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Maxing out Minimal art's funny bone

'Why Can't Minimal' at U of T's Justina M. Barnicke Gallery is a warm hug to the cool esthetic of Minimal art

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MURRAY WHYTE / TORONTO STAR [Order this photo](#)

Jon Sasaki's Slab, Base for a Future Monument, at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery's Why Can't Minimal.

By: **Murray Whyte** Visual arts, Published on Wed Sep 10 2014

The funny, engaging and happily perplexing new show *Why Can't Minimal* is less a question than an invitation: Why Can't Minimal art do what, exactly? Depending on what side of the conceptual fence you've placed yourself — "go away," some might like to finish the phrase — the question will be more or less open-ended.

In the case of curator John G. Hampton, whose show at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery is a wry, understated delight, the question appears to end with "be funny" and, to my mind, the question hardly needs asking.

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After all, wasn't Minimalism, born in the early 1960s as a cheeky, subversive rejoinder to the bacchanalian excess of an art market fattened on Abstract Expressionism's unquashable economic force, always meant to be a bit of a joke?

Sol LeWitt's skeletal cube structures, Dan Flavin's fluorescent tube sculptures, Carl Andre's fire bricks lined up end to end: all had a case to make about ascetic purity in the face of so much intemperance, no doubt.

But in the same soup of ideas that begat conceptualism — the equally eggheaded but more overtly impish art movement of the day — a wryness, however subtle, reigned. Flavin, when his shows were done, would take the light tubes back to the hardware store he'd bought them from, an absurdly funny gesture to almost anyone, unless you were the dealer trying to sell them.

Whatever the case, Hampton answers his own question ably and the naysayers, too. Minimalism isn't going anywhere, tethered permanently to certain forms of

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conceptualism that value material presence as much as idea.

A step into the first gallery draws you immediately to John Marriott's work, an array of white plinths displaying pigeon spikes, those things you put on top of utility boxes to avoid layers of droppings.

It's as direct a reference to classical Minimalism's roots as you'll find. Utilitarian object co-opted for its geometric and proportional esthetic properties? Check. Objects presented on their own, free apparently from artistic intervention? Check. (See Andre, Carl, represented here in name by Ken Nicol's work, in which thousands of index cards are typed with the same Andre quote and Minimalist mantra: "If a thing is worth doing once, it's worth doing again.")

The difference here is, where you might be able to divorce material from function in those foundational works, Marriott quite intentionally makes that impossible. Underscoring the point, an empty glass cube is placed in the middle of it all, its corners defanged with baby-proofing strips.

Like any decent joke, if I have to explain the punchline, it didn't work. But I think it does. Artwise, though, Marriott pulls the rug out from his Minimalist forebears: by cheekily tethering his materials to their real function, Minimalism's monklike ascetic is shoved incongruously into the real world and the joke's on them.

Funny, I suppose, is in the eye of the beholder and you'd be forgiven if you didn't burst out laughing here. Much of the wit of Minimalism lies in absurdity — paradoxical propositions, subverting the norm — and here we find *Six Boxes*, a short, bizarrely funny video piece by [John Wood and Paul Harrison](#).

Onscreen, a man in a black sweatsuit does weird, simple things: jumping up and down inside a white box precisely proportioned for him to do just that, or walking from one end of a box to the other with a rope tied around his waist, closing the open end just as he arrives.

The work is in this show, I suspect, as a subversion much like Marriott's: refuting Minimalism's chilly intellectual proposal of the purity of form with very human futility. That aside, it's hilarious: Minimal slapstick if there ever was such a thing.

The show arranges itself along these lines throughout: Tammi Campbell's series of "Dear Agnes" letters to Agnes Martin, the renowned painter of minimal grids, whom Campbell addresses in her own language, writing only "Dear Agnes" at the top of a page fitted with precise grids of pencil lines, thereby introducing a futile sentimentality to Martin's proposition of formal purity. John Boyle-Singfield works his own version of cheeky homage with *Untitled (Coke Zero)*, a Plexiglas cube with a shallow well of the titular soda pooled at the bottom, aping Hans Haacke's seminal work *Condensation Cube*, which he infused with water.

These kinds of gestures are truly for the art nerds, so consider this my signed confession: I loved them. They're bound to precedent, to be sure, and without those you'd be a little lost. But that's a small complaint, leavened by a breadth of more open invitations. Look no further than Jon Sasaki, whose unrequited conceptual gestures are the bedrock of one of the city's more interesting oeuvres.

Sasaki slips in here much like the others, as subversive and sly, but his conversation is an open one: a Fed Ex box containing a one-foot cube — or minimal structure, if you prefer — never opened and left on the gallery floor, displaying its packing labels at each showing (there have been several) or a glistening slab of wet concrete, still in its forms, formulated precisely to never fully set.

He calls it *Slab, Base For Future Monument* and, despite its properties (get out your Minimal checklist: simple form, workaday material), Sasaki infuses it with the cheeky melancholia of a grand goal never to be achieved, pushing it somewhere new. Minimal humanism, maybe? Mind the double-entendre: it's a joke we can all get.

Why Can't Minimal continues at the

<http://www.jmbgallery.ca/ExWhyCantMinimal.html> Justina M. BarnickeEND to Oct. 19.

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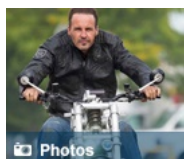
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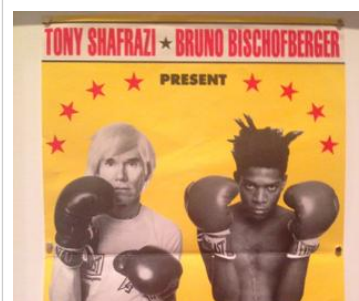


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