The weird world of laughter

By Helena Merriman
BBC News

Laughter and what different people around the world find funny are the subjects of a new exhibition at London's Hayward Gallery.

Laughing in a Foreign Language brings together 80 works by 30 international artists, including photographs, videos and installations.

It aims to provoke debate about the role of humour in art - and in the wider world.

"Contemporary art has a role to show the radically different viewpoint on the world surrounding you and humour has a similar role," says curator Mami Kataoka.

While much of the humour on display is culturally specific, many pieces use simple devices that draw you in regardless of your cultural background.

Often this is done by putting characters or objects out of context and the absurdity makes people laugh.

In Journey to the Lower World, British artist Marcus Coates has recorded himself performing a Siberian Shamanistic ritual in a Liverpudlian high-rise flat.

Set against the backdrop of the small flat, his passionate performance in a stag outfit complete with antlers is undeniably funny.

As one of the members of the exhibition audience put it: "It's funny because of the surrealism of this contained area and this man doing something really wild that you have no frame of reference for."

Unsettling images

But if putting something unfamiliar in a familiar context draws people in and makes them laugh, so the opposite is true.

In Clown, the German artist Julian Rosefeldt lifts a clown from his usual circus surroundings and places him in a Brazilian rainforest.
Looking both tragic and slapstick, the clown wanders aimlessly through the jungle.

No-one here is laughing. Instead, the exhibition audience now looks on suspiciously, unsettled by this traditional figure of fun being so out of place.

As one female visitor put it: "I think it's the location, the juxtaposition. If he was in a circus with other clowns it would be different."

A proportion of the works on show tackle meaty issues such as globalisation, sexuality, gender and race - but in surprising ways.

Japanese artist Taiyo Kimura explores the world of mass communications using a white teddy bear covered in earphones wired up to seven London radio stations - the noise from each one drowning out the words of another.

In a video, Turkish artist Kutlug Ataman is dressed as a belly dancer, and gyrates pathetically.

As well as making us laugh, this piece questions our understanding of the exotic and the "Orient".

One of the best pieces in this exhibition comes towards the end of the show. An innocent looking cardboard box has been placed on the floor.

Hover a while and it begins to speak: "I am a cardboard box. I am happy that I am a box. Of course there are some things I don't want people to put inside of me, but basically I am happy that I am a box."

Born as a Box (by the Japanese artist Shimabuku) inspires much laughter and discussion about exactly what the box was thinking.

A young Japanese girl laughed and nodded energetically at the piece. She said: "This cardboard box is like my generation. We don't know whether to study or work and so we get stuck and think too much."

While you might get louder laughs at a comedy night, this exhibition does something more interesting by covering the full gamut of what humour can be - melancholic, witty, satiric, tragic and playful.

If by the end of it you feel your comedy button has not been pushed, head to Doug Fishbone's Joke Machine.

It contains 200 of his favourite jokes. Punch it on the nose and it will dispense a joke - and you can keep going till you find one you like.

Here's a taster: "When I was a kid I used to pray every night for a new bike, then I realised the Lord doesn't work that way, so I stole one and asked him to forgive me."

*Laughing in a Foreign Language runs until 13 April 2008.*