

Bruce Pearson

Ronald Feldman, through Feb 10 (see Soho).

For the past few years, Bruce Pearson's work has provided a strange mix of attraction and repulsion, sense and nonsense. This time out, in a strong solo show at Ronald Feldman, one of these aspects seems to have intensified. It's just hard to say which.

Pearson begins his process by stretching snippets of found text into sinuous, elongated shapes. He then cuts these shapes into Styrofoam with a hot wire, assembles the separate jigsawlike pieces into large flat panels, and covers them with alternating layers of oil and acrylic (imagine a texture with the dubiously sensuous merit of day-old cake icing). The gallery refers to the works as paintings, but they might also be thought of as sculptural reliefs. Yet despite their ponderous thickness and size (some are up to eight feet tall), there's a dizzying, dancing optical quality to the text-based shapes—which keeps your eye, and mind, buzzing over the surfaces.

For my money, the more abstract the compositions, the better. *Silenus* is a large, orange-red monster of a "canvas" that has glyph-like shapes resembling molten pelvic bones. The equally massive *My Planet Wants Me Dead* features flesh-col-

ored, vaguely ominous shapes (think of '40s-era Arshile Gorky) that look like so much flayed cartilage floating in space. Works like these free the viewer from reading them on a literal level. Instead, the embedded words take on rhythmic, linear hum, like the patterns that sounds make on an oscilloscope's screen.

It's been said that language is something so ingrained in humans that we simply can't hear a word or see a letter without immediately "reading" it, instantly forming conceptual associations in our minds. Maybe Pearson is trying to find a way to cut that synapse and break down the rapid-fire reaction into something more intuitive, more poetic and purely formal. It's a funny but ultimately profound sort of surgery. As he pummels and stretches words beyond recognition, he proves that they are still bound to leave their rippling effects on the world.

—Sarah Schmerler



Bruce Pearson, *Hope and Comfort from the Other Side*, 2000.