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Review

To Jeanne Silverthorne, the joke's on us at Shoshana Wayne Gallery

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Jeanne Silverthorne's "Down the Hole and Through the Grain." (Jeanne Silverthorne / Shoshana Wayne Gallery)

New York sculptor Jeanne Silverthorne plays for laughs at Shoshana Wayne Gallery

A lot of people think that contemporary art is a big joke. A lot of artists get frustrated, even angry, when their work gets treated as a gag — as if it's a laugh track to life's more serious endeavors, like business and politics and other jobs in which nonsense and trickery supposedly play less prominent roles.

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New York sculptor Jeanne Silverthorne may be angry and frustrated but she's too smart an artist to get stuck in an argument she can't win. So she accepts the idea that art is a joke and sticks with it. Her persistence transforms the gag into a great way to capture the tenor of our times, when the world seems more surreal than anything made by a Surrealist, and absurdity seems to be normal.

At Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Silverthorne has lined up nearly 50 sculptures in four neat rows. The setup, titled "Down the Hole and Into the Grain," resembles nothing so much as the storage rooms of large offices, where chairs, desks, computers and supplies are kept. There's a casual purposefulness to Silverthorne's installation. It matches the attitude of her works.

All are made of rubber. Most are the same size as their real-world counterparts: light bulbs and fixtures, wooden crates, dollies, floor mats, a globe and a coffee cup. A few oversize pencils, dozens of oversize caterpillars and hundreds of oversize flies upset the one-to-one scale.

Several figurines and 6-inch skeletons contribute to the sense that you have stumbled into a world where one-size-fits-all thinking has been short-circuited.

It's a world of everyday reverie, where daydreams do not transport you to a fantasyland so much as they make your immediate surroundings seem as if they're not really real — just wobbly props for some hollow drama in which you play a part too negligible to care about. Such heavy-duty existentialism percolates throughout Silverthorne's art. But it's lightened by a sense of humor that is nothing if not resilient. After all, Silverthorne's rubber sculptures evoke the padded rooms of cartoon asylums as well as rubber vomit and plastic dog poop, office gags that take the tedium out of business as usual by inviting us to laugh at ourselves.

Shoshana Wayne Gallery, 2525 Michigan Ave., (310) 453-7535, through Jan. 10. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.shoshanawayne.com