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Laughter comes in all shapes and sizes, and you don't need to be a rocket scientist to know the difference between nervous titters, polite ha-has and gleeful giggles. The same goes for the "2002 California Biennial" at the Orange County Museum of Art in Newport Beach, where slapstick, parody and comic relief compete for your attention.

If this user-friendly exhibition, organized by curators Elizabeth Armstrong and Irene Hofmann, had a subtitle, it would be "Gags, Pranks and Jokes."

Its 12 artists use humor to make works whose first priority is to amuse you. A few paintings, sculptures and photographs go further, transforming seemingly mindless entertainment into occasions for sustained contemplation.

Charlie White's big color photographs resemble stills from teen movies. In several, well-heeled suburbanites fondle grotesque lumps of flesh in the same way that children cling to ratty security blankets. In others, anxieties about adolescent sexuality and insecurities about fitting into one's peer group take the shape of a scrawny, potbellied alien with leathery skin and puppy-dog eyes. Experiencing more than his share of emotional misadventures, this sympathetic misfit makes normal suburban life look freakish and inhuman.

Joe Sola's three 90-second videos have the presence of previews for upcoming features made by a film librarian with a short attention span and a love of order for its own sake. The first two consist of snippets of scenes from popular movies in which characters recite the same line: "Come on, come on" or "Go, go, go." The third, "Climaxes," shows 36 explosions, each from a movie made in the 36 years since 1966, when Sola was born.

Tom LaDuke's sculptures evoke the painstaking detail of model-size sets and the obsessive perfectionism of animatronic props. In one, hundreds of doll-size clay figures portray the artist as if he were the sole occupant of a mass grave. In another, two compact dioramas support tiny electrical towers with microscopically thin wires that extend across the gallery. LaDuke's nearly monochrome paintings depict similar structures at their bottom edges. Fascinating at first, his labor-intensive works are the artistic equivalent of special effects: Their mind-blowing illusions provide welcome diversions that fade from memory as soon as one leaves the museum.

Three artists from San Francisco play games whose amusements wear thin even more quickly. Yoram Wolberger has enlarged cheap toys so that they stand face to face with adults. His plastic soldier, farm girl with four chickens and bride and groom from a wedding cake are too silly to convey much more than misguided ambitions.

Rebecca Bollinger's 90-minute dual video projection and related prints juxtapose hundreds of thumb-size images. Although both strive to make a virtue of channel surfing, or to turn information downloaded from the Internet into a compositional device, their randomness has more to do with

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filling up space and killing time than pursuing a compelling inquiry.

Stephanie Syjuco's fake surveillance system, made of cardboard, contact paper and blinking LED lights, also mimics the real thing. Reminding visitors to be on guard against a false sense of security, it is redundant and condescending.

Los Angeles artist Kristin Calabrese wears her mistrust of viewers--and images--on her sleeve. Her painting of a water-damaged kitchen and three drip-enhanced silk-screens of generic street scenes include so many "secret" messages written on their slapdash surfaces that there's no room for mystery or for imagination.

More playful self-referential mirroring seems to be the point of Roman de Salvo's inflatable sculpture, which is meant to be tethered to the stack of rocks it resembles in the museum's sculpture garden. But technical difficulties have temporarily grounded his giant balloon, which the San Diego-based artist calls a sculpture that's also an advertisement for itself.

Yoshua Okon uses humor to terrifically subversive ends. The best of his four works is "Parking Lotus," a mockumentary project that records his founding of the Los Angeles Security Guard Meditation Movement.

An unbelievably sincere mission statement accompanies eight photographs of security guards meditating outside the institutions where they work for low wages. Together, the text and images make sidesplitting fun of the idea that art provides substitute social services.

At the same time, Okon playfully ridicules yoga yuppies. Never making fun of the guards, he turns them into temporary works of art, formally composed figures at once inscrutable, irresistible and loaded with meaning, much of which is contradictory. It's impossible to dismiss his project because it just might be serious. Not knowing for sure is part of the pointed fun.