

# Fried CHicken

(bEing JEaLOUs  
of eVeRyone)

Invisible-Exports photos

A painting recalling carnival ads, but with a not-so-subliminal message, and a pie chart, created with china marker on, of course, a pie plate, reflecting personal obsessions, are part of the Cary Leibowitz show at the Contemporary Jewish Museum.

## All signs pointing to Leibowitz's wit

By Charles Desmarais

"Attention!" commands a sign at the entrance to the newest exhibition at the Contemporary Jewish Museum. "All art critics must wash hands before leaving!"

It could be a warning, like those in restaurant restrooms, that "Cary Leibowitz: Museum Show," which runs through June 25, might lead to post-exposure contamination of others. Certainly, the humor in this art is infectious.

But I think my ilk is being asked to turn away, Pontius Pilate-style. To leave

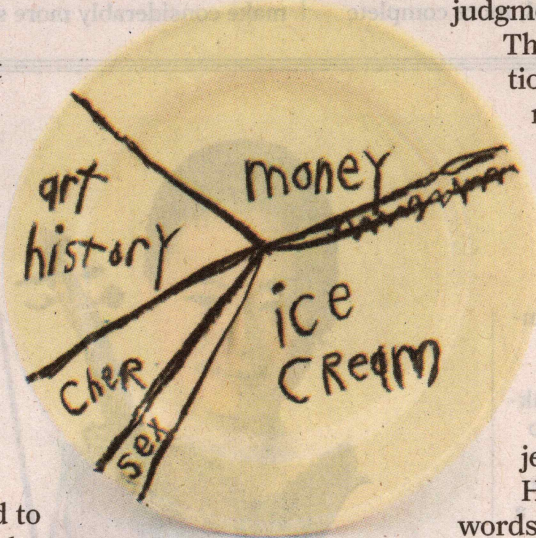
judgment to the crowd.

That would be best. This is an exhibition, like a great comedic performance, resistant to analysis. You had to be there. Still, let me tell you why you will want to go.

Cary Leibowitz is a silly artist. He has worked hard at looking witless for some 30 years, mocking homophobes, anti-Semites and, mostly, himself, creating a body of one-liner social commentary in the tradition of the court jester and the Shakespearean fool.

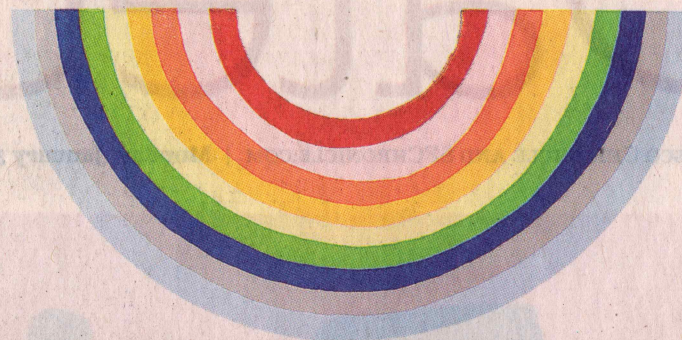
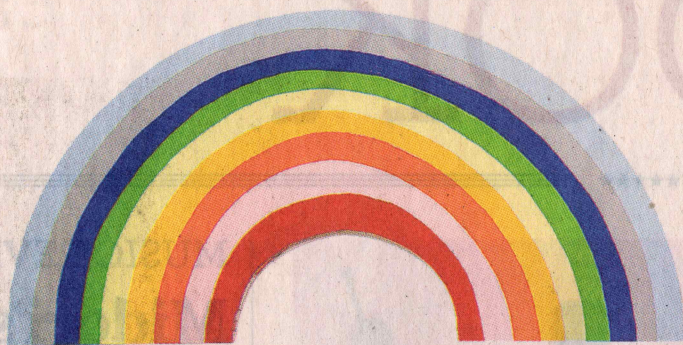
His works consist principally of words — painted in cotton-candy colors

*Art continues on E2*





## ARTS &amp; ENTERTAINMENT



Alexander Gray Associates

Cary Leibowitz's colorful semicircles make more sense when the artwork's title is known: "Sad Rainbow, Happy Rainbow" (2007).

# All signs point to Leibowitz's wit

Art from page E1

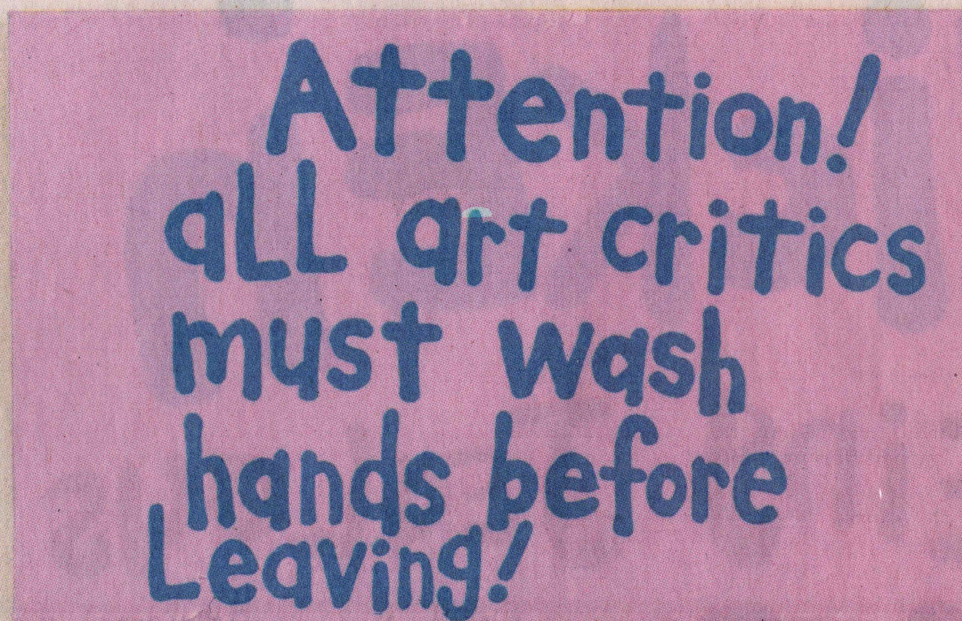
on wooden panels, scrawled on scraps of paper, crayoned on ceramics-class homeware. This retrospective crams nearly 350 such objects into a large gallery and two smaller ones. Generally, they chronicle the insecurities and obsessions of a gay Jewish character he sometimes calls "Candyass" (or "Candy Ass"), making his way through suburban adolescence in the late 20th century.

"Me me me," a sign says in green lettering on a purple field. It appears only in reproduction in the catalog, but it might as well be the heading for the whole affair. "LOSER Line forms here," announces another painting, with an arrow pointing right to this very spot — where the artist was positioned when painting it. Where the viewer stands now.

The packed gallery is painted pink and baby blue, ceilinged with colorful paper parasols, centered on a patch of fake grass and a monumental pyramid of commercially printed metal trashcans ("Gain! Wait! Now!"). It feels like being trapped in the overactive brain of a poor soul who can't decide to embrace love ("Isn't it great/ you like pizza/ I like pizza"), hide from life ("don't HATE me Because I'm Mediocre," "Please don't tell anyone you saw me") or end it all ("u Bring out the Best suicidal tendencies in me.").

But never mind. Amid the oversharing are glimmers of hope: "So funny it just occurred to me I haven't thought about suicide in weeks."

The tradition of text as art is an ancient one. The calligraphy of many cultures, often associated with religious themes — from manuscript Christian Bibles to embel-



Invisible-Exports

"Attention All Art Critics..." (1990), by Cary Leibowitz, greets visitors at the entrance to the exhibition of his works at the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco.

## Cary Leibowitz: Museum

**Show:** 11 a.m.-5 p.m. daily except Wednesdays; Thursdays until 8 p.m. Through June 25. \$12-\$14, free 18 and under. Contemporary Jewish Museum, 736 Mission St., S.F. (415) 655-7800. [www.thecjm.org](http://www.thecjm.org)

lished Islamic ceramics — can be the most splendid of abstract art. The Dadaists at the beginning of the 1900s, and conceptualists like Joseph Kosuth, Kay Rosen and others at the end, relied heavily on words, both for the ideas they embodied and for the look of their forms on the page or wall.

While surely aware of all that, Leibowitz also draws upon less exalted sources. The

setup-and-punch-line format of the joke greeting card works well for both the political and the confessional, sometimes in the same piece: "There are 2 things I will have 2 watch 4 the rest of my life — my weight and my racism."

Combined with childish hand lettering, many works recall no place more vividly than a high school toilet stall. "Roses are red/ violets are blue," goes one epigram, "Dick Cheney is still an —hole."

The show is the first outing for the museum's new associate curator, Anastasia James, who was appointed late in 2015. It's a good exhibition, with an even better accompanying book — more substantial than any previous museum publication and also, it must be said, more complete

in the picture it provides of the artist's work.

Ironically for a show that contains so much art, the problem is a space issue. Leafing through the catalog, we sense the impact individual works would have without the cacophony that assaults us in the gallery. The book focuses on one work or a small group in each spread; the show is something of a circular firing squad.

Given the volume of works, it's no wonder the decision was made to forgo individual object labels. That is not a problem for pieces that are, themselves, verbal statements of their titles. But a pair of shaped, childlike paintings of rainbows — one a traditional arch, the other inverted — make considerably more sense

when we read that the title is "Sad Rainbow, Happy Rainbow."

Similarly, a vitrine displaying traditional Jewish skull-caps has greater impact when we learn that one fashioned of blue and yellow satin is called "Swedish Yarmulke (Please Don't Forget Raoul Wallenberg)," and the one with pink and purple panels is "Stone-wall Yarmulke (Shalom Independence: July 4, 1776-June 27, 1969)."

Don't let these quibbles spoil your fun, though — and don't miss the remarkably timely references. As in the way the work slyly undercuts today's art world entanglement with market and money. A stuffed teddy bear wears a T-shirt imprinted, "I WILL MAKE A CUBIST PAINTING SOMEDAY BUT RIGHT NOW IT IS NOT IMPORTANT." A large, circular painting ("tondo schmondo") is rimmed with caps knitted for the Fran Drescher Fan Club, complete with the Star of David. (A half-serious conversation with the actress is published among the catalog's scholarly essays.)

Matters of identity, always present but key to this political moment, lie close to the surface in paintings like "Do these pants make me look Jewish?" and a series of sports pennants emblazoned, "GO FAGS!"

And then there are the 8-by-10 glossy photographs, found images of earlier-day celebrities, intentionally mislabeled with the scribbled names of famous artists. What better bombshell to drop at the dawning of the age of alternative facts?

Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle's art critic. Email: [cdesmarais@sfgchronicle.com](mailto:cdesmarais@sfgchronicle.com) Twitter: @Artguy1