

There's a big bite to her humor

By LEAH OLLMAN
Special to The Times

Considering how annoying most of the characters are in Tamy Ben-Tor's two "mockumentary" videos at Lightbox, it's surprisingly hard to pull away from them.

Ignorance can be fascinating — as can extremism, absurdity, fear-driven arrogance and ideological fervor, especially when performed and performed cannily, the characterizations laced with bitter, brutal humor.

Ben-Tor, a native of Jerusalem now getting her master's of fine art at Columbia, caused a stir with this work when it was shown, together with other pieces, in New York last year. (This is her first show in California.) Critics compared her to the controversial comedian Sarah Silverman, the shape-shifting self-portraitist Cindy Sherman and the irreverent Mel Brooks. Ben-Tor does bear similarities to all three but has developed an approach of her own that is captivating and unsettling, like the massaging of a bruise.

In both videos at Lightbox (eight or nine minutes each), Ben-Tor takes on the enemy, or at least the perceived enemy. "Women Talk About Adolf Hitler" (2003) features a variety of characters giving their take on the genocidal despot. In "Girls Beware" (2005), the characters issue warnings, ostensibly to Israeli Jewish girls, about the dangers of Arab men. Ben-Tor assumes all the identities herself,

brilliantly enacting them through gesture, accent and costume.

In the Hitler piece, Ben-Tor becomes a shrill gender-studies maven from New York conducting a ludicrous psychological dissection of Hitler, accounting for his behavior by pointing to his fear of dentists, his inability as a painter to grasp perspective and his dependence on "painkillahs." She also makes appearances as Teutonic Mitzi, a giggling, top-

less blond enamored of Hitler's mustache and oblivious to his crimes; Chava, an Israeli so full of loathing for the man that she can barely spit out his name; and a nameless, voiceless, creepy character who mimics Hitler's appearance and fondles his portrait.

The characters verge on caricature but keep to the realm of credibility. Likewise, the video's form mimics that of the scholarly, talking-head documentary

spiced up by the egalitarian unpredictability of shock-jock call-in radio. Political correctness feels moot in this hybrid arena of self-serving and self-defeating agendas.

The personalities in "Girls Beware" are equally well realized — comical, irritating and viable. Ben-Tor exaggerates, but as with all effective caricature a nugget of accuracy gleams within.

So much of humor is based on denigration and humiliation.

Ben-Tor's brand of subversive satire spreads the shame broadly and thinly, so that we're not just laughing at others but also at ourselves — the parts that are just as cliché and just as deluded as her fictional figures. This "Exploration in the Domain of Idiocy," as Ben-Tor's show is titled, is well worth taking.

Lightbox, 2656 S. La Cienega Blvd., (310) 550-1111, through April 15. Closed Sunday and Monday. www.lightbox.tv



"WOMEN TALK ABOUT ADOLF HITLER" A work of characters, all played by Tamy Ben-Tor, give their views on the 20th century in the mockumentary of Lightbox.

Los Angeles Times

E20 FRIDAY, APRIL 7, 2006

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