

CHARLES DESMARAIS *Art*

Clown collection is no laughing matter

“Ugo Rondinone: The World Just Makes Me Laugh,” an exhibition at the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive on view through Aug. 27, consists primarily of lifelike sculptures of clowns. But it is no circus.

There are 45 of them, scattered about the museum’s voluminous main space. If

you are someone who finds clowns frightening (thank you, Stephen King), fear not. You know that worn-out, caged lion at the zoo? A bit overweight — a threat only to the flies within reach? That’s more like this collection of paunchy, tapped-out fellows, listlessly biding time. Inmates, with the run of the

Clowns continues on E6



Sibila Savage / Courtesy Frahm & Frahm

Sculptures of clowns look eerily lifelike in “Ugo Rondinone: The World Just Makes Me Laugh,” through Aug. 27.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



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For artist Ugo Rondinone, the rainbow, as seen here at UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, has been a theme throughout his career.

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gallery, maybe, but confined to the institution.

The persona of the clown, of course, has long been the receptacle for our unresolved emotions at the blurry edge of pain and pleasure. He is the quintessential pathetic character, unable to share with the world any outward expression but a forced joy.

The clown is masked and costumed. His self (all these clowns present as male) is

obscured, but a new one has been selected, constructed for the event. In the context of Rondinone's career-long references to the rainbow as both a celebration of the world and an emblem of identity, the clown's is a kind of drag persona — a happy choice, but also a defiant performance.

The exhibition is billed as Rondinone's first one-person show here, but it is not his introduction to the Bay Area. A group of three figures, his "Moonrise Sculptures" in-

Ugo Rondinone: The World Just Makes Me Laugh: 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Wednesdays-Thursdays; 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays. Through Aug. 27. \$10-\$12, free 18 and younger. UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2155 Center St., Berkeley. (510) 642-0808. www.bampfa.org

stalled since 2008 in a public open space at 555 Mission St., strive for the the same serio-comic effect but are quite different in their look. One critic

called them "unhappy potatoes."

I find the recent sculptures, which I saw in a different installation in Rome last year and have been unable to forget, haunting precisely because they are so little like art. You feel if you nudged one, he might moan in protest.

In Italy, the works were presented in walled bays along a central corridor, so that each turned corner was a startling encounter. In Berkeley, the effect is more overall, as though

you have arrived after the final act of some grand conflict. A battlefield strewn with the wounded. The magnified aftermath of the murders in the beloved opera "Pagliacci" ("Clowns").

All I could think was, "*La commedia è finita.*"

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Haunting figures of clowns in starkly different hues highlight "Ugo Rondinone: The World Just Makes Me Laugh," on display through Aug. 27.