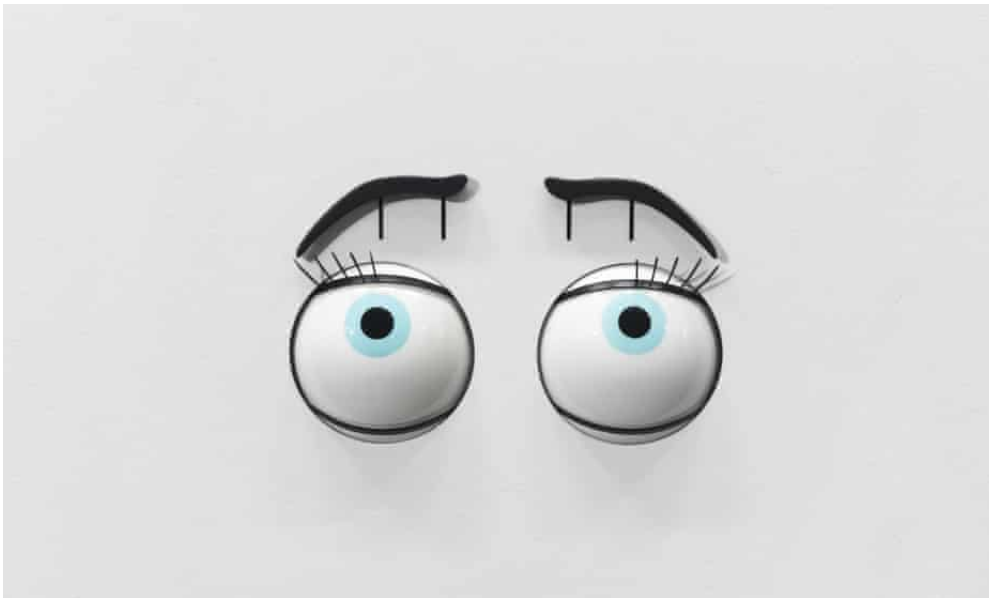


Knock Knock review – 'I like a laugh as much as the next miserable critic!'

[Adrian Searle](#) Tue 18 Sep 2018 18.08 BST

South London Gallery

There are old jokes, new jokes, even Welsh sheep jokes. But the real star of this show about humour in art is the rescued fire station much of it is housed in



Eyes that follow you round the room ... Ryan Gander, *Dominae Illud Opus Populare*, 2016. Photograph: Ryan Gander. Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery.

Knock Knock! Who's there? A Welshman overly fond of sheep. [Rodney Graham](#), seated on a park bench, eyeing the world through two small holes torn in the newspaper he's pretending to read. A clown and a tin-foil flailing rock-god guitarist. Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse and the real Snow White. Here comes everybody.

Filling the South London Gallery and its new expansion into the 19th-century fire station across the Peckham Road, [Knock Knock](#) – the title

taken not just from the hoary old formula for a joke, but also from [a drawing by Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein](#) – has been curated by South London Gallery director Margot Heller and artist [Ryan Gander](#).

Knock Knock jokes usually evince a groan. Stop me if you've heard this one before. Stop me before I kill again. Artists who are genuinely funny, and whose wit is complex enough to sustain, and even to deepen, on repeated viewings are uncommon. Swiss duo [Fischli and Weiss](#), David Shrigley, Ed Ruscha, [Nicole Eisenman](#), Paul McCarthy, Bruce Nauman all come to mind. They're not here. Nor is [Andy Holden](#), whose recent animated films, as well as being very funny, analyse humour itself in deft, often sly ways. Perhaps a funny thing happened to him on the way to the gallery.

I like a good laugh as well as the next miserable art critic. Featuring a mix of old works and new, of pieces and artists who have shown previously at SLG, much of the humour here really has to be worked at. One-liners and no-liners, impenetrable sight gags that leave me dumbfounded, things that just aren't funny at all, and perhaps aren't even trying to be, fill the galleries. In one of the best works, [Harold Offeh's 2001 video Smile](#), the artist grimaces with a rictus grin to Nat King Cole's 1954 version of the song Smile (Charlie Chaplin composed the music). Offeh follows the song's injunction to smile, but it looks like a terrible ordeal.

The big, open space of the original 1891 gallery is dominated by [Joyce Pensato's Take Me to Your Leader](#), an enormous charcoal drawing in which Mickey Mouse confronts a group of Donald Ducks. I like the drawing well enough, though its scale seems unnecessary. Martin Creed's big, black diagonal stripes on an adjacent wall evince a sort of blank fury. A saw seems to be about to cut a circular hole in the gallery floor from below in a work by Ceal Floyer. Maybe she's trying to help us escape. A brick foot and a brick ball, by Judith Hopf, aren't going to have a kick-about soon, and if you try to have a go with Basim Magdy's basketball hoop you would break it. It is made of glass. Ba-boom.

Many things here defeat me. Heman Chong has printed the internet 404 error phrase “Something went wrong. We’re working on getting it fixed as soon as we can” on one of the doors, while [Maurizio Cattelan’s stuffed flock of pigeons](#) have infested the gallery eaves. An old gag, but sometimes they’re the best. [Bedwyr Williams](#) has parked his bike in the corridor. The bicycle’s frame has been upholstered in sheep fur, the handlebars are a pair of horns and there’s a sheep skull poking out the front. Fucking Inbred Welsh Sheepshagger, it is called, turning the xenophobic English insult against the Welsh back on itself.

The real star of the show is the building across the street, where the show continues in the old Peckham Road Fire Station, donated anonymously to the gallery after it was sold at auction in 2008 and left derelict for several years. Built in 1867, the fire station – with its horse-drawn carriages kept on the ground floor, and the firemen and their families housed above, has been gutted and rebuilt. [6a Architects](#) have provided a stack of larger and smaller exhibition and project spaces, an archive room and a kitchen. Various original features remain (a fireplace hangs high on a blank wall in the opened-up full-height stairwell, and a replica of the original station gaslight hangs outside, the word ENGINES printed on the glass). A small group of concrete sheep nestle in the vertiginous stairwell. Basic concrete blocks mounted on old table legs, Judith Hopf’s little flock are only identifiable as sheep by the cartoonish sheep faces drawn on the bare concrete. Better keep Bedwyr Williams away from them. He might do himself a mischief.



(left to right): Campaign Volunteer (2018) by Rosemarie Trockel, Yves (2018) by Sarah Lucas, and Biological Clock 2 (1995), Call Me (1987) and Seduction (1985) by Lynn Hershman Leeson. Photograph: Andy Stagg

On the floor a man lies sleeping. Wrapped in a sheepskin and a towel, and his face painted as a clown, Ugo Rondinone's lifelike sculpture has a drift of glitter at his feet. Like several other works here, the title of Rondinone's sculpture is at least as intriguing as the 2002 work itself. *If There Were Anywhere But Desert, Friday*, it is called. Upstairs, Sarah Lucas's latest mannequin perches on a chair. With her lewd breasts, long bendy legs and clumping blue velvet shoes that look far too big, Lucas's *Yves* (named after Yves Klein, maybe because of the blue heels she wears) is as vulnerable as she is provocative. Ryan Gander's animatronic pair of eyes, inset in the wall, blink and follow you round the room. Tom Friedman's kitchen-foil guitarist flails his silver-foil hair. On a grainy video, [Lucy Gunning's 1994 *The Horse Impressionists*](#) whinny and neigh. Still funny, Gunning's work also feels old-fashioned, even quaint, like an old comedy re-run on a dead-zone channel. In its way, there's human pathos in there, too, oddly amplified, like Offeh's *Smile*, by the passage of time.

With its beautiful Gabriel Orozco garden, its incursion into adjoining buildings and the council estate behind, where it hosts community projects and art classes, and now with the fire station across the street, South London Gallery has slowly, incrementally expanded over the past decade.

And the works keep coming, as you mount the stairs and go from room to room. Cartoons, sound works, an ice cream cone, slightly sinister drawings and in-jokes I'm still trying to get. It's not exactly a bundle of laughs but it keeps you on the move, looking for a punchline, which might be the point.

- Knock Knock: Humour in Contemporary Art is at the [South London Gallery, from 22 September until 18 November](#).
- This article was amended on 24 September 2018 to correct the spelling of Basim Magdy's name.