

# pompom

## WARPARTY

You can't always be the funny guy in this life, or maybe you can. Philjames is a pretty funny guy, and then again, he isn't. Comedy is a double-edged sword in its many forms. Like so many of his pop art compatriots at the heart of Philjames' practice is a scathing social reflection that requires comedy. If you didn't laugh, you would cry. In an essay titled *The Comic In General* French Philosopher Henri Bergson noted, "To produce the whole of its effect, then, the comic demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart."<sup>1</sup> This anaesthesia of the heart could not be more apparent than in *WARPARTY*.

The *White Privilege (and how to get it)* series debuting in *WARPARTY* is a notable departure for Philjames from the world of immediately recognisable cartoons and fallen superheroes as he begins a line of inquiry concerning race relations and the social and historical frameworks, conditions, and stereotypes that propagate inequity and discrimination. Featuring eight prints and three vessels Philjames has constructed a circus-like face built from the symbolic burning cross imagery associated with the actions of lynch mobs and caricature lips reminiscent of 'the golliwog'. The eyeballs in the *White Privilege* series appear heavily strained and darting creating a sense of motion across all of the works akin to a visual flip book depiction of guilty looks. There is a concerted coldness in these works. At the core of each resides a sinister history that still proves unnerving as a commentary on racial discrimination and social narrative structures. Banana skin ceramic works spread across the floor act as a connective tissue between the *White Privilege* series and the works contained in the central section of the gallery space providing a sense of comic relief and critical distance whilst reaffirming the serious social issues being explored in *WARPARTY*. As cultural theorist Simon Critchley notes in *The Jokes On Us*, "Laughter gives us a distance on everyday life, and there is a certain coldness at its core...if someone slips on a banana skin, then we do not rush to help, we sit back and laugh..."<sup>2</sup> The Greco Roman bust and accompanying paintings featured in the main gallery herald the neo pop oeuvre for which Philjames is known. Still, for the continued circus-ness, freakishness and slapstick tropes, the subject matter remains far from funny. In *Protectress of Dewy Youth*, Philjames evokes the spirit of the Greek Goddess Artemis. A nurturing spirit yet sometimes fierce and vengeful, the Goddess of the darkness represented the uncertainty between good and evil, both all-powerful and vulnerable. In *WARPARTY* she is recognizable only in form. The Goddess resurrect appears grotesque, mutilated, monstrous and powerless. Flanked by the pornographically inspired *MILFquilt* one cannot help but wonder if the Goddess has been rendered grotesque by virtue of her unearthly nature. After all, if you can't fuck her what good is she?

Philjames' chilling displacement of slapstick jokes with remixed pop culture iconology creates a language of visual oxymora and tautologies that collapse into an abject and ill at ease metaphorical hall of mirrors. Walking this razor's edge, *WARPARTY* holds ambiguous meaning in its double-speak. Perhaps our gods are our monsters and our monsters are our gods? Or maybe, like cartoon characters and pornographic images, they are simply projected figments of our collective imagination reflecting us back our basest human urges.

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<sup>1</sup> Bergson, Henri, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Translation published Arc Manor, 2008, p.11.

<sup>2</sup> Critchley, Simon, *On Humour; Chapter 6 The Jokes on All of Us*, Routledge Press, 2002, p.87.