# Camille Henrot
# Commedia dell'arte

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Aspen Art Museum

# BEHIND THE SCENES

DRAWING
Camille Henrot, *Study for Dagmara, the Artist*, 2025
© ADAGP Camille Henrot.
Courtesy of the artist, Mennour and Hauser & Wirth.

DRAWING
Camille Henrot, *Study for Catherine "Cat" Harlequina, the Art Critic*, 2025
© ADAGP Camille Henrot.
Courtesy of the artist, Mennour and Hauser & Wirth.

*The artist is in conversation with set designer Adam Charlap Hyman and Aspen Art Museum Curator-at-Large Eliza Ryan, moderated and introduced by writer Camille Okhio. This conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity and length.*

# CAMILLE HENROT'S *COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE*

LEFT
Photo: Charlie Rubin.
Courtesy of Aspen Art Museum.

Satire and making light of subject matter have long been tools of great cathartic value. We laugh at the absurd, the frightening, or the painful by transmuting our reticence or rage into something we can digest. As laughter can serve to alleviate or reorient, so can it also serve as a means to diminish, humiliate, or retaliate. In 1646, Gian Lorenzo Bernini wrote, directed, and performed in a play for Donna Olimpia Maidalchini Pamphili, sister-in-law to the newly minted Pope Innocent X. The Renaissance sculptor's biting comedy highlighted the shortcomings of Pamphili's two most visibly powerful relatives: her handsome but useless son and the shrewd but indecisive Innocent X. Both owed everything they had to her, and through Innocent X she at least wielded some power, yet she could wield no power entirely on her own. So she exorcized the bounds on her agency through theater.

The threat of powerlessness is timeless. Humor is almost required to face its possibility. Camille Henrot's *Commedia dell'arte* explores the relationship between heaviness and humor, following in the tradition of the work's title. She needs not change any of the medium's rules—a jocular, slapstick style of delivery, integrated improvisations, the use of distinct, cultural archetypes as the base for each central character—to maintain its integrity within a contemporary landscape. In this landscape, the figures are highly recognizable to today's audience: struggling delivery workers, landlords so consumed with avarice that they would rather perish in a mountain of their own (or others') possessions than live free with just enough. Henrot animates tech bros so consumed with productivity that their only friends are the tools they use to produce, along with Pilates instructors consumed with rage no workout could expunge. Her characters' lives are riddled with pain, isolation, love, confusion, and fear. They are our lives and it is humor that helps us see ourselves in them.

In Henrot's deft manipulation of this ancient comedic form, we are given a mirror and forced to confront reality on the stage. What she introduces so beautifully in this, her first foray into performance, is a sense of agency offered to the audience itself. The dialogue she has crafted collaboratively with Estelle Hoy and Justine Gelfman is designed to shift with each draft and each performance. The characters and audience are given space to diverge from the lines, from reality, and seize hold of new paths. *Commedia dell'arte* is a catalyst.

We know the accuracy of Bernini's caricatures in his 1646 performance was damning enough to put a brief, but serious, kibosh on the artist's career. So there is danger in laughter, too. There is a risk when we crack a joke and when we laugh at it. A catalyst is introduced to force a reaction, after all. That split second between when we add one last ingredient and when we see a reaction is as pregnant with transformative possibilities as the space around laughter. It flexes and extends to encompass everyone we have been, could be, and are presently. The present is ludicrous. Maybe we are as well, by choosing credit scores, borders, and hierarchy over equilibrium, justice, and genuine joy?

The thing about performance is that it is our most ancient art form. We were thinking about how we presented, to whom, and why, before we ever lifted our hands to trace the shape of a Paleolithic pig. Its rules are as simple and consistent as they are old: all you need is a beginning, a middle, and an end. Aside from that trifecta, anything can change, ourselves included.

—*Camille Okhio*

CAMILLE OKHIO
Camille, I'm thinking about the grand tradition of privately commissioned plays in Europe. During the Renaissance, they generally were performed in residences or palaces, or even the Vatican, and were often commissioned to mock an enemy or to highlight a current event or social issue. Were you creating a work of art in that spirit?

CAMILLE HENROT
I was very conscious of this tradition. Like many of us, I've been feeling the increase in critique of social inequality in America for the past several years. It doesn't replace social change or activism or politics, but it also brings a feeling of hope and community because laughing about something is always a way up; it's never a way down. It's the opposite of bitterness and hatred. I recently read philosopher Cynthia Fleury's book *Ci-gît l'amer: Guérir du ressentiment* [Here Lies Bitterness: Healing from Resentment]. She calls for this practice of turning powerful people into clowns and criticizing society through a comical point of view, but childishly comical, as a way out of bitterness or despair. It's important, in these moments of disorientation and despair, to remember that we've been in a place of very strong injustice and inequity before.

CAMILLE OKHIO
You and I have talked about this before, but it reminds me of how the Black American community laughs at, jokes about, and denigrates our tormentors for catharsis, and how that's sometimes central to survival.

I really like that you clarified that this kind of work does not replace revolution, but have you thought about the possibility that it's sometimes a catalyst for revolution? Do you think there's a possibility in well-executed and comedic art to serve as a catalyst for retribution, social change, revenge, positives and negatives? Do you feel some sort of responsibility for the response to your work as an artist?

IMAGES
Photo: Charlie Rubin.
Courtesy of Aspen Art Museum.

CAMILLE HENROT
Oh, that's a very interesting question. French Revolution–era cartoons have been a huge inspiration for me. I was educated as a cartoonist. So, for me, the journalistic cartoon and TV cartoon are the foundation of my work. Those cartoons were very often anonymous not just because people were afraid of retaliation and punishment, but also because it was accepted that they belonged to everybody. I feel a similar way about this play. I don't have a very strong sense of ownership over it. It's a very collective work. My hope is that this play will tour with another director, and then maybe even the script would evolve. I really like how ancient theater changed and adapted.

We also need to talk about Tex Avery, because he's such a genius. I've been rewatching all the early Bugs Bunny cartoons with my kids. The subversiveness of humor, when it goes into the absurd, is so powerful. And of course, the poetry of Buster Keaton, because we talk about cynicism and fun and the meat—the taste—of words. The play is also driven by the beauty in the powerlessness of movement—bodies that are being pushed to their limits or trying too hard, like Jim Carrey in *The Cable Guy*. The sort of desperation from wanting to be accepted, wanting to be good at your job, wanting to be loved, and how that kind of pressure brings the body onto the wreck of its own destruction—it's the *zanni*, which comes from commedia dell'arte. In English, it's the "zany" genre—it has something that's also not funny, a little bit desperate, a little bit cringe, a bit hard to watch.

CAMILLE OKHIO
Do you think of this as a living thing, this work?

CAMILLE HENROT
Completely. Yes. It was originally commissioned by RoseLee Goldberg and Performa, and I worked with two cowriters, Estelle Hoy and Justine Gelfman. There are two music composers, Aaron David Ross and Mauro Hertig. Sandra Berrebi is designing costumes and Adam Charlap Hyman

is designing the set. The producers, Eliza [Ryan], who is also the co-curator, and Julia Simpson, have a lot of input. And we have a great cast; some of them really are authors of the work, you know.

CAMILLE OKHIO

I'd love for you to speak to your desire to do collaborative work in general. I think of your sculptures as collaborative works in the sense that you're not entirely making them with your own hands. At least in the States, right now, as our economy shakes and as we become more radicalized and so many Americans are now getting their voting rights repealed, do you sense a lot of people desiring protection just for themselves, feeling like they need to hoard their resources and become hermits with a very protective but individual mindset? Do you feel that this individualistic wave leads you to seek more connection in your work as an artist?

CAMILLE HENROT

Yeah, I've had that moment of recoiling and despair. I grew really convinced that, in difficult times, what makes you go on and out of this difficulty and feeling of survival is a sense of connection with a small group of people that you love. You don't need to have an immediate solution [outside of that].

When I met Adam at the Fausto Melotti exhibition at Hauser & Wirth, looking at his sculptures of mini theaters, we both thought, "Oh my god, it would be so fun to do a stage together." And then, with Mauro, we were talking about *The Magic Flute* and how much we love *Peter and the Wolf*—which we listen to with our kids—and how nobody's doing opera for kids anymore.

Sandra Berrebi, a very close friend of mine over the last twenty-five years, and I have wanted to collaborate on something as well. Thinking back on the AIR theme of *Figures in a Landscape*—all the characters come from drawing, and that will be felt in the costumes. Some are made completely out of paper. Most of the decor is made of cardboard. Adam comes from drawing; he doesn't do anything in 3D. Everything comes from the hand. We have similar processes, and I think it's because we both had a crafty mom. We were making our own Christmas decorations, our own Easter eggs. The hands are very important in this play. There's № 3D printer. There's № 3D design. It's very lo-fi.

ELIZA RYAN

Camille's distinctive line, rooted in her early training as a cartoonist, is evident across every aspect of the production from costumes and set design to props and even choreography. Throughout the process, Adam continually encouraged Camille to return to this. They are extraordinary collaborators, and it has been incredible to observe the way they inspire and build upon each other's ideas.

ADAM CHARLAP HYMAN

In working on this piece with her, I felt like I had the best tool at my disposal—which is Camille, you know. With every piece, I thought, should it be more sculptural or more functional? And what's



DRAWING
Camille Henrot, *Study for Pantalone, the Landlord*, 2025

Courtesy of the artist, Mennour and Hauser & Wirth.

RIGHT
Photo: Charlie Rubin.
Courtesy of Aspen Art Museum.

the balance that we're trying to achieve between Camille's line and the larger world that we were creating, this world of felt and cardboard and found objects. And I think we struck a nice balance, wherein the things she's physically made and painted really shine in this drab cardboard and felt world, and they feel special, magical almost.

I think about landscape a lot in my work as a designer. And I often think of rooms in a very environmental way—like a landscape with different elements. And I'm very interested in the space you can find within paintings of landscapes—within paintings of built landscapes. I mean, I love the stretched-out trees in Poussin. I love the constructions in Cezanne's landscapes, and metaphysical landscapes. The uncanny, the strange, the bizarre—de Chirico landscapes, the ruins of Piranesi.

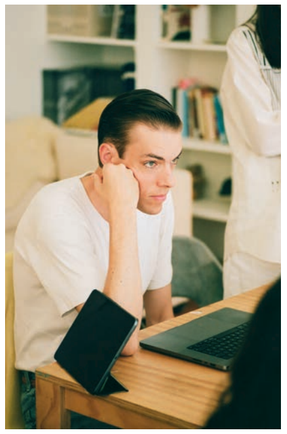
The cardboard set was the perfect answer to these three trains of thought that all came together. One, the play revolves around Pierrot trying to deliver a package in a cardboard box. Two, I also have a really great image of my mom, who made decor for a gala dinner at the Chrysler Building in the eighties out of cardboard. She decorated the gala with giant architectural elements that were made-to-scale pieces of the Chrysler Building, like a piece of the spire and the elevator door, all done in cardboard.

CAMILLE OKHIO
Wow!

ADAM CHARLAP HYMAN
The third thought was that children love to play in boxes, and build spaces, and buildings and puppet theaters out of boxes. The box is also a home for a child with a dream and an imagination; it's also a temporary home for an unhoused person. That connection between early childhood notions of space-making and home creation to a sort of end-of-the-line destruction of it was a dark and interesting connection to explore as well. Our decision to make a lot of the set out of cardboard speaks directly to the ephemerality of a theater set, the space itself, but then also your house, your home, your city. The elevator is definitely a character. It's a catalyst for movement between the apartments and for moving the story along. And it's kind of the foil for Pierrot. At the end of the play, you see the landlord's lair, and the city skyline is revealed as a pile of boxes—stolen packages—in the basement.

CAMILLE OKHIO
And the other prominent material, the felt—what led you to use it?

ADAM CHARLAP HYMAN
It's part of the child puppet theater vernacular. It's very easy to cut; you don't need to sew the edges. We liked the association that felt has with toys and child crafts, but also to art history. Obviously, there's the Joseph Beuys connection. There's an Arte Povera connection. These brown and natural felt materials come up over and over again. It's a very sober material, but a very creative one.



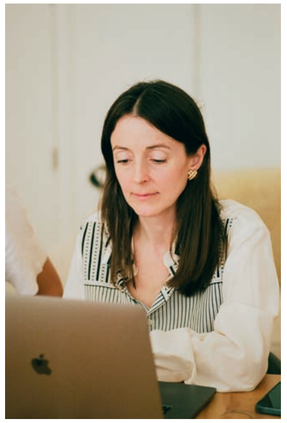


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Photo: Charlie Rubin.
Courtesy of Aspen Art Museum.

ELIZA RYAN
There's a rich history of artists creating set designs for theater. In the opening scene of the play, a character is a set designer for the Met, so the play collapses onto itself and in itself, too.

ADAM CHARLAP HYMAN
We looked at the work of Adolphe Appia for his abstract, simplistic designs of buildings and ruins. Pierre Le-Tan for *Quadrille* in the nineties. The set that David Hockney designed for *The Rake's Progress*—that was incredible. Michael Levine's sets for the Opéra de Paris.

CAMILLE OKHIO
As you were designing this set, how much did you think about the class critique implicit in the text? How much were you thinking about the financial tension, the social tension, between the people Camille's characters might represent in real life?

ADAM CHARLAP HYMAN
I think, for anybody who lives in New York, it feels very present. You're constantly confronting change there. I've had the experience of living in buildings where there's real tension between long-term tenants and a new generation that's moving in and changing the prices of things. For better and for worse. That's such an intrinsic part of the domestic experience in New York. It's a little hostile. Home is not uncontentious there, and it's not a given. Many people are constantly finding themselves on the brink of losing their home. That's a reality all around us.

CAMILLE OKHIO
I love you so much for speaking to that so clearly, because I feel like it's a reality a lot of people avoid.

ADAM CHARLAP HYMAN
For a lot of people that we all know, figuring out how to make it work in New York is kind of a game. It doesn't mean it's a fun game, it's a stressful game, but there's an element of the game, you know, of outsmarting your opponents, like chess, a sort of evasion. The simple tale of trying to hold on to an apartment in New York City is the perfect fodder for the tragicomedy format of commedia dell'arte because everyone has their own version of this story. And it's the thing that keeps the city going, the thing that brings the chaos that's also the lifeblood of the city in many ways. It's not an amazing place because people are relaxed being there.

CAMILLE OKHIO
It does reveal the truth of who we are. And Camille, were there aspects of yourself that you were able to examine from a new direction through the making of this work?

CAMILLE HENROT
Capitano is very easily distracted. He's almost unable to stay standing or not move for a long time. He also jumps into unnecessary side tasks very easily, and I feel I have that characteristic as well.



DRAWING
Camille Henrot, *Study for Pulcinella, the Pilates Teacher*, 2025
© ADAGP Camille Henrot.
Courtesy of the artist, Mennour and Hauser & Wirth.

DRAWING
Camille Henrot, *Study for Pulcinella, the Pilates Teacher*, 2025
© ADAGP Camille Henrot.
Courtesy of the artist, Mennour and Hauser & Wirth.

CAMILLE OKHIO
When you write, part of yourself is always revealed in the work in some way. Do you have nightmares that no one in the audience will laugh?

CAMILLE HENROT
I'm so afraid of it that we're going to use prerecorded laughter! I grew up in France in the eighties and my first interaction with American culture was this recorded laughter on American TV shows. For me, there's no comedy without prerecorded laughter.

There are jokes that we know only women laugh at. Or kids. Or adults, or very, very old people. And some jokes only the nerds will laugh at. I wanted to record all those different laughs separately. But also, sometimes there are things that won't be funny at all and kind of really cruel and tragic, and maybe you hear somebody laughing at that and it freezes your blood. But that's also part of what the comedy is about, that cruelty is always part of the humor. And this is why slapstick comes from commedia dell'arte. The expression *slapstick* is from a comedy where people get beaten with a stick.

There's something about the laugh that isn't just lovely and fun, something that's connected with danger and cruelty and the most evil part of us. I think comedy brings awareness to that. We can't just repress the cruelty; it needs to go out and it needs to go out in a way that isn't hurtful. And I wonder whether humor is the way out of it that isn't violence.

ELIZA RYAN
There's such a difference between that kind of unaware, childlike laughter—when you laugh without thinking—and the kind of laughter that emerges almost as a way of making someone else comfortable. You begin to notice things about yourself through your own laugh. Camille has been thinking a great deal about laughter throughout this commission, and is especially interested in incorporating it into the live sound design by referencing the history of canned laughter and laugh tracks.

CAMILLE OKHIO

Yes. There's so much variance within laughter. And as a pressure valve it is invaluable. You can't repress any negative feeling or really any feeling at all. It must always be released.

CAMILLE HENROT

One of my references is *Mary Poppins*. There's this moment in the movie where the character Bert starts imitating different laughs and he says something like, "Some people laugh and some people explode."

And there's another moment when Mary brings the children home really late from the park because they've been diving into a cartoonish world, and everybody's wet. The father is really upset at her and asks her, "Would you be good enough to explain all this?" And she's climbing the stairs, also really upset, and she turns to him and says, "I would like to make one thing quite clear: I never explain anything."

CAMILLE OKHIO

The release is required. And yes, sometimes the explanation can't even be put into words.

Something else that always comes up when I read about the court plays and performances of Renaissance monarchs is how so many playwrights, theater workers, and actors have used subterfuge to highlight something very obvious. I suppose that commingling of lies and the truth is a mainstay of fiction in general, but I'm curious as to what tools of disguise you used in your own commedia dell'arte? What archetypes did you twist to your use?

CAMILLE HENROT

The archetypes are quite recognizable. I want to please the children in us. This is why it needs to be underbelly humor. The narrative arc is extremely simple: it's a story about a package delivery; it's a comedy with just five characters.

It's also a way to talk about the fact that the artist's role is to kind of always produce culture and produce thoughts. But the idea of his or her survival is very accessory. The comedy that we all play in the art world is to pretend that we actually don't need to survive and that we don't need resources. That we only need to create to be happy. We all participate in this comedy and this pretense.

IMAGES ABOVE AND RIGHT
Photo: Charlie Rubin.
Courtesy of Aspen Art Museum.