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Four shows: How can we know 'What They Wanted'?

Kenneth Baker

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More than a year ago, Jeffrey Fraenkel had an idea for refreshing the conventional gallery summer group show: Ask one artist represented by each of four galleries to assemble a show drawing on the inventory of all of them.

The outcome: "They Knew What They Wanted," spread across four venues - Fraenkel, Berggruen, Altman Siegel and Ratio 3.

How much coherence, and what kind, should visitors expect of these exhibitions?

Inevitably, we look for thematic or formal threads that tie each show together, but

they seem to surface and disappear, both within each exhibition and across them all.



For this reason, Linda Ridgway's "Thank You" (2005-06) at Fraenkel can serve as an emblem of the entire project: an unfinished or half-unstrung strip of crochet - cast in bronze, no less - incorporating the words "thank you." It suggests a fraying or ambivalent welcome. I doubt that any of the artist curators intends such a sentiment, but visitors may feel it anyway as they puzzle over the details of "They Knew What They Wanted."

Bay Area photographer Katy Grannan selected the Fraenkel chapter of "TKWTW." Like the others, it offers clusters of connectible works. A paint-daubed, headless female figure sculpture by Manuel Neri stands alongside one of photographer E.J. Bellocq's famous "Storyville Portraits" of prostitutes - printed by Lee Friedlander - the subject's face scratched out for anonymity in the original negative.

Flanking these two are Diane Arbus' "James Brown at Home in Curlers, Queens, N. Y." (1966) and a deliberately airless 2006 series that Friedlander shot backstage at a New York fashion show. An interest in the fabrication of identity - a preoccupation of Grannan's own work - seems to link these pictures. Another passage in her Fraenkel installation uses animal imagery to connect things as various as Will Rogan's picture of pigeon footprints in concrete; a 1964 Garry Winogrand image of a cow stumbling on pavement, shot through a windshield; a Robert Bechtle "car portrait" lithograph; and illustrator Charley Harper's folk-art-like drawings of wildlife.

Among the artist curators of "TKWTW," only Shannon Ebner at Altman Siegel lives outside the Bay Area, in Los Angeles. A subtle difference in angle of vision sets her installment apart from the others.

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Ebner seems to have strived for an ensemble that would feel like an artwork. It has pleasing internal rhymes such as that between Iran Do Espirito Santo's solid crystal "Water Glass 2" (2008) and Rogan's 2003 video "Glory," in which lemon seeds rise and descend repeatedly in a glass of water, borne by escaping carbonation bubbles.

Ebner's show even leads our viewing angle up and down, with works placed on or near the floor, such as Sol LeWitt's wonderful white electrical faceplate partly dipped in black and Tom Otterness' bronze floor sculpture, "Broken Humpty Dumpty" (1990). Next to the LeWitt, Ed Ruscha's lithograph "Unit" (2004) has us dead level with a purely fictional eyeline.

In the same cluster hangs Lee Friedlander's deflating picture "Egypt" (1983), which sights up at the Pyramids and Sphinx across a trash-strewn slope patrolled by vagrant dogs.

More than her fellow artist curators, Ebner seems to have thought contrapuntally about her choices, their aspects and implications.

Jordan Kantor's selection at Ratio 3 has a sinister humor to it, turning on suggestions of conspiracy, censorship, surveillance and private versus public memory.

Works by several artists - Grannan, Friedlander, Ruscha, Robert Adams, Trevor Paglen, Bechtle, Garth Weiser, Lutz Bacher - appear in two or more of the exhibitions.

But Paglen's super telephoto images of "Detachment 3, Air Force Flight Test Center #2, Groom Lake, NV" (2008) at Berggruen have an impact very different from his time lapse of a naval satellite's night-sky transit at Ratio 3.

Bechtle, who organized the Berggruen show, has placed Paglen's long shots in a sequence with Richard Misrach's views of the Golden Gate from his Berkeley home and two paintings by Tom McKinley that idealize, a little creepily, vantage points of high privilege.

Kantor positioned Paglen's satellite streak between a Vija Celmins print of a spiderweb and a grainy Sara Vanderbeek photo that appears to show a poster winking through fractured plate glass.

"They Knew What They Wanted" challenges the assumption that any given artwork is a distinct thing. The complex of shows argues that artworks are shape-shifting entities that impose and receive influences from their contexts - both the overt and the invisible ones that viewers' memories and art history provide. A discomfiting recognition, but a necessary one.

They Knew What They Wanted: Four connected shows of paintings, sculpture, photographs and other works on paper selected by four artists. Through July 31. John Berggruen Gallery, 228 Grant Ave., S.F. (415) 781-4629www.berggruen.com. Through Aug. 7. Altman Siegel Gallery, 49 Geary St., S.F. (415) 576-9300.www.altmansiegel.com. Through Aug. 13. Ratio 3, 1447 Stevenson St., S.F. (415) 821-3371.www.ratio3.org. Through Aug. 21. Fraenkel Gallery, 49 Geary St., S.F. (415) 981-2661.www.fraenkelgallery.com.