

DeCordova gains wit with show

With many politicians still convinced that culture is as much of a threat to public life as guns or poverty, getting art to lighten up seems long overdue.

So the DeCordova Museum's "Lighten Up: Art With a Sense of Humor" is most welcome. The show provides a solid dose

VISUAL ARTS

Mary Sherman

of wit and mischievousness at the time when the art world could sorely use it.

William Wegman's Weimaraners are a delight, as are the "Saturday Night Live"-like parodies by Teddy Dibble and Jeff Smith. Cary Leibowitz/Candyass' irreverent paintings of the word ego, priced according to size, take a stab at art's ludicrous role as a status symbol.

Even Norman Rockwell's pictures can look silly in a painting by Christopher "Lucky" Leone, "Rockwells Updated: Looking (Crap Art)."

As every child knows, bodies can be funny. This isn't lost on Philip Knoll and Erika Rothenberg, whose drawings and paintings feature unsuspecting animals as sex objects, or on Pat Oleszko, in a video of a dancing behind.

Religion can be funny, too. Karin Giusti offers "The Pope on Rope," a carved soap of the pope "for spiritual tidiness."

In Tom Otterness' bronze courtroom — made shortly after the announcement of the O.J. Simpson verdict — the cat clearly has eaten the proverbial canary.

Canned goods provide a visual pun in Jeffu Warmouth's elbow macaroni label, which sports human elbows instead of pasta. "Rather than be reconstituted by these products that I ingest and invest in," Warmouth says, "I want to put a little bit of me in every can."

Much of this work grows out the early 20th century Dadaist movement and its attacks on art. Candyass' pieces, using



LIGHT VIEW: Karl Baden's silver gelatin print 'Badger, Halloween, 1983' is on view at the DeCordova Museum.

scrawled texts of aggressive wit, are a direct descendant of Ben Vautier's irreverent one-liners.

Choosing sources from pop culture and children's art and activities, Peter Thibeault and

others often take games as a starting point for their visual puns. Todd McKie creates brightly colored paintings, like "I Made Them Myself," peopled by childish characters haplessly out of place in straight-laced society.

One could say the same of Oleszko's pieces, but her creatures and their embellishments also pack a pointedly feminist punch. Consider her nipple dress "Under Delight."

Curator Rachel Lafo points out in the catalog that "far more men use overt humor in their work than women." The result here is a lot of male, adolescent make-believe as exemplified by Smith and his American Emergency Safety Co. Smith's mock company comes complete with its own promotional videos, extolling the exhibited devices' power to combat food parasites, avoid traffic accidents and ward off children.

Dibble also parodies TV ads in a hilarious series of videos in

which a quite ordinary person is coached in how to kiss ("Rules of Kissing") and in ways of coughing ("The Cough"). Much sillier is Warmouth's low-tech video "Kung-fu Kitchen," a kind of Japanese B-movie send-up in which vegetables and fruits, with names like "Oh Ran Ji" and "Ah-Po," vie to become emperor.

A number of works pit men as losers. In Lev and Emre Yilmaz's video "Bad Night," the lead character, blinded by his own self-pity, misses all the wildly fantastic opportunities thrown his way.

In Steve Aishman's "lonely guy" photo series, Aishman appears drunk on the floor with a caption that reads, "I don't have a girlfriend because of two words: Women's Intuition."

Baden makes sure women don't get away completely clean with striking pictures of a pregnant woman's huge stomach confronting an open fridge or blocking the reading of a scale. But he cleverly sidesteps making fun of his subject, titling the series "The Kid."

"Lighten Up: Art With a Sense of Humor" at the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, through May 28.