In August 1836, an editorialist lamented in Washington D.C.’s *Daily National Intelligencer* that Charles Bird King’s (1785-1862) large picture gallery on 12th Street “suffered unrewarded” and was without “sufficient public patronage,” despite providing Washingtonians with a “meritorious exhibition of paintings.”¹ Tellingly, the editorialist’s comments presage one of the major themes now associated with Charles Bird King: the public disregard of the arts in the Federal-era United States. Indeed, art historians almost purely discuss King in terms of his perceived frustration with the dire prospects of artists at this time. His canonical still-lives, *The Poor Artist’s Cupboard* (1815) and *The Vanity of the Artist’s Dream* (1830), are near universally viewed as expressions of this sentiment. This paper proposes an alternative interpretation of King, revealing him to be a satirical artist whose works operated as burlesque jokes of the emerging American art-world’s nascent anxieties. I analyze data from King’s Washington gallery to demonstrate the artist’s commercial popularity and involvement in Washington’s rapidly growing art market. I then reread *Vanity of the Artist’s Dream* within this socio-economic context to show the artist’s deep investment in satire, exaggeration, and self-effacement. I argue that the still-life is not an autobiographical lament, but an inside joke executed in collaboration with the painting’s patron, the wealthy collector James Fullerton. As a result, this paper complicates extant interpretations of King, and nuances our understanding of the growth of the art market in Washington, D.C.