

Roth, Charlene. "Naive Set Theory at Cirrus Gallery," *Artweek*, February 2007, Volume 28, Issue 1, p. 21.**'Naïve Set Theory' at Cirrus Gallery**

*Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;
/ And take upon's the mystery of things; /
As if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out,
/ In a walled prison, packs and sets of great
ones / That ebb and flow by the moon.*

—William Shakespeare, *King Lear*

In the play *King Lear*, Shakespeare asked, "Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out?" In other words, what constitutes this group or "set" contained by a prison wall? Empirically, a set is a collection of objects with some sort of relationship to one another, or a common connection to their container. The concept of set is fundamental to mathematics and within this context can be loosely defined as a collection of objects that belong together or belong to a place. How to establish and frame sets is a question that has teased (and plagued) curators of art exhibitions since the mid-seventeenth century when the term, "curator" (denoting a custodian of a collection) entered common usage. After all, the core duty of the job of fine art curation is to arrange and exhibit sets of artworks and/or sets of artists.

The artists in *Naive Set Theory* have vague stylistic and technical relationships to one another. This tenuous relationship serves as an allusion to naive set theory, which was devised as a conceptual tool for mathematicians. It was used as a means to visualize an infinite array.

Above: Jennifer Sullivan, *Bob Dylan with Hat*, 2006, mixed media, 18" x 18" x 10"; below: Brian Bress, *Vortex (for John Boorman)*, 2006, collage on C-print with string supports, 30" x 39", at Cirrus Gallery, Los Angeles.



However, it was eventually demoted to informal theoretical status because, though useful, a number of paradoxes that were the result of loose relationships were eventually revealed. The formal set theory, named axiomatic set theory, which was developed to address these paradoxes, does not look at the members of a set, rather only the provable facts about members based on a definite lists of axioms (accepted truths).

Curator Catherine Taft contends the artists included in *Naive Set Theory* can be seen as a casual or loose set because they share common ground. The common ground includes the following: all are emerging artists (each is a recent graduate from an MFA program), all produce work that projects a faux naïveté, in most cases the projected innocence is a screen meant to mediate mature and often political content. However, what is not shared by the artists is the paradox that threatens to break up the set. These artists range across a broad spectrum of weighty and complex issues that do not overlap. Individual works in the exhibition explore the broad concepts of psychological states, nationalistic identity, institutional authority, allegory, myth and popular culture. Plus, the artists' process is far flung. It includes drawing, interactive Web-based work, performance, painting, video, collage, photography and sculpture.

The delicate watercolor and pencil drawings produced by Julie Lequin have a fragile sense of humor. *I have a cat in my throat* is an example wherein a big blue-eyed blond child is spitting out a striped cat. Brian Bress's collages, on the other hand, are

chaotically complex and eerie. *Rubble* features a male bust comprised of layered images that are difficult to tease apart. The images within the composite include sinuous, serpentine eyeglasses and a death's head mask among many, many other elements. This is also the case, though the figure is implied, with *Vortex*, a collage over a C-print, by Bress. Lastly, Ami Tallman paints, with ink on paper, brightly colored portraits of imaginary patriarchal, often military, figures like *Military Mucky-Muck*.

Some theories of curatorial practice suggest that it is the curator's task to make choices that result in a matrix or structure that links together a set and creates a significant object (or text) from the set that is larger in scope than its elements.

If an exhibition achieves this status, the members of the set are in essential dialogue with one another. This dialogue, once established, is entered into by viewers/participants who are rewarded (ideally) with a barrage of interconnected information that can be formal or conceptual, but importantly and ultimately, useful in the way that expanded knowledge is useful. In the end, the question is posed here—how important is an interactive and productive architecture to an exhibition?

—Charlene Roth

Naive Set Theory: Brian Bress, Julie Lequin, Jennifer Sullivan and Ami Tallman closed in December at Cirrus Gallery, Los Angeles.

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