

Art in America

Staving Off the Sophomore Slump: D'Ette Nogle at Clifton Benevento



Installation view of D'Ette Nogle's exhibition "Michael Clifton & Michael Benevento and D'Ette Nogle Present: Regressing to Mean at Clifton Benevento," New York, 2014. Courtesy the artist and Clifton Benevento, New York. Photo Andres Ramirez.

One of the many pleasures of being finished with school is that you no longer have to deal with standardized tests.

That is unless, in your leisure time, you willingly visit "Michael Clifton & Michael Benevento and D'Ette Nogle Present: Regressing to Mean," an exhibition comprising an interactive installation by Los Angeles-based high school teacher and artist D'Ette Nogle, now at New York gallery Clifton Benevento (through May 24). The artist's second show with the gallery turns the space into something resembling a sterile testing center.

At the entrance, viewers are greeted by a video that invites them to take a two-part exam at a desk set up in the corner. If they accept, the exam is administered by a gallery attendant. The test consists of two booklets administered in succession, in which the same 10 questions are asked in a different order. Thematically, they are based on the phenomenon of *schadenfreude*—pleasure derived from others' misfortune. After taking the test, visitors are informed of their scores.

"I wanted to create a situation in which results could be provided to each person," Nogle told me when she proctored my exam the day before the exhibition opened. "I wanted the viewer to experience, in a way, what I have experienced between my first and second exhibitions: an increase in scrutiny."

In other words, rather than waiting for viewers to pass judgment on her new show—good or bad, better or worse than the previous one—Nogle, 40, aims to pass judgment on them. Test takers are asked to first visit two different booths set up along one wall in the gallery, in which they see, on one side, a female mannequin, with a swipe of white paint on her behind, filing papers. On the other side is a male mannequin, in a coffee-stained shirt, typing on a keyboard. The booths serve as visual prompts for the first two out of 10 questions on the exam. The next eight questions are answered after viewing photocopied images of works of art such as Ed Ruscha's *The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire (1965-68)* in a testing pamphlet handed out at the beginning of the exhibition. The questions are non-verbal. After viewing the prompts, viewers are merely asked to decide "true" or "untrue" based on their gut reaction. The concept of *schadenfreude* is implied in the misfortune depicted in some of the images, but never mentioned explicitly in any of the prompts.

Derosia

Brienne Walsh, Art in America, May 12, 2014

Because there is no right or wrong answer, in order to take the test methodically, one must set up a subjective criterion. Do you answer each section based on feeling? Or on pattern? For Nogle, this arbitrariness is a metaphor for the ways that the art we see is selected.

“Gallery directors, curators—they are gatekeepers who make subjective decisions, and they determine our access to art over time,” Nogle explained.



On the first section, using my gut to guide my answers, I scored a seven out of 10; on the second section, I thought about whether or not the visual reflected *schadenfreude*, and scored a five. “I’m sorry, but you deviated from the mean,” Nogle said, laughing, when she handed me the pin I received as a result, which depicts a downward-pointing arrow. “You can turn it around if you feel bad,” she added later.

The exhibition read something like an apology from Nogle—a joke she’s cracking about herself before you get a chance to notice the flaw she’s self-conscious about. Many of the objects in the current exhibition—the materials used to make the booths, the folding chairs—were present in her first exhibition at the same gallery, “Information from Two Sources.”

“I wanted these formal elements to be repeated just to sort of acknowledge that this is the same context I was working within before,” she explained. In her opinion, when an art viewer comes in to see a sophomore attempt at a gallery, they want to see the connection with the earlier body of work.

By tying this lineage to the notion of *schadenfreude*, she’s telling the viewer that she’s already considered, and accepted, the possibility of her own failure. Maybe “Regressing From the Mean” scores lower than her last exhibition in your estimation—or maybe it scores higher.

