

Meliksetian MB Briggs



Picturing Paradoxes: An Interview With Cody Trepte

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Artist Cody Trepte is dealing with some very heady subjects. His art is quite graphic and often deals with language and images as examples of the unknowable. He digests concepts like infinity and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, presenting them through complex artistic and intellectual representations. It is incredibly fascinating work. We spoke with Cody on his perplexing subject matters, on his studio practice, and on Los Angeles' closeness to history and to artists.

A paradox cannot be defined. They are contrarian and defy logic, items that inherently require great thought to understand. Artist Cody Trepte creates paradoxes and places viewers in situations where they may only be able to catch a tiny hint of what he's portraying in his work. He doesn't make his work dense intentionally, either: the subjects of his work are uniquely paradoxical—and these subjects can manifest themselves in many, many ways.

Cody was born in Austin and raised in Greenville, Texas but left the area as soon as he could, leading him to New York City to attend NYU. He studied photography and lived in New York for a few years after school, working a day job at legendary art center, **The Kitchen**. He moved out to Los Angeles to attend Calarts in 2008 where he focused on studio art. "It's a really amazing program," he explains. "I actually just watched the movie *Fame* for the first time last night and it really reminded me a lot of campus life at Calarts. There was a bit of chaos everywhere, which was fun and oddly productive."

Since graduating, Cody has been in Los Angeles working in his studio downtown. "Originally I was planning to leave LA and go back to New York after grad school finished, which hasn't happened yet," he notes. "I'm still jonesing for the city but things are great here and it always feels like its such a hustle there. I'm not looking forward to returning to that."

Cody is very straightforward and is in no way contradictory. However, his stance on Los Angeles is quite funny: he's an Angeleno who longs for New York and who hates the beach and sand. He's a rare breed of local. "I left New York kicking and screaming," he says. "The art schools [in New York] felt sort of business based in terms of leading into the gallery world, or at least it felt that way at the time. I guess it's not really a problem, but it's so easy to get swallowed by that way of thinking out there. I also came out to work with a lot of people based at Calarts like Charles Gaines. It feels a little easier to articulate after living out here for a few years, but art schools in LA seem to influence the art world in a way that in

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other cities, it's more about what the galleries are doing. It's an interesting shift that I've learned a ton from."

Being here, Cody has found great success and has dug himself deep in local history and the local art community. "I curated a show in 2010 at LACE called *On The Line*," he says. "I was interested in looking at West Coast language-based work from the 1980s, thinking of it as one of the first waves of post-conceptual art. The show included four artists, all of whom I didn't know about in New York, which is insane that that can even happen. It's always great to get a new perspective."

The show connected Cody to a very recent history and greatly engaged his aesthetic as his work copes with language and design centered visual concepts. Los Angeles has enabled him to reach new artists and allowed him to better understand them and their work. "A big part of that show for me was getting to know and work with the artists. It's amazing—but it feels like it doesn't happen in other cities. Things can be filtered through institutions or there is an assumed formality to the approach, which wasn't my experience out here at all."

This recent and tactile art history is what attracts him and others to this city. How we're capturing and presenting this history is important, too. "*Made In L.A.* is one way of addressing that issue, as was the *Pacific Standard Time* project," he says. "It's important to record what's happening here, both in a younger generation and in a historical sense, but I guess that impulse or need to reaffirm that for ourselves feels a little odd to me. I'm really glad to have seen many of the *Pacific Standard Time* shows though. LA has been great in that way. I've discovered lots of new art that has been really influential to me."

This influence of location and its artists is somewhat invisible in his work. He creates art that is very self-contained and devoid of geographical reference. They appear to be a response to and manifestation of the unknowable. "I'm sure [Los Angeles] must have some influence on my work but I don't know that it's on the surface," he explains. "One thing that I thought a lot about when moving out here was the baggage of the history of conceptual art. My work is very black and white, very text-based, and fits very cleanly into that lineage. For the first time, I was trying to understand what work is left to be done in Conceptualism, and was really inspired by looking at how it had morphed and changed on the West Coast. That was a big inspiration for the *On The Line* exhibition at LACE."

"My work really comes from what I read and what I'm thinking about and these problems that I'm trying to solve for myself. I've been really inspired by paradoxes. For example, my thesis at Calarts was about **Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle**. The challenge for that work became trying to give some form to paradoxes in a way that involved the viewer. There are ways to easily point at a paradox, like drawing an infinity sign or pointing to the stars, but I wanted to actually implicate the viewer in the experience of that paradox, which is more difficult to do."

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“In more recent projects I’ve been trying to separate the ideas from external narratives so that, for example, you aren’t required to know about Heisenberg or quantum physics,” he continues. “The work for the Hammer was about this idea of giving form to, or pointing toward, the unknowable. That was the first body of work that I felt was approaching something successful in that respect. I tried to use the idea of an ellipsis as an aesthetic strategy so that instead of talking about the subject of the work directly, you are always pointing to the subject through strategic omissions. I like to think that the omissions in the work form some constellation that traces the outline of the subject. This is apparent in the text in the work, which is only conditionally visible (as in, when you look at it head on, you don’t see anything—but as you move around the piece the text becomes apparent). The marbling was another way to visualize this idea since it creates this delineation of an infinite space. Both of these things hopefully point back at this problem of how to represent the unknowable.”

It may sound like Cody’s work is very difficult to explain but it really is not. He’s made an effort to make it approachable, too. “I had a crisis in grad school thinking about these ideas of accessibility as there’s never a one-to-one relationship to what goes into the work and what comes out of the work since there are all of these subjective barriers. Who knows what the viewer is bringing to the work or what they take from it! It was a big step to acknowledge that in some way. I also feel that work can be about a specific idea and not just inspired by it, and that is a really hard thing to do. I’m not one of those artists who makes a mark on a canvas and then responds to it—it’s the opposite: it’s starting with an idea or problem and reverse engineering it to figure out how to represent that in the work.”

“I don’t want the work to be cryptic or off-putting but I do like the idea that a little work has to be done and that the pieces unfold for the viewer over time. Hopefully, something will stick with you as you walk away. I like to ask that of viewers,” he says with a smile, relating it to his work in *Made In L.A.* “The language that appears in the work (‘Erasing impertinences,’ ‘Centering premises in a,’ ‘Permanence site rising,’ and ‘Emerges in certain spin’) are all anagrams of the title, which is *Its Remaining Presence*. From the perspective of creating meaning within work, there’s a hierarchy of things that can be used. Language is at the top and it’s the easiest way to point at an idea with any level of specificity. I was trying to reverse that assumption so that what you get is language that’s almost meaningless. I’ve always been interested in the elastic quality of language. There’s an economy of letters in the work that are just being re-jumbled to form new words and new phrases.”

Making *Its Remaining Presence* was a difficult task, too. Coming up with the concept was a challenge but the execution was also incredibly taxing. He worked with local screen printers only to eventually do the printing work himself. Moreover, due to his work’s relationship with light, he had to match colors to the light color spectrum. It was all very complicated.

“I realized the color of the lights made a huge difference. I had to get lights from the

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Hammer and black out my studio while printing to get what I wanted,” he explained. “I really have no idea how to mix colors. I had to look up the color wheel and thought, ‘Oh, that’s what it’s for!’ It took me three weeks to figure it out. As you can see by the hot pink over there, it’s black and white—and hot pink. That was the thing that changed the ink. It took a long time to get everything to be the right color.”

“It became a site specific piece in some ways,” he says with a laugh. “If the work is ever acquired, the lighting will have to be considered, too. It’s a little bit of a mess...”

This complication isn’t uncommon in his work: as stated, he enjoys challenging viewers—even if they own the piece. “There’s a lot of science-y craft that goes into these gestures,” Cody says. “There’s this piece I made with **LM Projects—*So This Is***—that’s made from the pigment found in transition lenses. It’s supposed to be placed next to a window and as the light moves throughout the room and strikes the piece, the ink turns into a medium gray, making visible a gradient that exposes the words ‘so this is.’ This O is exactly the same shape as this figure, too. This piece was an early experiment in making work that shifts as you move around it or through time. It has a fixed number of transitions until it finally expires (approximately 2000 shifts). I love that it’s an edition and it’s unique. There are ten of these out in the world, all of them aging at different times. You could opt to frame it under UV glass and protect it forever and never see the transition. It’s up to the owner to make this decision, to make the piece active.”

As you can see, Cody’s work always contains an element of performance. If they aren’t reacting to light, they are slowly decaying or sparkling from the inclusion of diamond dust or caustic chemicals in its production. If the pieces aren’t performing, his viewers are as they must move around and approach the work from different angles in order to fully experience it. Both *Its Remaining Presence* and *So This Is* do this in their own ways. “There are rules with *So This Is*,” he explains. “The pair has to be installed at the same time but they can be installed in different locations, inviting a bit of a scavenger hunt.”

This hunt and the photo itself in *So This Is* represent an absurdity in his art. Photography in his work points to the unexplainable. “It’s an altered found photo from eBay,” he says of the figure holding the hat in the desert in *So This Is*. “It’s a totally bizarre image. I do a lot with photos like this. I really like that quality that they have where something is slightly off. They’re kooky.”

He pulls out another photo of a man with a hat smiling at the camera in a backwards coat. He then places it against a similar photo of the same man with this backwards coat—but this time he has a lampshade on his head. “It’s about something happening between A and B that we don’t have access to,” he says with a smile. “Maybe there was just a lot of alcohol! I love the quality of a photograph that’s difficult to place in time and hard to tell what’s going on.”

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Cody can't seem to place himself, either. He does not have any plans to leave Los Angeles but he also seems a bit antsy to get back to New York. "I'm not leaving LA any time soon. I'd really like to get a dog, which would be difficult to do in New York. I miss New York a lot, but I'm enjoying LA and am happy here."

His work is going to continue in its challenging, unpredictable direction. "I seem to be fixated on a few ideas, and I sometimes feel like I'm making and re-making the same thing, but the truth is that the different bodies of work do feel radically different to me. The process of making the work is also becoming more and more decadent over time." he says. "A lot of the work is about the same things (the unknowable or paradoxes) and I continue to be inspired by thinking through those issues. Tom McCarthy and Simon Critchley, as well as their project, the International Necronautical Society, have been really inspiring in how they're able to tackle some similar ideas in very efficient and interesting ways."

But what is the future of his art? "To answer your question, I have no idea. I keep thinking that maybe I'll start using color in my work—but that hasn't happened yet. I was thinking of a brown or dark blue. We'll see."