frieze

Dana Lok

Chewday's, London, UK

BY **AARON BOGART**

In 1902, the British philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote a letter to the German logician Gottlob Frege explaining that he had found a paradox in Frege's foundations of mathematics. Russell's paradox refers an object being part of a group (a set) only if it is not part of that group. The title of Dana Lok's first solo exhibition, 'The Set of All Sets', alludes to this contradiction, but here it is the painted surface that is the stage for tensions between what is portrayed and our visual expectations.

Dana Lok, *Tilted Bather*, 2014, oil on canvas, 1.8 x 2 m. Courtesy: © Dana Lok

Tilted Bather (2014), one of five paintings in the show, is a large work that depicts a cutout of a female figure laid on a circular pool of blue, set against what appears to be a green forest floor, with brown tree trunks in the background. Three vertical bands, which look as though they could be prison bars, are painted at the immediate foreground of the work creating a cage, of sorts – for the woman or for the viewer. The painting takes its bathing figure from Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Luncheon on the Grass, 1863). In both works, the woman appears out of proportion: in Manet's rendering, she is too large for her location behind the other figures in the work, looming, oversized and flat, almost like a painting within a painting. Lok's bather looks as if she has been excised from Manet's canvas and placed horizontally, like a coin on a level surface, so that we are able to see the depth of the cutout form. Lok's skillful use of perspectival shifts – from three dimensions to two dimensions and back – offers us the chance to see the painted surface for what it is: an artificial construction that can stage a multitude of realities; a kind of theatre set.

Dana Lok, *Conjurors I*, 2016, oil on canvas, 1.8 x 1.7 m. Courtesy: © Dana Lok

The many angles that a painting can deliver and the change of compositional outlook that can follow is given further attention in two very similar looking works, *Conjurors I* and *Conjurors II* (2016), which hang directly across from one another, like mirror images. Both paintings are a night-sky blue, which slightly darkens toward the top, where there is a pale blue moon and are scattered with small stars, tilted and slanted, like falling confetti. From the bottom edge of each, an angled shadow creeps its way into the picture. Maybe it's the head of someone looking into a reflecting pool that mirrors a moon-filled night above, but then the water would have to be eerily still. More likely it's the shadow of an imaginary viewer standing between the paintings, humorously intimating us in the spatial murkiness of the composition. Adding to this disorienting configuration, a ring of red- and blue-lettered text looks as if it is circling in the pictorial plane – a trick of perspective. *Conjurors I* reads 'I KNOW YOU KNOW', assuming you start with the pink-coloured 'I' highlighted by the moon's glow – while *Conjurors II* might be read as 'YOU KNOW I KNOW'. The infinite loop of 'you know's' – I know that you know that I know that you know, and so on – is both a nod to the use of recursion in mathematics and logic, and a wink to the audience that painting is a game – one in which we all know the rules, though they may sometimes fool us. Lok's paintings remind us that the nature of painterly representation, of looking for depth in flatness and of finding flatness in depth, requires ambiguity and perhaps a little bit of paradox.

Main image: Dana Lok, Conjurors II, 2016, oil on canvas, 1.8 x 1.7 m

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