

Jenny Gheith: Performance provides a space where reality and our expectations can be suspended. What is it about performers, particularly comedians and magicians, that interests you, and how have they influenced your work?

Lindsey White: I love the idea of a "show" and the way a show can inspire me to look at simple things, like how someone ties their shoes or reacts to a funny story. Artists, magicians, and comedians rely on observation to suspend disbelief and upend preconceived notions. The attention to detail shared by these professions is a lesson in how to reconstruct or change a given narrative. To turn an everyday occurrence on its side by shining a light on it taps into a familiar language and structure for an audience.

When you go to a show everyone knows what’s going to happen: you’re going to laugh, or magic is going to happen. It’s just a matter of getting from point A to point B. It’s like a scene with Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton, where they have to get from one side of the street to the other—they’re going to slip and fall, or a building might topple over, but they’re going to get there. I’m interested in those pivotal moments when the audience isn’t paying attention and the performer capitalizes on that—that’s usually when the action happens or the punch line hits. An art exhibition is a type of performance, too, with a specifically conditioned audience.

You’re particularly interested in female comedians such as Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers. They both faced challenges as women in what is primarily a man’s world.

Phyllis Diller was at the forefront of women being accepted in stand-up comedy. Male comedians would go onstage and make jokes about their wives, so she made fun of her fictitious husband, Fang. She was ridiculed for having the presence of a man—and her laugh was so out there. [laughs] And Joan Rivers would talk about issues that weren’t accepted, like sex and dating. The documentary Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work (2010) shows how much of a hustler she was, how much she craved being onstage, how organized her jokes were, and how willing she was to do anything to get ahead.

I’m interested in success and failure and the ways age affects how the public perceives you. I gravitate toward older female comedians because they have a lot of wisdom. Their jokes are often about being ignored. One moment you have a comedy special and everyone is into you; then a couple months go by and you’re forgotten. It’s like when you build up to an art exhibition, the show ends, and you’re depressed. The comedy and magic worlds are similar to the art world in that they can feel like closed-off clubs with a strong male lineage.

Do you find that including humor in your work allows you to push boundaries?

With a humorous entry point, you can talk about heavy things. If a comedian says something that unnerves audiences, they’ll often nervously laugh. You can get away with it because there’s a fantasy world that exists onstage. I try to use humor similarly in my work. Of course, some comedians still get torn down because people are afraid to laugh at things that are problematic or scary. I’m someone who often laughs at things that are inappropriate in everyday life. If someone says something a particular way, I’ll just crack up.

And what about Ron Lynch? He’s someone you’ve collaborated with from the comedy world.

Ron is a physical comedian with a classic slapstick, vaudevillian, old Hollywood vibe. He was at the forefront of the alternative comedy scene in Boston in the 1980s and gave Louis C.K. his first break. He taught comedy classes, which appealed to me because I teach a class about the intersection of humor and art. At one point he mentioned how there
was nothing sadder than teaching people how to do comedy—people think they’re funny, but they’re not. That’s hilarious. [laughs]

When the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco commissioned me to work with someone outside the visual arts in 2014, I knew he was the guy. He helped me push my ideas and guided my work into a more theatrical realm. I was particularly interested in his alter egos, including the Animatronic Comedian. He can cycle through these characters at warp speed, mixing hand-made props with more refined ones. You generally see all the strings, which I think is what makes it so funny.

**The objects you make and depict often look like they are performing jokes or are onstage.**

Objects made for performances are more interesting to me than the performances themselves. I look at how they’re built and what happens when someone holds or points at a prop. Ron helped me gain perspective about how objects can perform. I often exhaust props because I want to see if I can reinvent them on an art stage. I like to flatten the space in which objects appear to create another dimension entirely—one where you can see what an object is doing or what you think it’s doing. When you flatten an object in a photograph, there’s an illusion that it is active or in flux. This technique is clearly illustrated by the two hands in the photograph *Often Imitated, Never Equaled*. I like when things transform from objects into photos and back.

**How do you decide what to photograph and what to turn into a sculpture or film?**

I’ve been making photos for so long that everything starts as an image in my brain. But sometimes an idea is more interesting as an object than a photograph—it has to do with tactility and depth. And sometimes I need to make a photograph to realize it doesn’t work as a photograph. I try to be flexible and open to intuition and chance. The truth is, I can often box myself into a corner. It took me a little while to realize I was the only one keeping me there.