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Reviews: Humor at the RISD Museum

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It isn't often that you find the words "fun" and "futility" inhabiting the same sentence. After all, how much fun can you have pondering the futility of your own existence and the absurdity of life in general? (That is, of course, unless your name is Jean-Paul Sartre.)

Still, as fans of "The Simpsons" can attest, it is possible to laugh — and laugh heartily — in the face of life's absurdities.

While not quite as laugh-out-loud funny as a Simpson's episode, the antics of the strange little creatures that inhabit "Exempla," an interactive exhibit at the RISD Museum, can be just as amusing. The work of Brian Knep, a Brown University graduate who's currently based in Boston, "Exempla" consists of four small video works, each featuring the same cast of crudely drawn animated figures.

In a piece called "Excel," a parade of these bobble-headed humanoids slowly makes its way toward a circle of light. Depending on your frame of reference, they could be fame-seekers drawn toward the klieg lights of celebrity or virtual pilgrims striving for intellectual or religious enlightenment.

In the end, it doesn't matter: as soon as they arrive at the light, each figure instantly disappears from view, as though yanked away by an unseen hand.



Things initially look more promising in "Expand," a work in which another series of amoeba-shaped figures slowly inflate like helium-filled balloons, then drifts toward another circle of light. Ultimately, though, their fate is the same: as soon as the light hits them, they shrivel, sink and have to start over again. (Then again, at least they're not zapped into nothingness like the figures in "Excel.")

In the remaining two works, "Escape" and "Embark," viewers can play the role of digital gatekeeper, allowing individual figures to pass from crowded, claustrophobic spaces into spaces that are less crowded. Eventually, though the two spaces switch roles, with the once unpopulated area becoming crowded and the densely populated area becoming nearly empty.

Interestingly, while Knep's amoeba-like figures rarely meet with success, they don't seem to begrudge the absurd (or at least doomed-to-fail) universe in which they find themselves. As many times as they fail at whatever it is they're doing — and Knep wisely allows us to attach as many different meanings and motivations to his figures as we like — they inevitably pick themselves up and start all over again.

In the end, they're funny precisely because they're so deeply human.

"Brian Knep: Exempla" runs through Feb. 28 at the RISD Museum, 224 Benefit St. in Providence. For information, including hours and admission, call (401) 454-6500 or visit www.risdmuseum.org.