ALMINE RECH

Todd Bienvenu
Slapstick

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In *Slapstick*, Todd Bienvenu's new show at Almine Rech, comedy springs from the physical world failing human ambition. His scenes teem with raucous energy, feeding off the kind of ugly emotions usually swept under the carpet by art world good manners. Humiliation, embarrassment and loss crash-land into his canvases like uninvited guests.

Bienvenu's eye is compulsively drawn to moments of comic deflation and thwarted hope. His acrylic is applied with a deceptively crude unruliness, yet his subjects remain curiously static, as if photobombing scenes from their own lives. They're drinkers, idlers, eloquent bums lounging in dive bars. It's a working-class world usually exiled from the stuffy confines of the art gallery: chipped teeth and bad tattoos, hellraisers living for a good time.

Yet, cast outside the bourgeois politics of identity, these louche characters are more than just the dog-eared flipside of the American dream. They're emblems of a country both divided and galvanised by that most successful of failures: Trump. Is their hedonism a necessary escape, or an ignorant distraction from the inferno? Sometimes, escaping hell means burying yourself in it.

Bienvenu nods towards his influences with an off-kilter bravado. His swimming pool scenes are like hungover Hockney: all artful slapdash and sun-soaked bliss. Yet even this lazy paradise is fraught with misfires. Someone slips in the shower; a diver belly flops with an almost audible splash.

The human body is scrutinised with sly humour. A bearded beefcake poses, hunch-shouldered, in polka-dotted boxer shorts. A diver preens in Speedos. Belly-down on the sand, a sunbather's leopard print bathing suit catches in her butt crack. Elsewhere, skateboarders crumple onto the street and footballs smack into the faces of passersby.

Summertime seems to transform the city into a febrile public theatre, full of unintended collisions and high anxiety. In one painting, Bienvenu's English father-in-law is hit by a cyclist, turning the road into a wince-making ballet witnessed by Copenhagen's candy-coloured houses. In another, the artist himself moves studios, a mountain of half-finished canvases and easels teetering on his bike.

A jaundiced eye is also cast over technology – how it both distorts and reflects us in its own omnipotent image. An anonymous voyeur glances at a wall of screens glowing with disembodied body parts, blurring the line between the watched and the watcher. In other paintings, people stare into their smartphone screens and laptops, looking for fleeting connection and finding only themselves. Every hopeful departure is a possible banana skin.

These scenes point to the sadness that floats just beyond the surface of things; the painful awareness that nothing is long for this world. "The paintings are about seizing the day [...] They are about mortality—knowing that you'll have to leave the party sometime..."

Above all, Bienvenu's work reminds us that so much of our experience of being alive is pure sensation – stinging, ambivalent, ecstatic – forever shadowed by its own inevitable disappointment.