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Last Updated: Wednesday, 30 January 2008, 08:45 GMT

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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 Liverpool 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."

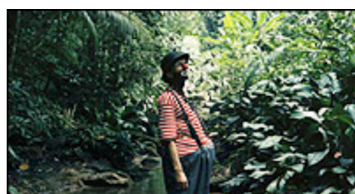
Unsettling images

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.



Many of the works put people and things in the wrong context



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