

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

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ALAN SARET: ALLIES

by Greg Lindquist



Installation view, Alan Saret: *Allies* at Karma Gallery. April 21 - June 4, 2022. Courtesy Karma.

While a mutation in the human body can emerge as cancer, a mutation in human-generated coding manifests as a sort of consciousness, a computer programmer recently explained. The subject of Alan Saret's exhibition *Allies* at Karma is largely the various mutations of wire into sculpture and his specific yet assorted vocabulary of materials—gauges of thicknesses, coloration endemic to metals, and the resulting oxidation from their exposure to humidity and environmental conditions. While these anti-form structures resemble the material world of organisms such as coral, birds' nests, or snarls of human hair, they at the same time peculiarly evoke neural networks and the accretions of points in data visualizations, predictions, and modelling.

Alan Saret rose to prominence in the late 1960s in his early 20s with notable shows at Bykert Gallery (a review by Emily Wasserman in *ArtForum* compared the work, some remade for this Karma exhibition, to Jackson Pollock), and was included in the 1990 Postminimalist exhibition *The New Sculpture 1965-75*—featuring Eva Hesse, Robert Smithson, Richard Serra, Barry Le Va, Lynda Benglis, among others—at the Whitney Museum of American Art. In the catalog, Robert Pincus-Witten, the authorial voice at the time of its inception, curiously described Postminimalism as an “expressionist movement of painterly issues” that signaled “a revival of gestural Abstract Expressionist attitudes,” while at the same time its “organizational principles derived from information-centered theories of knowledge... from epistemology.” In this sense, Pincus-Witten reframed Postminimalism within the dematerializing shift of Postmodernism in the 1990s, arguing for theory and process to dictate a form in which “art and language grew interchangeable.”

Fast forward to 2022: social media as neoliberal hubs for data extractions, cultural predictions of consciousnesses in artificial intelligence, Alan Saret's exhibition in the East Village concurrent with a Covid-19 mutation surge. *Allies* surveys work from 1969 to present and is remarkable in how consistently Saret has approached form, process, and material for more than 50 years. The way in which he has shaped the wide variety of metal wire—stainless steel, galvanized hex steel, magnet, brass, Teflon-coated—is wowing, as is the requisite manual dexterity to fashion some into airy forms, others into dense masses.

In the main gallery, the instinctive placement of works demonstrates how much the forms depend on the white box of the gallery for intelligibility, sharing more with Minimalism in their overall restrained monochrome palette and geometric undergirding structures. *Flame Aura* (1986, 2005)—a knee-high accumulation of curled magnet, brass, and stainless-steel wire petal-like loops—leans sideways, a disoriented plant drifting towards light or magnet to metal. Less physiologically visceral and more imagistic is the smaller *Soaring Sailing Mountain* (1988), evoking the shape of smoke levitating and the many identical polyps in marine invertebrates such as coral. Like its poetic yet literal title whose description tends to limit associations of its ambiguous form, this work is wispy and wistful, delicate and dense. Works that tower over the body are most commanding, such as *Zinc Cloud* (1967, remade 1990) evoking a crashing wave and *Blazing Be* (2008) a raging bonfire. Though largest, they by contrast and contradiction are the most ethereal and least dense.

Radar charts—also known as spider charts, web charts, or spider graphs—are commonly used to map sports players' weaknesses and strengths, as well as a variety of data visualizations, especially the performance of multivariable datasets. While Saret's sculptures don't look like literal radar charts, they behave similarly in their organic growth, free-flowing clusters, and spiraling configurations. In form, his sculptures resemble the never-ending patterns of fractals that often comprise data structures.

The radar chart was invented in 1877, and its predecessor, the coxcomb, was invented in 1856 by English social reformer and statistician Florence Nightingale. While the ability to visually arrange data has been with us for more than a century, its speed is now like a particle accelerator. To be clear, I'm not arguing that the visual appearances of data and its modelling dictates or motivates Saret's wire sculptures, but rather that our contemporary culture of data consumption provides a compelling lens through which Saret's work reflects our technological milieu. Yet, if we interpret Saret's looping wire nodes as data points, then perhaps in a persistent Postmodern perspective everything is language and data.

In the end, Alan Saret's sculptures have less in common with Donald Judd than with Jackson Pollock. In his 1966 essay "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," Robert Smithson admits that in Pollock "one may find traces of the biological metaphor," but in a footnote slams the biomorphic as formalist criticism and "simply a critical mutation based on the misunderstanding of metaphor." Just as Pollock's webs of skeins and drips may be read as both biomorphic and informational arrangements, Saret's sculptures bend to our own perspectives for meaning.