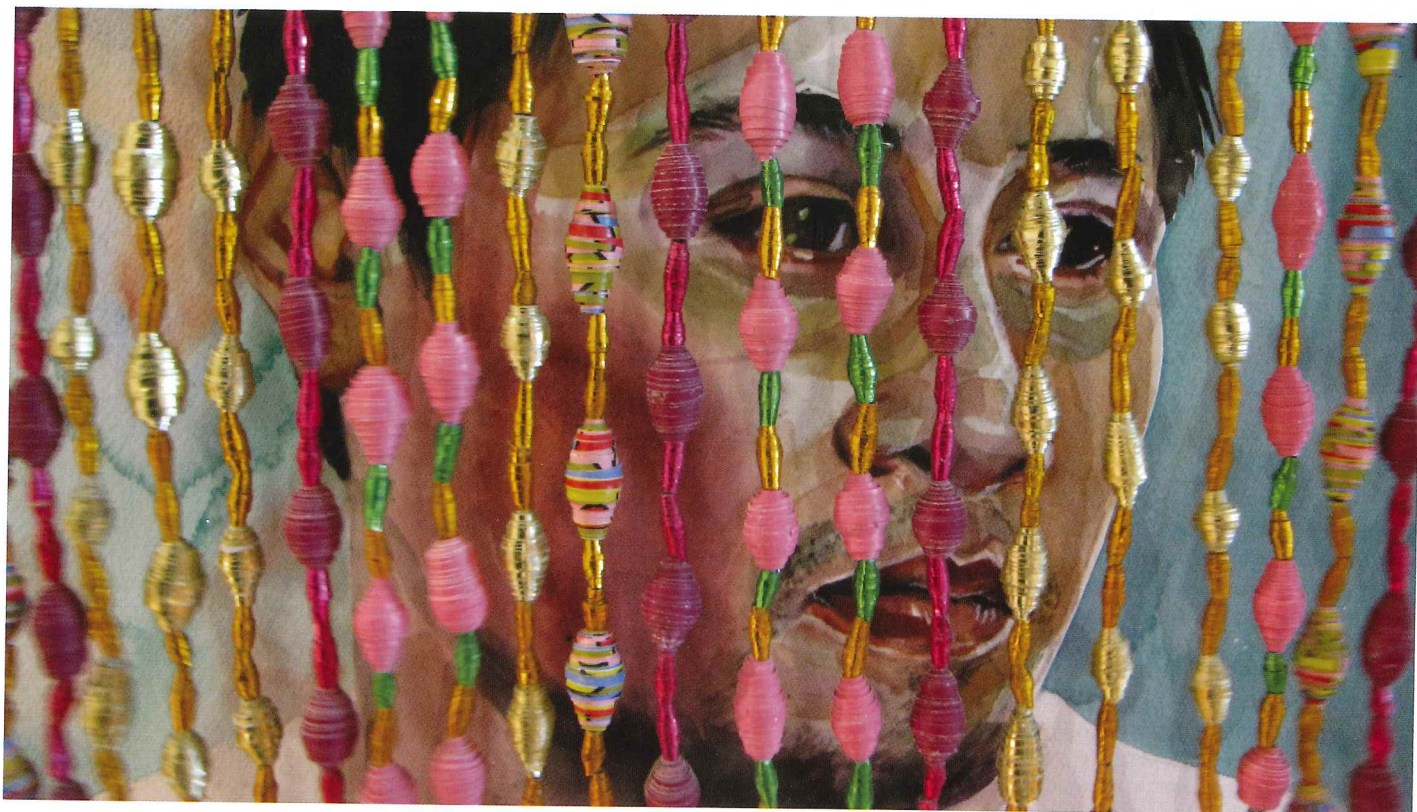


# JENNIFER LEVONIAN

ARTUS 2010-11

Fleisher/Ollman Gallery | Philadelphia  
Philadelphia Museum of Art



➔ The notion of cartoonists acting as social commentators is well known, as is that of painters and engravers pouring out their souls in labor-intensive satirical scenes. Paintings by Pieter Bruegel and Jan Steen, as well as prints by William Hogarth, Francisco de Goya and Honoré Daumier, or William Powhida's contemporary drawings all come to mind. But how is it possible to be both a serious satirist and a witty sketcher of social behavior using stop-motion photography of watercolor and cut-paper collage? Despite their characteristic jerky, puppet-like movements, Jennifer Levonian's videos defy expectations. Her animations can feel frivolous and weighty, irreverent and solemn, effortless and arduous. Even as some pathetic sub-heroes elicit groans from the audience, viewers still "ooh and aah" as the brisk frames draw them in ever deeper. Each frame is so freighted with text that you strain to read every last pun and quip. For example, the camera pans a brand of yogurt called "Pit Bull" (made from the milk of rescued dogs) in *Buffalo Milk Yogurt* (2010).

Though many frames are fraught with glimpses of momentary fright, the pleasant sensibility of Levonian's seemingly light videos eases viewers' anxieties regarding ordinarily terrifying situations. The term philosopher Ted Gracyk uses to describe the way breezy pop tunes get listeners to sing along with messages they might

otherwise avoid is the "spoonful-of-sugar" approach. Lending credence to Gracyk's idea, Levonian routinely dangles glimpses of baked goods (cakes, donuts, muffins) before us, while interrogating otherwise nightmarish subjects, such as giddy, girl-only wedding showers; grocery store displays verging on propaganda machines; corporate brands annulling meaningful experiences; religion's fear-induced brainwashing schemes; or bakeries feigning "wholesome" sensorial adventures.

Last April, Levonian projected *Take Your Picture With a Puma* (2009), which actually takes place in a bakery, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Adjacent the museum's video gallery, random arrangements of watercolor drawings of body parts, food, scenery, and imagery used to make the video were on display in a room of their own. Here, a bakery boy, one of her many sub-heroes, feels snubbed by an unsuspecting gal, in this case an American tourist passing through his Mexican town. For her show at Fleisher/Ollman, which opened a week later, she exhibited *Buffalo Milk Yogurt* (with original soundtrack by Corey Fogel) and *Her Slip is Showing* (2010, with music by Nathan Parker Smith and text by Polly Pauley) on flatscreen monitors, accompanied by 16 framed objects, each combining related fragments used to animate particular scenes, as well as an angled shelf featuring a mash-up of drawings.

During a recent screening of her films at a TEDx conference in Phoenixville, PA, people roared with laughter, demonstrating their enormous appreciation for her ingenuity and skill in confronting sensitive subjects. Given this, I bet that her first feature, if she opts to go this route, will be a huge success. If I were Lorne Michaels, I'd screen her videos during *SNL* in a heartbeat. And if I were Robert Redford, I'd invite her to Sundance.

~Sue Spaid