

ART REVIEW

'Punchline II' is an exhibition meant to embrace the absurdity of an absurd world

By Cate McQuaid Updated July 10, 2026, 9:12 a.m.



Gallerist Yng-Ru Chen and stand-up comedian Atsuko Okatsuka after a show by Okatsuka at the Wilbur in 2024. Chen invited Okatsuka and Ryan Harper Gray, the comedian's creative director, to guest curate "Punchline II," now at Praise Shadows Art Gallery. SUBMITTED PHOTO

“Gallery spaces can be intimidating for people,” said stand-up comedian [Atsuko Okatsuka](#), ““Oh, am I dressed right for even going in? Am I smart enough? Will I get it?”

Okatsuka and her partner and creative director, Ryan Harper Gray, are guest curators of “Punchline II,” at Praise Shadows Art Gallery through Aug. 8. They worked in tandem with gallery owner Yng-Ru Chen.

“It feels like the opposite of a lot of gallery shows feel,” said Harper Gray. “You don’t need to know about art. Come on in.”

Serious times call for a little goofiness and absurdity. “Punchline II” features businessmen sneezing out rabbits in a video by Mika Rottenberg, Pat Olesko’s birthday cake hat, and Jibz Cameron/Dynasty Handbag’s antic drawings of life’s everyday insults, with titles like “Traffic Am I Right.”

The three curators spoke with the Globe over Zoom, Okatsuka and Harper Gray from their home in Los Angeles, and Chen from Brookline.



Mika Rottenberg, "Sneeze," 2012, single-channel video installation. MIKA ROTTENBERG AND HAUSER & WIRTH, NYC

Chen put together the first “Punchline” exhibition on her own in 2022 in a New York space. The post-COVID show was darker.

“Trump was leaving the first term, and we were finishing coming out of lockdown,” she said. “It was dealing with some PTSD from the few years before.”

This time, she wanted something completely different. She was a fan of Okatsuka’s stand-up filled with wry personal stories and had attended the comic’s Boston shows, so she reached out.

“Having collaborators who are simpatico but have very different lives and careers and objectives” helped her push her own envelope, she said. “They’re not looking at art as a dealer. They’re looking at art as sources of inspiration or entertainment.”



Liliana Porter's "To Fix It." LILIANA PORTER AND KRAKOW WITKIN, BOSTON

Okatsuka and Harper Gray are no strangers to art; they regularly go to galleries and museums in Los Angeles. The comedian attended California Institute of the Arts. She even spoofs heady art-world jargon in a hilarious [Instagram](#) video.

“Comedy is far easier when everyone else is taking themselves very seriously,” Harper Gray said.

Despite being an art lover, Okatsuka felt like a babe in the woods when Chen took them on studio visits to scope out artists for “Punchline II.” “It’s intimidating. I was like, do I know anything?,” she said. “I just know when something makes me laugh or makes me giggle, I’m drawn to it, or it makes me happy.”

The three arrived at a list of 10 artists, and the show includes cheeky ceramics by Kristy Moreno and Chiara No, sly and goofy sculptures by art-world elders Olezsko and Liliana Porter, and videos by Rottenberg and Cameron (who performs as Dynasty Handbag).

The work is heartfelt, not ironic. “We talk about how we’re in an era where hopefully sincerity and genuineness is something so beautiful and not to overlook,” Okatsuka said. “The whole rolling your eyes at something or someone because they’re cheesy — I’d like to think we’re over that.”



Chiara No, "Votive to Baubo — All books go to heaven." CHIARA NO AND PRAISE SHADOWS, BOSTON

No, a Vermont sculptor, crafted ceramic bells celebrating Baubo, a nursemaid in Greek mythology who uses crude humor to assuage the goddess Demeter's grief after losing her daughter Persephone to the underworld. In "Votive to Baubo — All books go to heaven," the nursemaid appears to lift her skirts, mooning viewers to reveal truths about what happens if you burn books.

That piece echoes Okatsuka's own aesthetic, drawing on her wardrobe in her 2025 Hulu stand-up special, "Father." The show was nominated for an Art Directors Guild production design award. Design is crucial to the comedian's work; Okatsuka's looks match her humor — warm, light, and smart.

"Why does Atsuko have a bowl cut?," Harper Gray asks. "It's fashion. It's art. It's funny."



Kristy Moreno, "NO PARKING ON THE DANCE FLOOR." KRISTY MORENO AND PRAISE SHADOWS, BOSTON

Moreno's funky, in-the-round sculpture depicting people of different ages and types hugging, dancing, or just real close, reminded the comedian of her grandmother, whom she often speaks about in standup.

"I'm very moved by colors and fashion," Okatsuka said, "then thinking about ancestors ... my grandma is my best friend and she raised me. She's 92 now. And we sometimes share each other's clothes. I joke that Taiwanese grandmas are very fashion forward and they don't know it sometimes, but they've accidentally started trends."

Ceramics like Moreno's and No's echo a legacy of comedy in craft-based mediums that once, in the fine art world, was frowned on as kitschy and whimsical.

"The art world had a history, a little more rigidity at times," said Harper Gray. "We find artists to be very funny and very full of humor and joy. When you remove the marketplace of it all, then it's just humans playing with mud."

For Chen, the message is clear: Lighten up.

"We can all have a little bit of a laugh," she said, "because we need to."

PUNCHLINE II

At Praise Shadows Art Gallery, 129 Kingston St., through Aug. 8. 617-256-0227,
www.praiseshadows.com