

The Art Guys: *What's the Big Idea?*

Cornell DeWitt Gallery

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The Art Guys can be hard to take if you take them the wrong way. That sounds as if I'm implying there's a right way to take them, which is not what I mean to say at all.

Let's start over. The Art Guys are serious-minded artists who make silly art that levels a serious critique at the art world and other cultural silliness.

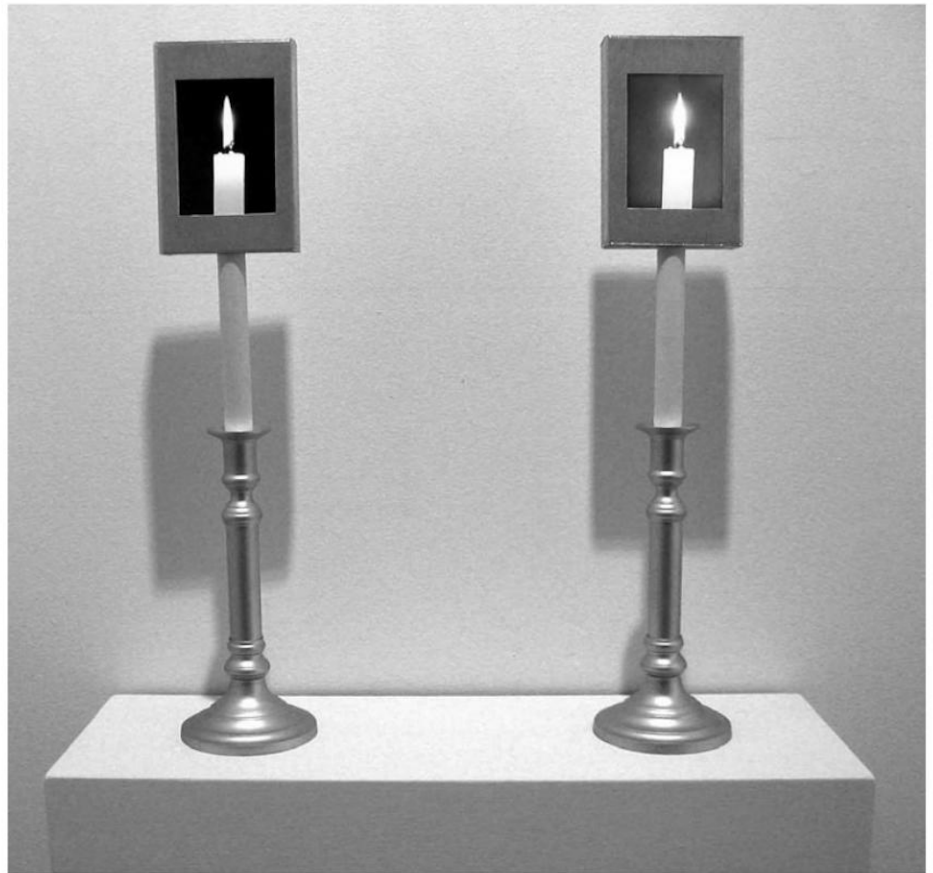
Alright, that's closer to where we need to be to talk about this Houston-based duo. Michael Galbreth and Jack Massing make art about art, a time-honored and high-toned tradition. This is an intellectual exercise to identify blind-spots in culture and perception that only art can pin down. The Art Guys also like a good gag, which is a tradition of a very different order. This high-low tension produces art that feels unfixed, suspended, preparatory to a punch line that falls between parentheses. Because there's so much goosing and winking bouncing around, The Art Guys can play to a wide audience. Their best shows include a variety of conceptual, sculptural and performance-based work.

What's the Big Idea shows The Art Guys working in just such a manner, with characteristic attention to material detail and conceptual punning. Two pieces concern aspects of light. The first, *It's Better To Turn On The TV Than To Curse The Darkness (video candles)*, is a sculpture composed of a shelf, two formal candlesticks, and small video screens mounted where real flames should be burning. In their place are inextinguishable video flames, glowing in a black void that is unreachable except through art history.

As if to undo the solemn beauty of this lovely conceit, another light work nearby, *Nascent Ethnographic Ritual Concoction*, is pure novelty. A black electric cord runs from a wall outlet to a lamp socket. Instead of an actual light bulb there's another small screen and video image of an illuminated bulb. These substitutions are ingeniously simple and completely entertaining. Perhaps they poke fun at academics who scrutinize the difference between naturalistic and expressionistic light in painting and cinema.

Other pieces are straightforward jokes that either soar or fall flat. *Bucket Symphony, Opus 7 in Four Movements: Farts, Yahoos, Doings and Taps* is a delight. The rich, raucous soundscape emanating from four upended aluminum buckets is just the right mix of ingenuity and irreverence. By contrast, *Squirting TV Gag* is visually and conceptually leaden (not to mention that water gags should always squirt the viewer in the face).

The Art Guys are hit or miss, which is a great way to work but not the best way to show. Several large photographs present shiny screws and nails, shot like art objects against backgrounds of emerald and crimson. These non sequiturs fail to gain any speed with titles like *Opprobrious Putative Spicule (pin scan)*.



Art Guys, *It's Better To Turn On The TV Than To Curse The Darkness (video candles)*, 2003
TFT video screens mounted on candle holder, DVD and players, wood shelf, wire and electronics
2 candles, 21 x 4 x 4" each



Art Guys, *Bucket Symphony, Opus 7 in Four Movements: Farts, Yahoos, Doings and Taps*, 2003
Metal buckets, sound system/electronics
4 parts, 11 x 8 x 8" each

But elsewhere in the gallery, two groups of computer-generated vector drawings give a sharp sensation like a quick slap to the face. Fishing reels are the pseudo-subject in one group of four. These polite little drawings on paper are so faint, banal, and utterly un-hip that they open an entire genre of image makers

to ridicule. Similarly, a suite of Twombly-esque pencil drawings (*Big Scribble, Version #2; Four Identical Scribbles, Version #2; Sixteen Identical Scribbles, Version #2*) goes for the jugular, at once mocking "the Artist," his mark and his tool. This willingness to critique their profession gives The Art Guys their fire.

A short program of videos tucked behind the gallery's reception desk shows the collaborative duo in top form. Entitled *Home on the Range*, these novelty gems feature a carnival vocabulary of clowns, balloons and midway lights, reveling in color and quick edits. Sketch-like projects such as these are where The Art Guys hit their stride, when concept and medium match wits.