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## ART

### Eye Exam

Booster Club

### Jason Foumberg

When I attend an art exhibition hosted by Steph Pavone and Britt Reilly my mind drifts to the social affairs of yore, to speakeasies and soirees and salons, and everything takes on that rosy and gilded hue of prescient acclaim and influence. I don't mean to over-compliment them, but isn't it grand to approve of someone's doings with deserved flatteries knowing that they will prosper whether in or out of the limelight? Steph and Britt's parties are cultural happenings that begin as typical exhibitions of contemporary art. Yet like their precedents, like Cabaret Voltaire or Madame Plum's, they nourish a community, shape a subculture and question what it means to be a cultural producer today.

Steph and Britt's curatorial venture is Booster and Seven, which once had a permanent home as a storefront art venue in Ukrainian Village from 2005-2006. In this brief but potent physical incarnation, Booster and Seven promoted performances, video screenings, music and readings and site-specific sculptural installations. The gatherings that occurred at this address, in and around and because of the art, seemed to glow with creative fervor. Events no longer occur at this site, yet this has led Britt and Steph to consider other ways to promote their crew of artists. Recently they were invited to present a showcase of work at Mark Rowland's gallery in the Fulton Market area. Additionally, they served on the advisory panel for Three Walls Solo, a new exhibition program catered toward Chicago-based artists, for which they screened applicants, generated conversation among the other committee members and promoted the Booster and Seven agenda.

If they do in fact have an agenda, it isn't one of power brokering, but rather a maneuvering of style. Perhaps it is more of a particular perspective, one that includes the overturning of some of Chicago's art-scene taboos. Knowing

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that many people in Chicago receive criticism for their sole support of an "in-crowd," for supporting a brand of youth cult fetishism, or for having too much of a good time promoting a "serious" venture, Booster and Seven turn these to their favor. In this they have built a community of artists who feel comfortable presenting their output to a focused group of aficionados. Perhaps it is incestuous, perhaps it is hipsterism, but it works; the art world shouldn't continue to believe that support isn't a synonym for mutual admiration. Realizing that the community spirit enables production, Booster and Seven harnesses the power of the group effort. This is a willful acknowledgement of Chicago's strengths, as well as the strengths of contemporary artistic practice, not the self-deception of a city unsure of its status in the art market or against the "other" art centers. It is the beginning of a new generation of involvement.

"We are hands-on, not laissez faire," remarks Steph, acknowledging her comfort in creative advising. Britt adds that, as curators, they are in it to see eye to eye with their artists, to raise them up by providing them with equal parts opportunity and risk. Both understand that their role includes, according to Britt, "facilitating as creating." For many curators, especially those institutionally affiliated, this is a no-no, but for the Booster and Seven family, this is a possibility, and thus expected. Being independent curators, they have the freedom to mix professionalism with friendship as they see fit, usually materializing like a delicate cocktail of awesomeness.

In the nineteenth century an urbanite class of dandies strutted avenues and filled night cafes. This included those who, to paraphrase the poet Baudelaire, had no profession other than elegance. They were the first audiences for their artist friends, vessels of poetry and projections of beauty. I see this type of subjectivity in the workings of Booster and Seven, which is all sharp-eyes and intuition, a guiding hand of taste. Both stress above all else the mutual trust that is involved in their curatorial projects and a serious commitment to representing the shape of the contemporary.

As passionate and informed members of the Chicago art community, Britt and Steph recently served on the committee to select artists for the new Three Walls enterprise that will give emerging and established Chicago artists solo exhibitions. As proponents of the "emerging" category, Booster and Seven felt that their voice was heard through the committee; artist Tano Ferrer will open the space, and the Fall series, with an exhibition at the Solo space. This week, the third part of their summer curatorial series opens at rowlandcontemporary, featuring a two-person show of Jeremy Boyle and Rick Gribenas' work. Earlier in the summer they hosted a group show of Booster and Seven artists, and the recently closed solo show by Brooklyn-based David Rothenberg blended high humor with low culture, an assortment that ranged from depersonalized portraits of assassinated leaders to images of conceptually overstuffed animals, both hunting and hunted. At the

opening, Britt and Steph seemed glad to entertain Rothenberg's conceptualism.

Perhaps feeling a little bit displaced, but with tongue in cheek, Booster and Seven's summer series is titled "If you lived here you'd be home by now." Looking toward the future, it seems that without a permanent address, Booster and Seven is making a home in the city's culture.

*Part three of "If you lived here you'd be home by now," featuring artists Jeremy Boyle and Rick Gribenas, runs August 10-18 at rowlandcontemporary, 1118 West Fulton, (312)421-6275.*

(2007-08-07)

### **Also by Jason Foumberg**

#### **Eye Exam**

Alternative art spaces planted in houses and apartments seem to proliferate in the summertime, and why shouldn't they? It was a beautiful night to be reminded that artists and poets and musicians love their audiences. A little hospitality lends so much Last Saturday evening Brown Triangle hosted its second event, organized by playwright Brian Torrey Scott (2007-07-24)

#### **Eye Exam**

A veritable pantheon of deformities is assembled in a quiet white room on the top floor of a warehouse. These are Volker Saul's disfigured figures, standing thirteen feet tall and half-mangled in a display of suggestively grotesque pageantry. To come off the deserted and shadeless industrial side streets of Chicago's Garfield Park and into the clean, serene gallery is like discovering the tomb site or hidden temple of some Egyptian king long since resurrected or raided (2007-07-17)

#### **Eye Exam**

Last year artist Pablo Helguera stopped in Chicago as part of his international touring community center, The School of Panamerican Unrest, in order to help artists and cultural supporters reflect on and respond to the city's contemporary artistic scene. The result was a collaborative text, an Address of the People of Chicago, that collectively listed perceived problems and freedoms of the city's artists. The text is now on view in the exhibition "Escultura Social: A New Generation of Art from Mexico City" at the MCA, and I caught up with a few of the Address' participants, to, well, address the text (2007-07-10)

#### **Eye Exam**