



Maitha Abdalla. *Between Daydreams and Nightmares*. 2020. Image courtesy of the artist and Tabari Artspace

COME ONE, COME ALL

From Bruegel and Goya to contemporary Middle Eastern artists, the trope of the carnivalesque has been used historically in art to speak truth to power with whimsy and irreverence.

Words by Tim Smith-Laing



Rokni Haerizadeh. *Cursed into Slum*. 2010. From the series *Fictionville*. 2009–ongoing. Mixed media on paper. 29.7 x 21 cm. Sharjah Art Foundation Collection. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation

In 1445, the dean of the theological faculty of Paris wrote an open letter to the bishops of France. It was long, minutely reasoned polemic against the so-called *Festus Fatuorum*, the 'Feast of Fools', that many churches saw fit to celebrate at new year. "Priests and clerks," wrote the scandalised Eustace de Mesnil, "may be seen wearing masks and monstrous visages at the hours of office. They dance in the choir dressed as women, pimps or minstrels. They sing wanton songs." It was a systematic undoing of all that should have been most sacrosanct about the mass. Instead of holy incense, smoke from old shoes; instead of the sanctified body and blood of Christ, blood puddings eaten on the altar. To cap it all, a procession through town that reduced priests to the worst kind of street entertainers: riding in "shabby traps and carts", entertaining the public with "infamous performances [...] indecent gestures and verses scurrilous and unchaste."

To those of a less serious disposition than the average medieval theologian, this probably sounds like a good time. As Eustace knew, plenty of priests thought so too. Yet there was no getting away from the fact that this was the least Christian of Christian traditions – suspiciously pagan, and all too disordered. Successive reforms curtailed the wildest practices until only one was left: the feast before the fast of Lent. With 40 days ahead in which they would be allowed no meat, dairy or eggs, and only a single meal per day, medieval

Christians called the last days of freedom *carnevamen*: time to 'solace the flesh' with good food and good fun too. By the time it made its way into Italian and French, the word had decayed into *carnevale*. Carnival was born.

As the letter shows, no matter how important carnival was in medieval Europe, it was never free of suspicion. It had to fight for the right to party. In Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent* (1559), that need is made literal in a joust between the two tendencies. On the left, Carnival rides astride a barrel, followed by a procession of masked, costumed merrymakers, making noise, drinking, tucking into waffles and cakes as they go. Bursting out of his shirt, he bears the perfect weapon: a roasting spit, complete with its piglet. Opposite him approaches the figure of Lent, brandishing a baker's peel with two fish on it for a lance. Pinch-cheeked, grey in the face, she looks almost too weakly thin to even hold her weapon aloft. Backed up by a retinue with wooden clappers, dry pretzels and rolls, she seems the image of joylessness itself.

If Lent's attenuated sneer seems to show just where Bruegel's sympathies lie, things are not so simple. Neither she nor Carnival provides a full answer to the complexities of the world around them. Bruegel's composition is such that most of the painting is background beyond their battle, crammed with precisely those complexities. Everywhere another tiny scene unfolds: a man vomiting from a tavern



Walid Raad. *Mao Zedong*. 2022. From the series *Festival of Gratitude*. 2022. Image courtesy of the artist and Artworld

window, an irritated householder dousing a drunk with water, a fishwife selling her wares. More important, though, are those whom life has left behind. Everywhere among the carousers and the penitents alike are the destitute, disabled and disfigured; beggars with extravagant disabilities and disfigurements calling out for alms. Ignored by the revellers, they receive bread and coins from the followers of Lent.

It is better than nothing, and yet, Bruegel shows mercilessly, it is still absurdly little. One of Lent's retinue bears a basket of shoes to hand out to those in need; directly behind him sits a beggar missing both his feet. Charity is all well and good, but what use are shoes to the footless? What, indeed, is the use of charity at all? Life, for Bruegel, is a multifaceted thing, but it only goes to one end. The beggars and the band of lepers who disintegrate piece by piece show the direction of travel, and Bruegel inserts the destination too. In the bottom right-hand corner of the painting lies a corpse in a shroud; in

the centre, another is wheeled along in a low barrow – echoing the massive fish belly-up just beneath it. Whether you side with Carnival or Lent, Bruegel suggests, life is always bound to suffering and death.

This, though, is why carnival matters, and why it has proven such an enduring vein for artists. The term might be Christian, but it labels something universal: a need for joy in the face of death; a need to affirm life once in a while by turning the accepted order of things upside down. Shoot forward 500 years from Bruegel to British-Dominican artist Tam Joseph's *Spirit of the Carnival* (1984), and the battle is no longer between Carnival and Lent, but Carnival and the Metropolitan Police. Conceived as a local grassroots response to race riots in the area, Notting Hill Carnival came into being in the mid-1960s as a Caribbean carnival encouraging communities in what was then a brutally poor area of the city to come together, display their heritage, and let off steam that would otherwise only add to the pressure cooker of racial tensions. Success over the next two decades brought its own pressures, not least of all because of heavy-handed policing. In Joseph's painting, Carnival is a lone figure in costume and mask, fenced in by riot shields, surrounded by dozens of helmeted London coppers, attacked by a dog. Holding up a single propitiatory hand, mouth frozen in a shocked O, Carnival is clearly on the losing side, and yet he is the burning centre of the painting; seen from a distance his straw-bear costume looks like flames holding back the dark of night.

Similar sentiments echo through Lebanese artist Raed Yassin's *The Theatricality of a Postponed Death* (2022–23), a piece reconstructing and memorialising a never-to-be-repeated carnival march against death that took place in Beirut in 1984. Led by theatre director Raif Karam – who went on to teach Yassin – the original event saw schoolchildren and actors, masked and carrying giant puppets, march down the main street of West Beirut even as the two sides in the civil war continued to fight. The carnival continued while bombs literally fell around it. In Yassin's recreation, giant papier mâché heads weep blue tears over the giant body of 1970s Lebanese comedian Shushu, borne through the streets to the strains of his own songs re-orchestrated as a New Orleans funeral march. Both Karam's original and Yassin's tribute are testament to what might be the core of carnival as an idea: the party can't go on; the party must go on.

It is, though, never just a party. As Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin argued in 1940, carnival attaches to a whole mode of being: the *carnavalesque*, a kind of underground stream of freedom in an unfree world. It bursts out when it does to "liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted." At its centre – as Bruegel saw – sits the body in all its hilarity and mortality, the flesh that ties every human together, no matter how elevated they claim to be. And what Bakhtin called 'grotesque realism' is carnivalesque's way of piercing all claims of authority and superiority – a supreme tool for artists, especially in authoritarian regimes.

The grand master of grotesque realism is Francisco Goya. Living in a period of brutal religious and secular authoritarianism in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Spain – under the twin terrors



Rokni Haerizadeh. *Act Like You Talk*. 2010. From the series *Fictionville*. 2009–ongoing. Mixed media on paper. 29.7 x 21 cm. Sharjah Art Foundation Collection. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation

of the Inquisition and the Peninsular War – he was fascinated both by carnival in its official form and by the ways in which carnivalesque absurdity inflected life everywhere. His *Burial of the Sardine* (c. 1814–18) records the former with gleeful fondness, depicting the mock funeral procession that completes Spain's annual carnival as a whirl of sinister joyfulness. When he turns his eyes beyond the party, though, his vision of life's ludicrousness is withering. *The etchings of the Caprichos* (1799) use carnival tropes of inversion and masquerade with savage brilliance to cut at the hypocrisies of contemporary life and reveal anyone with a self-satisfied claim to knowledge, virtue or holiness for what they really are. In *De que mal morira?* (What will he die of?), the doctor taking a patient's pulse is, for all his frock-coat and silk stockings, a literal ass. In *No te escaparàs* (You will not escape) a transparently flirtatious young woman simultaneously invites and flees the attentions of winged monsters with the faces of lecherous old men. In *Nadie nos ha visto* (No one has seen us), monks drink themselves senseless in secret, faces as wild as any carnival mask. In the end, the *Caprichos* scared even Goya himself; after publication, fear of the Inquisition made him remove them from sale.

Goya's double sense of the carnivalesque has inspired generations of artists since – from the extravagant inversions and animal imagery of

painters like Paula Rego and Michael Armitage, to the literal drawing over of his *Disasters of War* (1810–20) that forms the Chapman Brothers' *Insult to Injury* (2003), via the cold-eyed 'new objectivity' of Max Beckmann in 1930s Germany. The Christian origins of carnival notwithstanding, it is no surprise that tendrils of it have taken root in the contemporary Islamic world. As Goya knew, the jaundiced eye of grotesque realism is sometimes the clearest way of seeing through the competing claims to authority – civil, military, moral and religious – that are as present in the modern Middle East as they were in Goya's Spain.

The Emirati conceptual giant Hassan Sharif bookended his career with precisely such sceptical scrutiny, first in the form of his political caricatures, published in newspapers during the mid-1970s, then in the form of his *Press Conference* series (2008-9). Haunted by Goya and Beckmann, the *Press Conferences* depict politicians, mouths gaping, faces slathered out in grey, green and pink oil paint, caught in various hollow orations. Sunglassed bodyguards hover heavily behind to show just how often physical force and empty promises go hand in hand. "An artist," Sharif once commented, "is a realist by nature"; a realist whose task is "to say no to the authoritative orders", by showing them as they really are.



Hassan Sharif. *Press Conference No. 4*. 2008. Oil on canvas. 200 x 145. 4 cm. Image courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai; and gb Agency, Paris © 2023 Estate of Hassan Sharif

In a world of masks, though, what people really are is a vexed question. In the interdisciplinary work of fellow Emirati Maitha Abdalla, the mask becomes a means of acting out questions that might otherwise be too serious to take on. Abdalla's interdisciplinary practice – branching across painting, photography and performance – acts, in her words, as a surrealistic 'diary' of her passage through life. Filtering Goya's influence through Rego and Francis Bacon, Abdalla's is a world populated by anthropomorphised roosters and pigs, who dance and act their way through folktales and everyday dilemmas. In *Between Daydreams and Nightmares* (2020), against the bright-pink tiles of a teenage girl's bathroom, a pig – in green dress and papier-mâché mask – crouches on all fours, harangued by the rooster. The animals' well-known symbolism of sin and purity in the region is invoked above all to be undercut. Played by two adolescent girls, they become the opposing expectations and assumptions that play so heavily on the average teenager's mind. The pig, unfairly picked out for sinfulness, is just another girl, going through the painful passage of pubertal self-doubt. The masks are quite literally, child's play, but play that, in Abdallah's words, does precisely the work of carnival: disarming received "structures, rules, and ideas about [...] right/wrong, sin and purity".

If masks can disarm assumptions through fun, carnival masking never stays far away from the dangers depicted by Goya at his

darkest. In Iranian artist Rokni Haerizadeh's ongoing *Fictionville* (2009) series, masks act as a means of pulling away the surface of the world to reveal the madness beneath. Directly informed by Goya's diaristic approach to recording contemporary events in his sketchbooks and prints, Haerizadeh works over stills from news reports with elaborate overpainting inspired by the techniques of the Persian miniaturists. The alterations transform the entire world into a flux of grotesque hybridity. In *Act Like You Talk* (2010), a crowd of men stand, right hands raised to their head in a gesture of respect that simultaneously reads in the argot of social media as a facepalm. Only, Haerizadeh's paint has made them pigs, solemn, foolish, sinful; inverting whatever respect is due to the event they have gathered for. Elsewhere in *Fictionville*, a burning mosque screams through lipped windows and flukes a sea monster tail in agony; police visors transform into gaping toothed maws; a procession of mourners morph into unidentifiable chimeras. It is an attempt, Haerizadeh has said, to examine the media's use of violence and bring out what he calls "the dear beast inside all human beings". While the news often pronounces a clear judgement on the scenes he appropriates, Haerizadeh's vision is infinitely more ambivalent: a world without "moral lessons".

As Haerizadeh's strange visions suggest, masking is always and inevitably a source of anxiety. There is, as Bakhtin pointed out, a



Raed Yassin. *The Theatricality of a Postponed Death*. 2023. Installation view at Kalfayan Galleries, Athens, 2023. Image courtesy of the artist, Kalfayan Galleries and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai

justifiable fear that all that is "ordinary, commonplace [...] habitual and secure" might suddenly be revealed as "meaningless, dubious and hostile". The mask might be the world as we know it, ready to fall away at any second. It is a notion that lies at the heart of the long career of Lebanon's Walid Raad – an artist who, like others of his generation, saw the seemingly dependable fabric of normality ripped away by the Lebanese Civil War. His *Atlas Group* (1989–2004) project, which sees him masquerading as a fictional foundation carrying out historical investigations into the war, revolves around an obsessive collection of evidence relating to era, documenting the normal and its demolition across an entire archive of work.

While Raad himself assumes different masks in this process, at the heart of the work is the mask of fragile reality itself. Nowhere is it more visible than in *Notebook volume 38: Already been in a lake of fire* (1991), collated by Raad's alter-ego 'Dr Fadl Fakhouri', and featuring 145 cut-out photographs of cars, each attached to a formulaic set of notes. Purportedly, each photo corresponds "to the exact make, model and colour of every car used as a bomb between 1975 and 1991". The notes record the place, time and date of the detonation, weight and type of explosive, perimeter of explosion and casualty numbers. The point is the sheer ordinariness of the cars: nothing is special about them except

their use as camouflage for deadly cargo, ready to turn the world upside down.

Nevertheless, there remains in Raad's work a sense that, under the right conditions, what lies beneath might have a liberatory function too. His recent *Festival of Gratitude* (2022) series is a range of elaborate animated birthday cakes dedicated to dictators, strongmen and other world leaders of dubious reputation. Its origins date to Raad's childhood job photographing patisseries in a Beirut cakeshop, during which he fantasised about poisoning the then president Amine Gemayel with a cake. While the cakes remain virtual, the concept branches into the real: the smart contract system that tokenises Vladimir Putin's cake automatically donates the sale price to Ukraine artists and activists. The series, in its faux-celebration of each dedicatee, frames artistic irony as a revolutionary substance: a toxin to power.

The ambivalence is built into carnivalesque itself – and is key to its power as a concept. It persists, on one level, because as Bakhtin suggests, it is always already there, coursing beneath the streets of everyday life. It might burst out as the fear that all that is normal is mad, or as the hope that festive madness can wash away to 'official "truth"' in a clean tide of fun. Balanced between hope and fear, the face it chooses to show depends, perhaps, less on the mask than on the viewer. ■