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Carefully Orchestrated Failures

L.A. Expanded: Notes from the West Coast

A weekly column by Catherine Wagley



Joe Sola, "In a Kitchen", 2008

In a [Bridgestone Tires ad](#) that aired during last Sunday's Super Bowl, a car resembling the Batmobile speeds along a dark, rainy highway. It turns a corner and slams on its breaks to avoid hitting a brightly lit roadblock set up by eccentric-looking villains. The villain in charge says, over a loud speaker, "All right here's the deal. Your Bridgestone Tires or your life." A shivering blond in a leather bodysuit is shoved out of the imitation Batmobile, which then spins around and speeds away. The punch line? The slighted villain whimpers, "I said 'life,' not 'wife.'"

In a [Dodge spot](#) that also ran Sunday, a series of men with glazed over, submissive eyes, say things like "I will take your call," "I will listen to your opinion of your friends," "I will put the seat down." But being put upon by their women can't keep the men from making their "last stand" and driving cars they want to drive. The ads end with a shot of a speeding car on a lonely highway. Apparently, there is only one kind of legitimate

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masculinity—the kind for which fast cars are metonymic—and women are its natural foils. That Super Bowl Sunday would arrive hand-in-hand with advertisement misogyny shouldn't have surprised me, but, still, I expect more gender nuance even from my commercials.



In 2001, artist Joe Sola put himself at the mercy of a high school football team when he made the film *Saint Henry Composition (2001)*. Included in [LACMA's](#) 2008 exhibition [Hard Targets](#), the film showed Sola, wearing no gear, being tackled by well equipped award winning football players. It was a weirdly contradictory performance—on the one hand, Sola had taken on an impossible task (success would have been supernaturally heroic, an alpha male triumph); on the other hand, his failure made him look foolish, like he lacked a certain intuitive knowledge of sport that real guys should have. Sola's soon-to-close exhibition at [Happy Lion Gallery](#) in L.A.'s Chinatown, called *I found some Bic pens by the railroad tracks*, takes gender into a more whimsical but still confrontational arena. It includes a lighthearted collection of self-referential watercolors, a brutally funny video pitting a [male] artist against a [male] collector, and, on January 30th, it also included a performance by Sola and collaborator Michael Webster. The performers—though it was mainly Sola that we watched, while Webster sat behind the piano and provided a perfectly timed soundtrack—wore red and yellow striped vests and black pants that made them look like circus performers. Their slapstick personae were reminiscent of a Charlie Chaplin-Marx Brothers' hybrid, totally masculine but mocking of masculinity at the same time. Sola had typical junk food, glitter, feathers, and some explosives hidden inside a top hat that had been affixed to a table top (there was no attempt to maintain an illusion as Sola reached through the hat to pull out his props). He also had a blow torch, and the night consisted of dancing; the placing of containers, filled with milk, cheerios, glitter, and the like, on precarious platforms around the gallery; and periodic explosions.

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Toward the end of the performance, Sola set us up to expect something big. He'd built a contraption out of cardboard, feathers, and glue that looked like a miniature horse. And he'd pulled out the blow torch, wordlessly warning people in the front row to don the protective glasses he'd passed out. In preparing for the big explosion, Sola accidentally slipped onto the floor, and he stayed down, waiting for an eruption that never happened. Then, like an injured and disgraced warrior, he pulled himself along the floor with his arms, stopping under each platform, letting bowls of milk and cheerios that had been placed on precarious platforms around the gallery fall on his head. By the end of the evening, his pants were collages of feathers, glitter and food, glued together with milk. This was as rewarding a game as any Super Bowl I've ever watched, because it showed how much the failure to perform could hurt, but it also showed failure to be an inevitable part of performing gender or anything else.

Note: Images from Webster's and Sola's Happy Lion Gallery performance are not yet available. The above images depict a 2008 performance at the Hammer Museum, called Bananas at the Hammer.