

COPY



SPACE

By Leila Peacock

If prose is a house, poetry is a man on fire running quite fast through it. This is an analogy by the poet Anne Carson, but by the same metric if art is a marble palace then the art meme is a man with a lighter running amok setting light to the farts everyone is trying to politely ignore. Pyroflatulence, as its formally known, is a crude means of making outrageously visible that foul and lingering smell that is rarely acknowledged, which aptly describes the satirical strategy of art memes as they take on the inherent contradictions of the art world in all its cruel and self-regarding splendour.

For irony to function at its keenest there has to be a drop off between what is said and what is known, between the hope and the outcome, between the surface and the reality. For artists, this is the gap between the romantic idea and the financial reality of their profession, trying to live the dream becomes a case of enduring the delusion.

A joke is a friendly and recognisable incongruity deployed to make and maintain social bonds. But really good comedy, like the best art, is a violation of proper form, a disruption of the symbolic order of things. A meme is a violation of the joke, it has more moving parts which makes it harder to contain. Art memes deploy this unhinged anarchic form to create Unidentified Funny Objects in a world that relishes its own endless proliferation of terminology. Gleefully skewering the dangerously indeterminate rhetoric of contemporary art, memes call out its institutions and callous market mechanisms, whilst lampooning the poor suckers with the misplaced utopianism to become artists and then suffer the demented impracticalities of this choice.

Enter the art meme: imparting end-of-episode wisdom like He-Man, because someone has to remind the kids that unicorns are just horses wearing strap-ons on their heads.

Delivered anonymously, these memes employ the age-old strategy of the wise fool, yet the wise fool is disguised as an internet troll, and trolling is raised to the level of critique. The wise fool, who is welcome at court, drops truth bombs disguised as harmless fun to remind the tastemakers that those fools they are laughing at are themselves. Deploying readymade roadkill-Wikihow infographics and other unholy shreds ripped from internet image culture to make something so ugly it's funny and so funny it's ugly for those who suddenly recognise their own careers in an image of a dog trying to lick a rainbow off a wall.

The paradox of much satire is that it alleviates the pain of the status quo just enough that no one is pushed to actually fight the status quo. But pearls melt in vinegar, and humour nonetheless does important work deforming categories and categorical language by exposing its conceits and holding it up for ridicule; breaking accepted boundaries and transgressing codes that are felt but not stated. So let's all gather around this ring of fire for warmth and hope that it will grow into a pyre of Picasso fans in due course.