

## eye vibes by David Cohen

Bruce Pearson at the Museum of Modern Art, May 14-June 30, 1998 and at Nicholas Davies Gallery, June 2-July 2, 1998.



*Love Doesn't Always Have  
to Go Wrong...*  
1997



*Love Doesn't Always Have  
to Go Wrong...*  
(detail)



*No Car No Job No Life* 1995



*No Mandala* 1995

The view from the sixth floor exercise studio where I work out at Broadway at 72nd Street is filled to the bursting with Beaux-Arts sumptuousness. Excluding sky and ground and receding at an angle to the ubiquitous city grid, this fabulous tableau is a gaudy, dense overload of brick, masonry, ironwork, statuary. To the gymnastic viewer, suspended upside down in some Francis Bacon-like frame contraption (the studio follows the Pilates system) and gyrating back and forth, the architectural details mush together, disengaged from any established decorative order, forming an abstracted all-overness. Nestled between two apartment buildings, however, is an advertising slogan, interjecting bright, crystalline meaning to this jungle of effect: "Depression is a flaw of chemistry not character," it announces, giving a phone number with the implicit offer of pharmaceutical release.

This strange mixture of facade and relief, decoration and semiotics, the inversion of order, is all good preparation for the work of Bruce Pearson, who is included in the current group show in the Projects Room at the Museum of Modern Art. I thought of my private "ready-made" landscape when I first saw Pearson's weird psychedelic reliefs in his Williamsburg studio back in the fall. His pieces actually use wacky lines and slogans appropriated from the mass media which in turn serve as his titles, but my little "flaw of chemistry" number is unlikely to cut much of a figure to a man who goes in for the likes of "Something that seems to symbolize in quotes reality" and "Another nail in the coffin of objectivity," not to mention "Violence and profanity supernatural strangeness and graphically rendered sexual situations." These are all titles of pieces in the MoMA show. Curated by Lilian Tone and Anne Umland, this cogent and sexy little exhibition also includes Karin Davie, Udomsak Krisanamis and Fred Tomaselli.

Unlike the ad in my West Side cityscape, the semiotic in a Pearson is organically wedded to its defining form. One has to be told it, but his compositions are made from fantastically contorted renderings of a given phrase. The letters are stretched beyond legibility and -- in some works -- the sentences are mirrored vertically and horizontally like a folded cut-out paper doily. Text is then given texture when the linguistic motif is carved into Styrofoam. Actually, what I observed on my studio visit is a mind-bogglingly meticulous process whereby each letter is separately cut (with a hot wire) and built up in layers like the strata of a geologist's contour model. The final stage of production is the painting, as fiddly and concentrated, it would seem, as the plotting and



*Another Nail in the Coffin  
of Objectivity*  
1997



*Wanna Be Happy -- Be  
Happy*  
1995



*Age of Damage*  
1996



*Die of Pleasure*  
1997

carving had been in their turn. It was appropriate that the Projects Room show partially overlapped with the Chuck Close retrospective at the same museum for Pearson's enterprise is close to Closean in its mind-numbing labor intensity.

For "Closean" it was tempting to have said "Sisyphean," only in Pearson's case (if not Close's) that would be too judgmental. Nonetheless, skill -- as in dexterity concentrated in time and degree -- is a problem for contemporary art appreciation. It has taken us a long painful century to get used to the idea that economy counts for more than effort, that dash takes priority over muscle, to believe, sincerely, that less is indeed more. What are we supposed to do, then, when an artist presents us with the fruit of his or her own, personal, persnickety, crafty fingerwork? Frankly, we shudder with a certain embarrassment. For our delectation an artist -- no less -- has done all THIS? It's as if an honored dinner guest has washed the dishes.

There is a difference, however, between the skill quotient in Pearson and Close. In Close, the photographically derived image is immediate and omnipotent; the fiddly handmade fact of its facture is only gradually realized, and once established merely a cause for prying wonderment. In Pearson, by contrast, the facture meets with some correspondence of slowed-down effort on the part of the viewer. The surfaces, gooey and gaudy though they are, offer the prospect of reward for leisurely regard. Which is a longwinded way of saying that Pearsons might actually be beautiful as well as interesting.

Actually, the first association a Pearson triggered in my mind was with the kind of mindless modernist wall relief that was popular in the 1950s and 1960s, usually knocked out in concrete by the architect rather than any named artist, to lend warmth (as -- modernist taboo -- an afterthought) to an otherwise soulless entrance way or public interior. But then I began to discern some semblance of hierarchy; it wasn't gratuitous texture, there was method in the madness. Before I was told about the texts I began trying to "read" the images, but I saw them rather as maps, as circuit boards, even, with fanciful empathy, as the aerial view of some futuristic organic city. It was then that crescents and H-blocks started to make sense as letters, and I was on the way to Pearson literacy. Funnily enough, during my pre-signifiers phase, when I was still enjoying form for form's sake, I was reminded of Torres-Garcia and early Adolph Gottlieb and their primitive tabulations of pictographs.

Once I was initiated into the secret of Pearson's encoded messages I quickly regressed. I didn't see the point in straining my eyes to decode banal sentences which were there for me, anyway, with a friendly word from the artist (or, at the Modern, from the label). But this didn't -- and doesn't -- inhibit my pleasure in his work. I was able to go back to my primitive fantasies, in some ways actually

enriching those fantasies with my new knowledge. The experience of willfully not-reading while, in my own way, reading, of picking up the vibes of meaning without the meaning per se, can be compared to looking at an image from some culture whose iconography is a closed book to me -- say Tibetan -- without bothering to read long and bewildering explanations or wading through a gazetteer of deities.

A lot of contemporary art has a complicated story behind its facture. The way things are made, and the reason they are made that way, are integral to the work, and the supposed experience of it. There is a "get it" factor. A click in the brain and you move on. Much rarer, and of course more satisfying, is when the conceptual element doesn't circumvent the visual experience but instead conditions it. Of course, the link between facture and effect has to be manifest, otherwise how and why the artist went about making the work is of no more relevance than what he had for breakfast. There is a great moment in Balzac's story, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, in which the master extols the final stroke which brings an image to life. "No one will thank us for what is underneath," Frenhofer tells the young Poussin as he corrects the work of their mutual friend, Porbus.

In our postmodern culture that hardly pertains; where everything is at once surface and symbol -- and remember, Wilde warned us, its equally perilous to remain on the surface as it is to penetrate it -- art is equally what you get and the manifest evidence of how it arrived. Of course, as an art form painted relief is a wonderful tease, sending the eye into oscillation between surface and depth, neither of which yields. Pearson surely knows this. It is with similar acuteness that he sets up oscillations between detail and whole, legibility and texture, image and idea. His art is a kind of simultaneous equation in which the tension between process and result on his part forms an equivalent to these forced oscillations on the viewer's. He keeps the eye busy.

"Projects 63: Karin Davie, Udomsak Krisanamis, Bruce Pearson, Fred Tomaselli," May 14-June 30, 1998, at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10019.

Bruce Pearson is also included in "Wall Paper," June 2-July 2, 1998, an exhibition of works on paper curated by Lisa Jacobs at the Nicholas Davies Gallery, 23 Commerce Street, New York, N.Y. 10014.

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