



Review

*An Experiment with "New American Talent"*

by Angela Emmett  
August 2008

The juried "New American Talent: The Twenty-Third Exhibition" (or "NAT23") at [Arthouse](#) in Austin is something like a science fair for artists. Arthouse has conducted this competition/experiment 22 times before. Using the same formula, and changing one simple ingredient (the curator) with each attempt, the results often prove to be staggeringly different. But Arthouse's NAT survey is known for its new discoveries.



Justin Storms  
*War of the Whales*  
(2008)

It starts with over 1,000 submissions, each meeting a minimum set of requirements. The artists are at varying stages in their careers; some might already have work hanging in museum collections while others have no gallery representation or are still trying to finish art school. A guest curator gets a limited amount of time to review the artwork and choose the works to be displayed in an approximately 5,500-square foot space.

This year's curator was Nato Thompson, an activist, curator and producer at [Creative Time](#) in New York. Prior to joining Creative Time, Thompson was a curator at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art ([MASS MoCA](#)), and was involved with the [Department of Space and Land Reclamation \(DSLRL\)](#), the 2003 mass performance/activist campaign in Chicago.<sup>1</sup> Thompson's activities reflect the current surge of activism in the art world, though he himself might chafe at such easy pigeonholing.<sup>2</sup> Regardless, he is keen on all forms of information sharing and production, and his activist take on American culture is evident in "NAT23": in the show's catalog essay, he states that he looked specifically for art that inspires "thinking on the social and political conditions facing us today." The works he selected comment on the human condition, using imagery both from contemporary American society as well as diverse cultures.

Works in the exhibition address notions of race and identity, the tortured environment, technology overload and forgotten or neglected landmarks and people. Fear, brutality and loathing are also in evidence. Fortunately, little of what Thompson has compiled for Arthouse is transparent or overtly didactic, so any thread that links the art is just that — a thread. Maybe because the artists selected for this experiment are also in a state of investigating, the products of their labor and imagination are more stimulus than critique.

Interestingly, some of the most controversial issues manifest themselves in traditional media like oil painting, photography and printmaking. "R" rated lithographs created by [Goran Maric](#) depict contemporary scenes of torture and brutality similar to [Goya's Disasters of War](#). [Teruko Nimura's](#) soft sculpture entitled *Black Doll* (2007) reeks of masochism, manipulation and mutilation. An epic painting *War of the Whales* (2008), by [Justin Storms](#), evokes the destruction that looms in works by [Bosch](#) and [Géricault](#). Meanwhile the voyeuristic photography of [Margo Geddes' Lightpole 1](#) (2007) and [Beau Comeaux's A Frame](#) (2007) seems to emanate an invisible, lurking energy from the dark side.



Corey Escoto  
Self Improvement Plaza  
(2007)

Consumerism, suspicion and fantasy mix well in the idealistic rendering of [Corey Escoto's Self Improvement Plaza](#) (2007). This watercolor, painted from an aerial viewpoint, depicts a familiar yet unrealistic retail-like setting where those seeking improvement might find exactly what they are shopping for. Shouldn't we be worried about the empty parking lot?



[Emily Puthoff's S.I.R.E.N. Surrender Module Personal Portable Edition](#) and [Margot Herster's Soup and Yogurt](#) come across as discoveries in the use of non-traditional art materials. Through research, prototyping and field-testing, Puthoff's fictitious findings explain the power behind [Whitney Houston's](#) recording of "I Will Always Love You" and the song's ability to lure known terrorists into surrendering. Herster's findings, on the other hand, are based on facts of a different, non-fictitious nature. The subjects in her multi-media installation are 12 Kuwaiti detainees (held in [Guantanamo](#)), their families and the American lawyers representing their civil liberties case. Herster's documentary brings to life the faces and personalities of those directly affected by American policies and legal system (including families of the imprisoned and interrogated).

Emily Puthoff  
S.I.R.E.N. Surrender Module Personal Portable Edition  
2007

Though stitched with the same sociopolitical thread used by Puthoff and Herster, playful and inventive are words I would use to describe works by Joe Craig, [William Lamson](#), [Seth Lower](#) and [Megan Michalak](#). Lamson uses black balloons to produce a series of videos titled *Actions* (2007-2008). In what could be a stark white laboratory, the artist films different configurations of helium filled balloons in and around his nondescript self-made contraptions. A selection of six actions (in a series of 30+) sequence in a video loop on a large monitor. With each action, we witness balloons floating, falling or sitting stationary in differing scenarios. The artist uses a variety of weapons and methods to relinquish the balloons. In some cases, the artist films himself in practiced movements of self-defense, whereby he extinguishes the balloons. Watching Lamson's staged experiments is like eavesdropping on an actor rehearsing for a James Bond film.



William Lamson  
Actions (Selection)  
2007-2008