

IT'S ALL IN THE NUMBERS

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**BY SARAH ROBAYO SHERIDAN**

Gold mirror is a recurrent medium in Jade Rude's installations. It is a material that evokes divergent affiliations: both the high-end optic technology of space missions but also a plastic world's answer to consumer-grade luxury. Rude's industrial sheeting offers a more glamorous update to the mirrored surfaces of earthworks of yore, while nevertheless following on the turnabout prompted by American minimalism that made industrial fabrication the new gold standard in art. Indeed, Rude's favoring of conditions of installation in which "the physical body and surrounding architecture become enmeshed" aligns perfectly with the battle cry of minimalism in the 1960s. Yet in this particular foray, Rude also appropriates a specific image referent as her starting point—the mysterious solid that stars in Albrecht Dürer's now five-centuries-old engraving *Melencolia I* (1514). Based on what most scholars agree to be a truncated rhombohedron rendered in the etching, Rude has extrapolated a three-dimensional structure that she deploys in modular repetition, stacking and distributing these units in clusters across the gallery space. The resulting rhombic building blocks are scaled to multiple sizes and are placed according to subjective decisions of arrangement that the artist has negotiated in relationship to the physical footprint of the gallery. The dispersal of the forms across the site is formally linked to phenomena of accrual and multiplication common in the natural landscape. The repeating units also offer refractions of the surrounding environment and its visitors framed in the mirrored facets of the solids, which act like prisms distributing light in a theatrical staging of the forms. The resulting installation balances between sculptural, pictorial and performative concerns—both carefully laid rock garden and hall of mirrors.

In the original engraving, Dürer's hypothetical solid enjoys play amongst a packed crowd of both fantastic forms—an angel, a number table, a dragon—and practical ones—a compass, an hourglass, a ladder, keys and a moneybag. Yet even these hard tools carry highly malleable symbolic potential. It is

perhaps the tension between abstraction and the quantified reality with which Dürer's melancholic protagonist, a winged female personification of geometry, wrestles. According to the classical definition, geometry is the study of numbers in space, a description that has direct applications in the arts, where questions of ratio, proportion, composition, scale, form, surface and space have traditionally governed. In Rude's installation, the formal arrangement of shapes maps out the dimensions of the gallery. Each cluster floats atop a flat square of black mirror. While more rigidly geometric than the natural equivalent of a reflecting pool, these flats still invoke the myth of narcissus, which again brings the installation into conversation with Dürer's print, in which the vanitas symbol of a skull is barely discernible on one of the facets of the solid. Indeed a sense of the futility of the pursuit of terrestrial knowledge pervades this image, which has been commonly interpreted as portrait of the plight of the artist. In Rude's rendition the lively light filled room is less dour by comparison, yet the material itself proves the axiom that all that glitters is not gold, for in fact the glow relies on the reflective properties of polished brass anodized aluminum. In a demonstration of the economics of rarity, aluminum was in the mid-1880s more valuable than gold because of the difficulty of extracting it from its ore. The situation was reversed once this scientific puzzle was resolved and we now find aluminum in elements as disposable as soft drink cans and bottle caps. The use of artificial gold in Rude's installation prompts association with the pop cultural distillation of the hip hop slang "bling" to denote luxury, high living and ostentatious displays of wealth which has now morphed into the mainstream embrace of styles of conspicuous consumption.

Numbers surround us—whether in the chromatic and musical scales, the shaping of the page in books, the proportions of human anatomy, or the systems and patterning of architecture. The golden ratio is but one rule of proportion that has fascinated artists for centuries. From Da Vinci's *Vetruvian Man* to Le Corbusier's *Modulor*,

artists have used the human body as a unit of measurement. Rude follows in this legacy, considering the forms of the viewers reflected in the mirrored solids to be part and parcel of the installation, their bodies reproducing the ratio that also underpins the construction of her solids. The numbers equivalent to the geometric principle of the golden section is the Fibonacci series, which frequently underpinned artistic investigations by Mario Merz. In the image series *Untitled (A Real Sum is a Sum of People)* he visually demonstrates the principle by filling tables in a restaurant with a number of guests matching the sequence 0 1 1 2 3 5 8 13 21 34 55. Merz has said of his involvement with the Fibonacci numbers: "I did not understand why a work of art had to be a certain length when it could be infinite. (...) In the Fibonacci series, there are no spatial limitations because space becomes infinite—not abstract infinity, but biological infinity." The progression visible in the Merz photographs is the growth of a social body tied to an event. The opening reception for Rude's exhibition will likely demonstrate such an accrual of bodies in the finite space, creating its own rhythm and pattern. Amongst her aspirations for this installation is that it channel visitors in a pathway that encourages the direct association between their own roving bodies and that of the presented solid geometric forms. The social phenomenon of the art exhibition carries its own natural properties—peak and slow periods, traffic patterns, maximum and minimum density, jams, overloads and downtimes. Human perception is bounded by set physical and time scales such that some phenomena are either too large (geologic time) or too small (molecular geometry)—to be observed. In Rude's *The Golden Solid*, we are presented with forms scaled to our immediate perception and confined to a fully navigable space that affirms our own physical ratios and relation to interior architecture. The age-old question remains as to whether the tangible object before us is a sampling of a larger design. Shifting the focus of a theoretical drawing into the physical manifestation in three-dimensional space and leaving these to the action of the fourth

dimension of the time of exhibition, Rude offers a configuration of forms that foster sustained contemplation.

**SARAH ROBAYO SHERIDAN** is an independent writer and curator specialized in the dissemination of contemporary art. She has worked in non-profit galleries, museums and festivals and taught curatorial studies at the University of Toronto. Her writing has appeared in magazines, anthologies and artists' monographs and her independent research has received recognition from the Canada Council for the arts. She holds an MA Curatorial Practice from the California College of the Arts.

**JADE RUDE** studied social theory in Norway, Art and Design in England, and graduated from the Alberta College of Art. She works in a variety of media including sculpture, installation, photography, and video. Through a variety of perception-shifting tactics, Rude aims to disrupt our familiar responses to certain objects and in doing so, force a re-consideration of our relationship to the material world. Her strategies are deliberately playful even though they test the very boundaries between visual perception and physical presence. In addition Canada, including a group show at MOCCA, Rude has exhibited in the US, England, Japan, Australia, Columbia, and at MAMBA in Buenos Aires. Most recently she participated in a residency at SVA, New York. Rude currently lives and works in Toronto.

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