

Exhibitionist: The best art shows to see this week

There's clowning around in Sunderland, Wacky Races in Liverpool, and London's Frith Street takes a heartfelt look at the meaning of life

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Foolish games in Sunderland ... Marcos Chavez's parodic Laughing Mask. Photograph: Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art

Fools are contrary creatures, pretending to lark about in cap and bells while using riddles to speak the truth. Shakespeare knew this and so do the artists in *The Fool*, a perceptive group show at the [Northern Gallery of Contemporary Art](#). Wily seducers are rife: from Marcos Chavez's absurdist video performances, aping politicians' expressions of seriousness while his mouth is obscured by a gurning clown mask, to Alex Pollard's paintings, which fixate on the jaunty garb and outsider allure of jesters, dandies and crooks. The fallen idols of a long-abandoned Berlin funpark are the focus of Michael Gardiner's melancholy photographs, while Jim Hollands transforms found footage of a Russian bear circus into a disturbing parable of cruelty and political oppression. The artists here capitalise on the tradition of the fool to make sharp social insights. Just don't expect them to be funny.

Zany, big top-style antics are more Bernie Lubell's thing at [Fact in Liverpool](#). The artist won the [Ars Electronica prize](#) for interactive art two years ago and it's the willing audience who get to act the clown in his new installation, *A Theory of Entanglement*. Gallery-goers are to be found pedalling wildly at a kind of bike-powered giant loom with the aim of creating a monster-size, completely useless piece of crochet. It's a little like *Wacky Races* would be if it had been [penned by Samuel Beckett](#). Lubell's giant contraption has been clobbered together from bits of wood, a throwback to a time before microchips, while the bodies that form the motor become a study in motion. It is something of a monumental riposte to our dysfunctional relationship with technology and the short-sighted aspirations of the machine age.

Back in the early days of the 20th century, Futurism (currently the subject of a [major show at Tate Modern](#)) decreed that we were all going in one triumphant direction: forwards. It's a position that seems impossible today. At [Arnolfini in Bristol](#), Sequelism brings together work by an up-to-the-minute selection of artists who prefer a more ambiguous approach to what lies in store for humankind. Mariana Castillo Deball's crystal ball must have been murky when she made *Nobody was Tomorrow*, a film with a fractured story about an obscure item that muddles past and future. Similarly, Haegue Yang's installation of coloured blinds flutters mysteriously, an everyday portal into the unknown. A new commission from Francesc Ruiz about recession-hit Bristol businesses, however, is a long way from sci-fi fantasy. Now if we venture into the future, we do so on tiptoes, doubtful of what we might find.

Yet the future needn't be so doomy, at least according to the [Camden Arts Centre in London](#), where Johanna Billing's politically potent vision is realised with a delicate touch. Pop songs with upbeat messages transplanted into downtrodden environments frequently structure her videos. In *Magical World*, the titular number is bleated out by a choir of junior-school munchkins from eastern Europe. In the same way, her new commission, *I'm Lost Without Your Rhythm*, uses the title track to cohere a story of collective rejuvenation in Romania. Built from footage of young students performing in a local contemporary dance school, its heady energy contrasts tellingly with the hesitancy captured in an earlier work, *Where She is at*. Here, a young woman climbs the long ladder to a diving board, overlooking a worn-out modernist leisure development. She pauses, a lonely figure against a bright blue sky, before taking the long plunge into the unknown.

Escapement, an installation by Raqs Media Collective at London's [Frith Street Gallery](#) featuring tens of clocks, is, in spite of its title, ostensibly committed to the present moment. The Delhi-based Raqs seem well-placed to tackle changing ideas about space, time and what it means to exist today. They're at the forefront of artists from outside the western art-world nexus to gain hefty international attention in recent years, and have frequently channelled globalisation's slipstreams in their work. Yet, in spite of nods to world time zones and changing technology, this exhibition makes a surprisingly timeless, universal comment. A heartbeat featured on a sound piece provides the show's bass thrum. Instead of numbers, the clocks' hands point to loaded words like ecstasy, awe or guilt: it's good old human emotions that remain the markers in our lives.