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NSU Art Museum's "Happy!" Goes Deeper Than Its Title

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If tasked with conjuring the happiest image I can think of, my mind would probably wander to a pair of embracing panda bears imbibing a sunset. But a pair of glittery pandas drinking in said sunset, cuddling ear to ear as an ombré field of purple washes into splendorous reds and yellows? Well, that's simply too much beauty and cuteness for a museumgoer to handle.

Rob Pruitt's "Miami Pandas" is one of many high points in NSU Art Museum's aptly titled "Happy!", an exhibition that earns its exclamation point. It showcases works by more than 37 artists who, in the exhibit's own verbiage, "aim to engage the viewer emotionally"—as opposed to, perhaps, intellectually, though many function on that level as well. The key works in "Happy" are ones that a child could understand as well as an art scholar; that spark joy in us while allowing us to question the provenance of that spark.

This is a show in which attendees are invited to walk through a rainbow gate, play in clouds, lounge in beanbag chairs and eat free candy. It also provides a vision of the other side of the rainbow, if you will—the darker subtext lurking under the shiny happy surface. Such is the delicate balance struck by curator Bonnie Clearwater, who keenly gravitated toward works that subverted their own kiddish sense of play. As she told me during my visit to the museum this week, it's really a show "about death."

Focusing on contemporary art from the '50s to the present, "Happy!" includes household names—Rothko, Haring, Warhol, Yoko Ono—and emerging artists alike, and its breadth of mediums is delightfully varied, from painting to sculpture to installation to video. Viewers traverse the exhibition in such a way that they begin with works of straightforward bliss engineered to engender happiness in the spectator; like the art collective FriendsWithYou's giant blissful clouds hanging from the second-floor ceiling, and wend toward works that explore its near-reverse.

The pinnacle of the prior category is Kenny Scharf's "Cosmic Cavern," a walkable installation that might as well stand in for everybody's happy place: Every inch of its wall space, plus the ceiling, is plastered with found, molded and reimagined detritus. Anthropomorphized speakers smile from their perches; garland billows thanks to the constantly whirring fans. Keyboards and tires and TVs and children's cars jut out from everywhere you look in a crazy, nostalgic collage, while disco music seems to throb from nowhere and everywhere. You're encouraged to sit a while, if you like. I was never much of a club kid growing up, but in Scharf's Day-Glo cocoon, I felt as if I was.

Then there's Jeff Koons' crassly commercial and inevitable balloon animals, which by holy writ cannot be left off a museum exhibition about happiness; I frankly welcome the day when his ubiquitous popularity fades. I was much more taken with Takashi Murakami's "Open Your Hands Wide, Embrace Happiness!", an extraordinary assemblage of smiling, colorful emoji-like flowers filling a canvas. What at first glance appears to be a maximalist expression of unfettered joy is really the exhibition's earliest chink in its shield of happiness.

Murakami's work, and its title, double as a critique of postwar Japan's government-mandated embrace of happiness, which was more command than suggestion, and which was intended to paper over its citizens' troubles. Murakami literalizes this concept by creating a single crying face buried, almost undetectably, among the smiling floral masses.



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This trend of contradictory messaging continues with Alake Shilling's twisted takes on cartoonish imagery—her “Ladybug,” in particular, has the melt-y movement of an acid trip—and the trickster wit of Cory Arcangel's “Totally Fucked,” an existential hack of “Super Mario Brothers” in which the title character is stranded for eternity on a square, unable to jump into a void of nothingness on all sides. Also included is Arcangel's “Super Slow Tetris,” in which the artist drastically reduced the time it takes the game's blocks to fall into place. It's like watching 8-bit paint dry, and attendees are welcome to play it!

Even FriendsWithYou, which created the innocent puffy clouds at the exhibition's outset, manage to include some sly subversiveness into “Of All Things,” a clay collage of innumerable children's icons: Chucky the murderous doll is there too, along with a killer shark and a sign reading “Sesame Seedy.”



As the exhibit winds toward its close, harsher realities take hold. In Jorge Pantoja's "Over the Hills and Far Away," Spider-Man slings his web in a post-apocalyptic sky the color of lung cancer. In the video "God," the Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson, dressed as a '50s-style crooner and backed by a big-band orchestra, sings the line "Sorrow Conquers Happiness" repeatedly for 30 minutes, with a kind of gradual and perverse conviction. (It plays out in a room of vivid red curtains, a la "Twin Peaks," and the museum has replicated a similarly curtained space in which it projects the video.)

You know you've reached happiness' flip side when you encounter "Companion (Passing Through)," by artist and designer KAWS, a painted bronze sculpture of a Mickey Mouse-like figure covering its crossed-out eyes in a moment of despondence. Yes, kids, even this avatar of 24/7 cheer can feel depression, too.

So I suggest ending the show, as I did it, with Andy Warhol's "Silver Clouds," a black-walled space full of drifting, inflated foil bags. It's a work that encourages play and interaction; by gently unsettling the "clouds" from their status quos, you become a participant in the piece, a generator of its healthy entropy, and it provides a similar dopamine rush to the "Cosmic Cavern" piece.

"Happy!" may go to some unexpectedly dark places in its several sprawling galleries. But at least it begins and ends in the clouds.

"Happy!" runs through July 5 at NSU Art Museum, 1 E. Las Olas Blvd., Fort Lauderdale. Admission costs \$5-\$12. Call 954/525-5500 or visit nsuartmuseum.org.