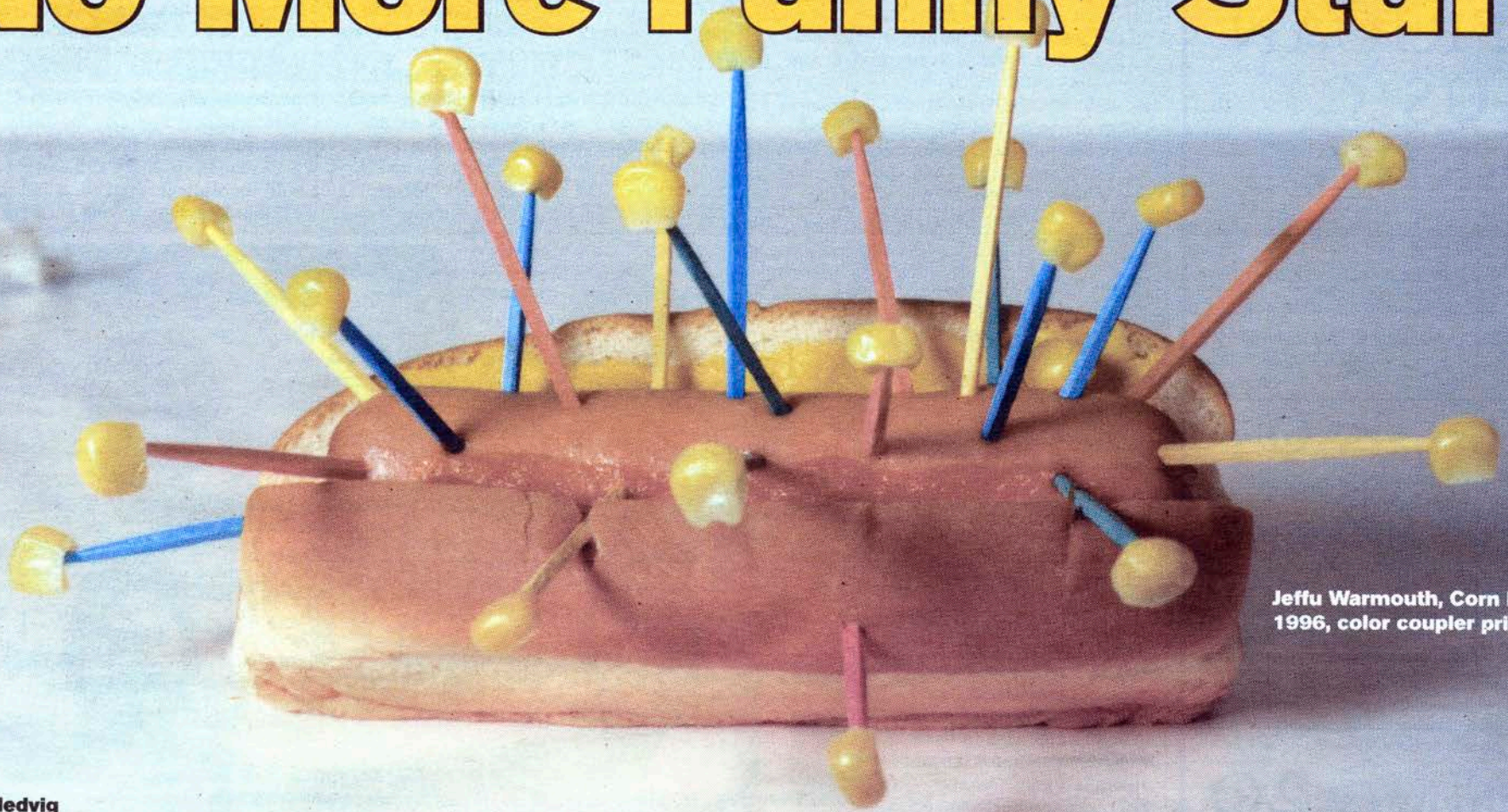


No More Funny Stuff



Jeffu Warmouth, Corn Dog, 1996, color coupler print

Lynne Hedvig

Interactivity and play are at the core of New England artist and Fitchburg State University professor Jeffu Warmouth's mid-career retrospective currently on exhibit at the Fitchburg Art Museum. The exhibition features the artist's work from the past 23 years. For Jeffu, who has been honing his craft and growing his thematic lexicon over a variety of artistic platforms, he admits he is "still kind of reeling a little bit to see all of this work in one place."

Encompassing 40-plus photos, 10 video installations of which two are interactive, and additional other works, the show is pretty space-consuming. "It's huge," Jeffu says. "I've definitely never had this much technical work in the same space all functioning at the same time, so it's been pretty remarkable actually."

Jeffu is a big fan of multi-screen arrangements, the better to make his pieces interact with themselves. He has several series, including the comprehensive "Nine Gestures" and "1UP," a massive 80-foot tall video installation at the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center, that utilize multiple video screens to create intersecting realities, the results of which can be thrilling, funny, or, as the artist notes, whatever you take them to be.

Humor became a central theme for Jeffu early on in his career, as a means of freeing himself and his expression. "As an artist, particularly in graduate school, of course you're supposed to be taking things to this very serious next level, so there are a lot of people that are just really over-serious about their work." So, Jeffu says, "I had a cadre of people with me who were like 'Yeah, art should be funny.' And even if you look at some of the major important art movements of the 20th century, for example Dada and Surrealism, a lot of that work was hilarious. Or pop art, or conceptual art...there were a lot of artists in the conceptual

art movement of the '70s that did absolutely gut-bustingly funny work, but it kind of gets equalized and made really serious through art history." Jeffu doesn't necessarily think art history's a bad thing, "but we were just doing this kind of subversive anarchic reaction," he says. "Then, I realized that I wasn't doing it in my work, but I was thinking it, so it was a conscious choice like, 'Ok now that I'm getting kind of bad critical feedback on this other work that I'm doing, now's the time that I'm just going to do work that's funny, that's about humor, that's just puns, riddles, that can incorporate all these things. I think humor can be a serious subject.'"

Thus Jeffu embarked on a journey through hilarity, parody, and tongue-in-cheek, producing works that draw on everything from simple pleasures and titular puns, to societal ennui and animate vegetables to produce in the viewer a shared, knowing laugh. His humor is at once silly and sophisticated, as well as enlivening. For example, the "all vegetable cast" in his monster-parody short "Day of the Cabbage," with a pun-punctured dialogue consisting strictly of clever exchanges like "Billy, you need your strength for the marinarathon next week," and "Oh, pesto, I forgot."

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Jeffu has used humor as a means to approach and analyze many issues that touch on the political, with particular reflection on living in a world of overmediation and consumer culture. With works like two of his early devices, "Oven Antics," a series of videos of convoluted food attached to an oven containing a television set, and "TV Dinner," a massive fork and knife hovering over a plate of television and videotape, Jeffu makes a heated assessment of our infatuation and dependence on television as well as our general American confusion about food and resultant relationship with curiously processed goods. Likewise, in "JFC," "Il Jeffuria Pizza" and "JeffuBurger," all are large interactive video installations that include familiar fast food facades and invite viewers to select oddly distorted foods. Jeffu uses the viewer's existent understanding of fast food culture as a language to engage in a comical, yet serious discussion about the state of our consumption, both in terms of food and packaged purchasing.

There is something unique in Jeffu's approach to these widely-incorporated themes; absent is a perpetrator, finger-pointing or judgment. In its place are just animated faces and silly entrees.

These more commentary-laced works marked a transitional time for Jeffu. "There was actually this moment after I had done Il Jeffuria Pizza and had that in a show with Jeffu Burger, that I was having a discussion with Nick Capasso (Director of the Fitchburg Art Museum) who was a curator at the time, and the conversation just came down to 'How long am I going to keep doing this work where I'm the funny food guy?' And I came to this realization that, even though I had explored a lot of different territory within that, I was painting myself into a corner in a way, where there's only so much I can do within this subject matter."

This led Jeffu to produce his later work, which, he says, "is really the 'No More Funny Stuff' era." He says it is not necessarily unfunny, but not specifically geared to be funny.

It is this era that Jeffu is currently in, creating video installations featuring himself performing movements that can be interpreted either as repetitive or meditative, but always playful.

"All this newer work, even if its not about humor or trying to be funny, naturally comes from an instinct of play. There's a

playfulness, and I think there are a lot of ideas that can come through play. We tend to think that play is something kids do, so its just playful, but I think that play can actually lead to a lot of different ideas."

This notion of play is evident in Jeffu's "Nine Gestures," which he describes as "a set of performance-based video compositions exploring time, repetition, scale, dimension, gravity and the body's interaction with architecture." The series includes "Merge," a 2-minute video loop over 9 screens

minutes later someone would say 'Oh I know you said no more funny stuff, but you can't help making funny work, this piece was really funny.' So two completely opposite readings, which I think is great. It allows the audience to project their own ideas onto the work, or to project themselves into the work."

Interactivity and play are at the core of Jeffu's retrospective show; even the presentation itself is a collaborative effort with the strategic marketing and preliminary exhibition design, having been created by



Jeffu Warmouth, *No More Funny Stuff (4-Way Cymbal Monkey)*, 2012, performance video, 4 minutes.

where different versions of the artist walk towards one another, then merge, moving in unconventional ways to create new moving representations of the human form.

Also in the series is "Fall," perhaps the most beautiful, created for the 80-foot high video marquee at the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center, "Fall" consists of versions of the artist falling through a screen of clouds and begin swimming upon hitting the blue screen below. Other iterations of this series include "Crawl," "Cymbal," "Up," "Walk," "Pull," "Sled," "Drop" and "Hop," all of which use versions of the artist moving through reconstructed visual realities using familiar movements in unusual ways.

"The interesting thing about a lot of those works is that I can get two radically different reactions from different people, which I didn't necessarily get with the work that was trying to be funny," Jeffu says. For example, he says, "with the piece 'Drop,' with a version of me carrying boxes into this little central pit and dropping them off, it was just meditative and slow-paced. One person would say 'Oh it's about the human condition and being stuck in these terrible jobs where you have to do the same thing over and over.' And then five

Fitchburg State University colleague Rob Carr's marketing communications class. As a 17-year professor at FSU, Jeffu credits the academic environment for much of his innovation, citing both technical and human resources. Seeing his students get excited about learning inspires him to keep learning and keep creating. And as a father to two young sons, Alexander, 7, and Ben, 2, play is now a constant part of Jeffu's life.

"I probably make a good dad because of this playfulness that I've always had, so it kind of works," Jeffu says. "Also, if I didn't before, kids kind of force you into this position where you have to be playful, even if you weren't. So it's been really fun."

Even while conveying a range of emotions and inspiring multitudinous reactions, whether eschewing or embracing overt humor, Jeffu's work remains decidedly fun.

"Jeffu Warmouth: NO MORE FUNNY STUFF" is on display now through June 1, 2014 at Fitchburg Art Museum, 25 Merriam Pkwy, Fitchburg. Jeffu will entertain visitors with live performances of his work on Sunday, March 23 at 3:30 p.m. and Sunday, April 13, as part of a Meet The Artist Event, from 1-3 p.m. fitchburgartmuseum.org.