

Bruce Pearson

Ronald Feldman
31 Mercer Street, SoHo
Through Feb. 10

Bruce Pearson's striking neo-psychedelic paintings first came to light in the mid-1990's. Inspired by melting-word, acid-rock posters of the 60's, Mr. Pearson repeatedly carved single words or found phrases into big plastic-foam slabs, using a heating element. He painted the resulting reliefs in saturated, high-contrast colors, producing zany, optically electric, near-abstract mandalas with subliminal messages that added hints of hallucinogen-induced paranoia.

Mr. Pearson's new work continues in this vein, but rather than developing in wilder and crazier ways, the trend is toward greater refinement and, one fears, a certain conservatism. In "Ecstatic Explosions of Romantic Love," for example, the illegible words of the title create a roughly Cubist field overlaid by semitransparent Art Nouveau-ish shapes. Painted in a lovely palette of powder blue, jade green, raspberry pink and beige, the picture has a tasteful, Impressionistic look that is not unappealing but runs counter to the essentially funky impulse of the artist's enterprise.

Other paintings are more aggressively garish, but then the rectangular format of all Mr. Pearson's works feels restrictive. Why shouldn't his absurdist imagination lead to a more inventive play with painting's conventional boundaries?

On the other hand, in his gouache-on-paper studies, particularly a radiating composition of wavy diamonds and loopy shapes titled "Silenus," Mr. Pearson achieves a near-perfect equilibrium of precision, luminosity and goofiness. It will be interesting to see where he goes from here.

KEN JOHNSON