

# Smack Mellon

92 Plymouth Street @ Washington Street, Dumbo, Brooklyn, NY 11201  
Tel: 718.834.8761 | [smackmellon.org](http://smackmellon.org) | Hours: Wednesday-Sunday, 12-6pm  
Contact: Jessica Holburn, [jholburn@smackmellon.org](mailto:jholburn@smackmellon.org)

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### Laugh Back

Curated by Lindsey O'Connor

**July 14–August 19, 2018**  
**Opening Reception: July 14, 6-8 PM**



Image: Jen Liu, still from *Pink Slime Caesar Shift*, 2018. Single-channel 4K video, two-channel audio; 24:20 min.  
Courtesy of the artist and Upstream Gallery, Amsterdam

**Participating Artists:** Farah Al Qasimi, Natalie Baxter, Deborah Castillo, Kristina Davis, Dynasty Handbag, Jesse Harrod, *INNER COURSE* (Rya Kleinpeter and Tora López), Lady Parts Justice League's Vagical Mystery Tour, Jen Liu, Rachel Mason, Jan Mun, Luis Mejico, Madhini Nirmal, Kameelah Janan Rasheed, Katherine Simóne Reynolds, Andréa Stanislav

Smack Mellon is pleased to present *Laugh Back*, a group exhibition that probes the transgressive potential of laughter to threaten authority. In an increasingly tense political landscape, laughing is an everyday gesture capable of unsettling norms, subverting power, and challenging dominant systems. *Laugh Back* focuses on the diverse cultural production of artists who engage the defiant possibilities of humor, satire, and the absurd as subversive tools for cultural change.

Focusing specifically on the practices of self-identifying women, *Laugh Back* reframes the trope of humorless feminist resistance by emphasizing deployments of the absurd that disrupt presumed stable discourses. Speaking directly to the contemporary sociopolitical climate, the works in *Laugh Back* examine gender, race, politics, and labor from multicultural perspectives to uncover a current, uniquely feminist brand of humor that is an increasingly threatened and threatening vehicle to speak truth to power.

In works that question and queer antiquated notions of gender, historically engrained myths and definitions are overturned while neat representations are problematized. **Farah Al Qasimi's** photographs capture women

# Smack Mellon

92 Plymouth Street @ Washington Street, Dumbo, Brooklyn, NY 11201  
Tel: 718.834.8761 | [smackmellon.org](http://smackmellon.org) | Hours: Wednesday-Sunday, 12-6pm  
Contact: Jessica Holburn, [jholburn@smackmellon.org](mailto:jholburn@smackmellon.org)

in domestic settings and grapple with the lingering effects of colonialism on Gulf Arab bodies. Meanwhile, **Luis Mejico**'s text-based works convey the artist's dysmorphia toward her transgender body and question the rigid gender categories projected onto diverse physicalities. In a turn, **Jesse Harrod** engages the legacy of swimmer and 1940s movie star Esther Williams, uncovering Williams's dual status as both a wholesome American icon and an LGBTQIA sex symbol. The collaborative duo **INNER COURSE** recreates a version of Lucy and Ricky Ricardo's bedroom from the 1950s sitcom *I Love Lucy* in a performative installation that functions as a library of pseudoscientific and predatory self-help books written for women. Finally, **Andréa Stanislav** creates a memorial to real and fictional men whose identities are inextricable from gross displays of masculinity. Utilizing humor both subtly and overtly, the artists in question mine diverse histories in order to call into question embedded gender stereotypes.

Other artists offer searing critiques of racial bias in works that throw systemic inequality into sharp relief. **Kameelah Janan Rasheed**'s collection of aphoristic, alliterative statements calls attention to racial injustice, political corruption, and pervasive apathy as aspects of larger societal malady in absurd combinations of text. In uncanny videos, **Katherine Simóne Reynolds** exposes the impacts of structural racism on Saint Louis's social and physical landscapes, examining the everyday microaggressions inflicted upon people of color. Both artists employ a brand of sardonic humor in an effort to confront uncomfortable truths head-on.

A number of artists reckon with the contemporary political landscape both nationally and abroad in works that utilize dark comedy and wry humor. **Natalie Baxter**'s massive, flaccid American flag is a comment on the divided and discordant nature of political ideology in our current cultural climate. In an aggressive and grotesque makeup tutorial, **Dynasty Handbag** laments the crumbling façade of liberalism and prepares her physical self for conservative backlash. Meanwhile, in an ominous and unsettling video, **Rachel Mason**'s avatar FutureClown lip-syncs Donald Trump's inauguration speech. **Deborah Castillo**'s performance in which she mauls two clay, male busts mocks misogyny, colonialism, and totalitarianism more universally. In addition, **Madhini Nirmal** reenvisions her hometown of Chennai, India as a subversive playground in which mischievous goats undermine oppressive political and caste systems. In each instance, these artists engage laughter to create a topsy-turvy space in which exchanges of power are unsettled.

Finally, a selection of works examines women's fundamental relationship to labor and economics. **Jan Mun**'s interactive project considers the lived experiences of women working in the direct line of secondary trauma and identifies laughter as a key survival tactic. In an installation of appropriated texts, **Kristina Davis** collages diverse voices from women working at the intersections of sex work, feminism, and queer theory. Lastly, **Jen Liu** considers the lived realities of women Special Economic Zone factory workers living in China in a film that also functions as a proposal to use genetically altered meat as a vehicle to covertly transmit messages of labor insurrection. These artists recognize women's labor as a fundamental aspect of the formal and informal international economy while considering the challenges facing specific populations of working women.

The artists in *Laugh Back* utilize various comedic genres to create a symbolic space for transformation in which structures of power and repression are recognized and confronted. These women use humor as a means to upset, if only for a visceral moment, established ways of being.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Lindsey O'Connor** is an exhibition organizer and arts writer living in New York City. She is currently the Biennial Co-Coordinator at the Whitney Museum of American Art and has held past positions at the Guggenheim Museum, American Federation of Arts, and Biennial of the Americas. She has curated and co-curated exhibitions with Greatmore Studios in Cape Town, South Africa, and the NLE Curatorial Lab in New York. Her writing has been published in *Hyperallergic*, *CAA.Reviews*, *Art Papers*, and *Ada: Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*.

# Smack Mellon

92 Plymouth Street @ Washington Street, Dumbo, Brooklyn, NY 11201  
Tel: 718.834.8761 | smackmellon.org | Hours: Wednesday-Sunday, 12-6pm  
Contact: Jessica Holburn, jholburn@smackmellon.org

## EVENTS

### Saturday, July 14; 7:00 PM

Performance

During the exhibition opening, **Deborah Castillo** will perform *Slapping Power*, in which she mauls two male busts symbolic of legacies of colonialism and patriarchy.

### Every Thursday-Saturday; 1-6 PM

Performance

**INNER COURSE** will activate their installation modeled after Lucy and Ricky Ricardo's bedroom in the sitcom *I Love Lucy*. The artists will be bedbound, and visitors are invited to sit and read from a selection of predatory books from **INNER COURSE**'s library.

### Friday, July 27, 8:00 PM

Stand-Up Comedy

**The Lady Parts Justice League** will host an extension of its Vagical Mystery Tour, a night of stand-up comedy and activism focusing on reproductive freedom and bodily autonomy. A post-show talkback with abortion providers and activists will offer tangible ways to fight back and support local clinics. \$10 suggested donation; comedians to be announced.

\*\*\*\*\*

*This exhibition is supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, New York City Council Member Stephen Levin, and the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo and the New York State Legislature, and with generous support from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Robert Lehman Foundation, Iorio Charitable Foundation, Select Equity Group Foundation, many individuals and Smack Mellon's Members.*

*Smack Mellon's programs are also made possible with public funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and with generous support from The New York Community Trust, The Edward and Sally Van Lier Fund of The New York Community Trust, The Roy and Niuta Titus Foundation, Jerome Foundation, The Greenwich Collection Ltd, Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation Inc., Brooklyn Arts Council, and Exploring The Arts.*

*Space for Smack Mellon's programs is generously provided by the Walentas family and Two Trees Management.*

\*\*\*\*\*

## PRESS CONTACT:

Jessica Holburn, jholburn@smackmellon.org

### Thursday, August 2; 6:30 PM

Exhibition Tour

Guest curator **Lindsey O'Connor** will lead a tour of *Laugh Back* with exhibition artists **Natalie Baxter** and **Madhini Nirmal**.

### Saturday, August 11; 4:00 PM

Reading

**INNER COURSE** will present an evening of screwball readings from their private library; celebrity guest readers to be announced.

### Saturday, August 18; 4:00 PM

Performance and Closing Reception

**Dynasty Handbag** will blur the boundaries of comedy and art in an outlandish performance followed by a closing reception.