

Magic Powers: The Generous Work of Charley Friedman



By DANIEL A. SIEDELL, JUL. 2015

I just want real reactions. I want people to laugh from the gut, be sad from the gut, or get angry from the gut.

—Andy Kaufman

Charley Friedman's third and most recent exhibition at Gallery Diet in the Wynwood Arts District in Miami closed in mid February and it deserves more than a conventional review. It warrants a few words concerning what is ultimately at stake for an artist whose work contradicts what the contemporary art world expects from art. The significance of Friedman's twenty year career hinges on this contradiction.

Real reactions from the gut are scarce in the contemporary art world. Such responses require emotional risk. And the contemporary art world is often averse to such risk because it is almost pathologically afraid of being duped, made a fool of by misplaced trust in the quality of an artist's work.

The contemporary art world simply doesn't trust the gut and so prefers work that is controlled by the intellect, by theory, and which can be validated, not by emotional responses but by other forms of discourse. Irony and cynicism further inoculates the artist and her work from the dangerous realm of emotions and experience that can occur when a viewer stands before a work of art.

But this dangerous emotional realm of experience is where Friedman's work dwells, forging, through this fear and mistrust, extraordinarily close relationships between his works and the viewers that experience them. Friedman works through a conceptual and performance armature that appears discourse- and theory dependent, full of irony and cynicism, but it gradually unfolds an emotional response that is sincere, honest, and, something even rarer than authentic in the art world: generous.

Friedman's most recent exhibition at Gallery Diet, which he called, *The Western Code*, is a conceptual installation that features paintings, photographs, and objects. It consisted of a room of small painted letters of the alphabet and numbers from zero to nine. It also included several modeled squirrels, unpainted, that are on the floor and wall of the gallery; a kinetic installation that twirled plastic beach balls; a photograph of the artist, nude, as an Hasidic Jew; a beautiful close-up photograph of a dandelion; and a odd, tiny, crudely hand sewn figure (or creature) standing on a pedestal before a brilliantly yellow striped work on paper that is tacked to the wall.

Friedman offers a description that situates the installation on familiar territory for the contemporary art world.

The themes in my new body of work reflect my preoccupations with how individuals, nations and cultures form and transmit ideas and values. How we perceive each other and ourselves and how we invent systems to categorize our own egocentric worldview.

Rather than use the conceptual and critical forms of the contemporary art world to insulate himself from the gut and maintain emotional distance, Friedman deploys them in ways that expose his emotional vulnerability in an effort to create an experience that addresses our own.



Charley Friedman, *Science Project(14)*, beach balls, motor, machined parts, steel rod, 132" x 96"

Judaism

Friedman's capacity to use the artistic forms of critical distance in the service of exposing and exploring his own emotional vulnerability can be observed in the photograph of the artist performing the role of an Hasidic Jew, who, with beard, curl, and hat, carrying what might be a Torah, stands nude in a field (that the sacred book finds its primary use in covering his genitals is not insignificant). Friedman does not treat Hasidic Judaism as an abstraction, as a cipher for religious fundamentalism or reactionary separatism that is "out there." It emerges from his own Jewish identity, and it is a role that he is not qualified enough to play. The vulnerability, then, is his own. It is his nudity, the nudity of a man playing the role of a member in a tightly guarded community, a role that masks fragility, doubt, and vulnerability. What are the roles we play, the costumes we wear, the curls we put in our hair and the beards we grow, and the sacred books we use that protect ourselves from fragility, doubt, vulnerability?

An important work in Friedman's development of this deeply personal and vulnerable approach to conceptual performance is *Untitled* (Chuck Close), 1998, a self-portrait of the artist as he performs Chuck Close's famous self-portrait drawing. Friedman mimics (puts on) the artist's arrogance and self-confidence. Several years later, Friedman expands the range of the work by performing Chuck Close as his Hasidic alter ego in *Untitled* (Chasid), 2008. Friedman's identity as an artist (although perhaps not yet a "real" artist compared to Close) is further deepened through his persona as Jewish (although not a "real" Jew according to Hasidism). Both alter egos suggest the important social roles of "real artist" and "real religious believer" for Friedman. Unlike many contemporary artists, Friedman does not presume the authority and power of his role as an artist, and the authority and power of the artistic forms he uses, but rather subjects them to reflection and bends them to serve his needs, not merely as a professional artist, but as a human being.

Jewish personas and alter egos have been a crucial and abiding presence in Friedman's artistic practice. "Betsy Geffen" is an art gallery dealer who gives tours and tries to sell Friedman's work and "The Adnoid," is a gruff, pushy Jewish salesman who is featured in the touching video performance, *Felix, Flags, and Poems* (2001) that takes place in Chelsea with Rumi's poetry and Felix Gonzalez Torres's candies. "Bitzalel Friedemann" is a more recent persona who seems to have developed from his Chuck Close photograph and is related to the photograph of the nude Hasid on view at Gallery Diet.

In a 2013 performance at the Sheldon Museum of Art, Bitzalel Friedemann "koshers" the high modernist art museum designed by Phillip Johnson in a ritual performance that also includes hanging Mezuzahs and singing Shabbat Kiddish, transforming the Sheldon into a sacred Jewish "temple" and then as he meets his wife (artist Nancy Friedemann) in one of the galleries, he returns to "Charley" as they enjoy a meal together, further transforming the public gallery into the intimacy of a home, where new social roles are assumed. The social roles of the audience are also transformed as well, from museum goers, to religious believers, to dinner guests. Each of these transformations suggests the function of social roles not ultimately as means of division and separation but as means to offer communal hospitality.



Charley Friedman, *Looking at The Sun*(12), Color pencil on paper, magic sculpt, Total installation 96" x 168" x 72", Figure size 9" x 3" x 2"

Magic Powers: The Absurdity of Art

One of the more peculiar elements in *The Western Code* is *Looking Into the Sun* (2012), a hand-sewn little creature standing on a pedestal, facing a large, bright yellow-stripped work on paper. Perhaps the figure is wearing a suit, an old worn-out suit, like a football team mascot or perhaps a child's fuzzy pajamas. Crouched and with outstretched hands, the figure appears to (or pretends) to create, conjure, or perhaps even venerate the work on the wall. The figure, oblivious to the ridiculousness of his gesture, is engrossed in his performance as a magician, shaman, or artist with unwavering confidence. The arrogance or self-importance of this inflated gesture is softened by the presence of this little figure's butt crack, which makes his endeavor endearing and lends to it an innocence and vulnerability.

Friedman had explored this experience of vulnerability and absurdity previously in *Magic Powers* (2011), a crudely formed nude figure who conjures some kind of power through his hands. The brilliance of this "trick" is tested by the figure's embarrassing nudity his black hairy armpits, pubic hair, and penis, which seems to contradict his claim to power.

And yet, despite their silliness, vulnerability, and absurdity—or, perhaps because of them—we trust these creatures and believe in their endeavors. In fact, Friedman creates the space for us to risk identifying with them. For Friedman, art is a magic trick, for it to work, requires both the artist and the viewer to believe it, to trust it. This is an important and continued interest in Friedman's the self-delusion, impotency, vulnerability, and silliness of art—of art that barely looks and behaves like art and the importance of the viewer to give it its power. It would be too easy to regard this insight cynically, as if the artist is fooling or conning the viewer. But this could not be further from the truth of Friedman's work. It is not the artist against the audience, but the artist bringing the viewer with him, generously inviting the viewer to trust the work. But this relationship requires risk through emotional involvement, an involvement that could fail, that could result in disappointment. Friedman's work, however, always respects this risk. This is what has distinguished his career for twenty years.

Perhaps this is to be expected from an artist who lists Lincoln, Nebraska as well as Brooklyn, New York as the geographical location of his creative and imaginative work.

Based in New York & Nebraska

Grey plasticine squirrels invade the pristine white cube of the gallery space at Gallery Diet in *The Western Code*. They disrupt the pristine nature of art world discourse, the examinations and interrogations of power structures and dominant discourse. The squirrels seem to function as ciphers for Friedman's personal experience, those chaotic or messy aspects of life that cannot be excluded by his artistic practice but are smuggled in through his use of humor (not to be confused with jokes). However, because it lacks skepticism and suspicion and is about the gut, humor is often not considered "serious" enough to be trusted in the contemporary art world. And Friedman knows this. The humor in his work is not on the surface; it unfolds gradually, subtly, and by way of indirection, reveals itself only at the deepest levels of experience. (Jokes, on the other hand, which the contemporary art world tolerates because of its critical distance and capacity to serve as a form of cynicism and irony, must always function the surface and be the first thing a viewer encounters.)

Friedman enacts a similar tone in *Group Portrait* (2013), which includes he, his wife, young child, and dog taken soon after they had moved from Brooklyn to Nebraska. The family poses like Grant Wood's iconic *American Gothic*, facing us in the snow and ice and cold, standing in front of a large white utility van with "Friedman Realty and Conceptual Art" stenciled on its side—a van that the family will transport supplies and art, but also which advertises their real estate business which will help them pay the bills as they work as artists. This "realty" becomes an important part of the "reality" for the artist and his family—a cold, vulnerable, and uncomfortable reality, a reality of the sacrifices of art and life and the multiples social roles that Friedman plays: artist, husband, father, financial provider, supporter of his partner's work as an artist. It is this discomfort and vulnerability brought about by the compression of these vocations and the pressure of living them in a new geographic location that Friedman sought. According to the artist, he took several versions of this family portrait and decided on the one "he couldn't bear to look at." Friedman allows no critical distance or detachment. The emotional register of this photograph comes from his guts and "works" only if it can address the viewer on this visceral level.



Charley Friedman, Staring at the Sun, (detail)

From the Beginning

Friedman produced two early works, *Cake Box* and *One-Hour Smile* while a resident at Skowhegan in 1995 that launched the trajectory of his career. As the artist tells it, surrounded by egocentric and professionally ambitious young wannabe artists, Friedman experimented with what he remembers as “gestures of psychological and emotional resonance,” producing work that he considered defined less by the discourses of art than a personal aesthetic response to a particular community’s highly-charged emotional atmosphere.

In *One-Hour Smile* (1995), Friedman set up a video camera, turned it on, sat down, and looked into it. And then he smiled. And he kept that smile for an hour. Watching this performance was my first encounter with Friedman’s work nearly twenty years ago. His full, open, remarkably generous smile was subjected to the pain and suffering of muscle twitches, tears, and all manner of physical and emotional torture.

This simple but profound performance is not “about” being happy (or the absurdity of being happy or the analysis of being happy). There is thus no room for irony or cynicism, no room for the smile that is really a condescending smirk, an inside joke. *One-Hour Smile* embraces suffering; in fact, the smile even causes it. It is the artist’s commitment, his willful decision to smile—as an artist and I believe also as a human being—that is the very source of his pain. His earnestness, not unlike that silly creature in *The Western Code*, wins us over, making us believe in the importance (and power) of this absurd gesture. And so as we watch him suffer, we suffer with him.

Conclusion

For two decades that smile has been there in, with, and under all of Friedman’s work. The smile is a promise, a covenant with the viewer to respect her emotional investment. The smile is a risky artistic gesture in an art world that too often hides pain, fear, and vulnerability under cynicism, irony, and theory. It is not hard to see this smile behind the smile of the middle-aged artist standing in the cold and snow with his family. Friedman’s work smiles through his vulnerability and it asks only one thing from us, to trust it. And if we can do so, it will allow us to smile through our own vulnerability.