

BETWEEN OBJECT AND IMAGE
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What is at stake in the contemporary re-engagement with abstraction? And how do we understand the work of Anthony Pearson, who creates apparent abstractions by exploiting flaws in the camera apparatus (in the pictures of light leaks) and by photographically recording and transforming series of hand-made drawings into solarized prints? Although Pearson trained in photography and continues to work with the photographic apparatus, his work operates in an ambiguous space. Although his practice is grounded in “the subtle and tactile nature” of the medium and its materiality,¹ photography per se is no longer his context. Instead, Pearson uses photography to do something else, something that borders on painting and even sculpture — and it makes sense that in recent years he has indeed expanded his practice to include overtly sculptural works.

One way into this project is offered by the group exhibition *Alex Hubbard, Charlemagne Palestine, Anthony Pearson and Jon Pestoni* held at China Art Objects in the spring of 2009, which included two of Pearson’s solarized silver gelatin prints alongside Jon Pestoni’s abstract paintings and an Alex Hubbard tabletop video. The exhibition was anchored by Charlemagne Palestine’s *Dorian Sweep* (1973), a peculiar mixed media work where five wiggly bands of fabric scarves meander across a large wall painted bubblegum pink, accompanied by a drone-like electronic composition that played on a CD player mounted above. The piece, both object and painting, had only been exhibited once before, at an exhibition at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York in 2003. Palestine’s little-known work evoked aberrant and less

explored strands of post-minimal art, lesser-known paths entangled with drone music, process art, everyday materials and even craft-based practices: a kookier, more sensuous trajectory that, among other things, suggests the possibility of weirder, less heroic versions of gestural abstraction as still viable in the present — contaminating formalism, as the press release proposed, with the emotions and materials of the present.²

In this context, Pearson's framed prints hovered between painting and photography; at first glance, it was not even clear what they were, since viewers might have taken them for monotypes. Small and intimately-scaled, to be approached closely, their shimmering surfaces invite open-ended contemplation and projection; they are dense and opaque fields that we physically and emotionally invest ourselves in. Spatial relations, or relations of figure and ground, oscillate. Seemingly hand-drawn marks, like a crisscrossing field of black lines, alternately read as pigment applied onto a surface and as dark gouges or scrapings. As has become Pearson's practice, the small painterly photographs were made by photographing hand-made drawings, and then solarizing the photographic paper to create unique prints. Although photographs, they are not really images, but objects: small, precise objects whose uniqueness forcefully disavows photographic replication.

At times, Pearson's solarized prints recall the work of Aaron Siskind, whose photographs of glyph-like markings on flat surfaces — walls of peeling paint, corroded metal, torn posters — recall the formal vocabulary of abstract expressionist painting. Like Siskind, who flattened the photographic picture plane to push everyday objects and surfaces toward abstraction, Pearson

transforms mundane materials — ink on aluminum foil, tape, paper, spray paint, studio walls — into strangely otherworldly pictures. Yet these are not simply photographs of already flat surfaces, but works that revel in opacity and flatness, and that appear — in scale and tonality — almost like bookplates.

Despite certain surface resemblances, one is struck by Pearson's divergence from the types of work that are usually grouped under the rubric of "photography and abstraction." Relying on darkroom processes and overt historical referencing, such projects tend to be more reliant on a kind of discursive propping, presenting abstract images as documents of a process — such that large color photograms, for instance, become markers for the global circulation of goods or art historical concepts of indexicality. Although nonrepresentational, such images take on meaning by referencing terms and discourses that we already know; they are saturated with reference.³ With Pearson's work, it's not really necessary to know how it is made, and the images don't exist to illustrate a process or set of ideas. Instead, he is closer, personally and artistically, to an artist like Barbara Kastan who understands her work to be a kind of sculpture made through photography. And in their oscillation between abstraction and representation, they also recall the early aluminum foil photographs of James Welling, which used overexposure and other darkroom techniques to push the medium towards open-ended associations.

Like some of the contemporary painters who are his friends and colleagues, Pearson explores abstraction as a set of conventions that are useful precisely because they are outmoded, old-timey and even a bit embarrassing. In his photographs

since 2006, Pearson can be seen to draw on a range of historical models, from abstract expressionism to 1960s hard-edge painting to more calligraphic renderings. Yet these are not just styles to be recirculated and quoted, but formal languages that can somehow be made to work in the present. Of course, Pearson's works are in some sense simulations of abstraction, works that cite and replicate prior languages of abstract art, and that employ them as signs. Pearson is clearly not committed to any specific formal vocabulary here; instead, he trawls through neglected undercurrents of modernism, searching for beauty in the dustbin of history. Such use is knowing, but not cynical: it is less about a model of citationality or appropriation than about finding "hidden reserves" or aesthetic potentials that might continue to propel art forward.⁴ After all, the autographic mark as an expressive bodily gesture is totally old-timey—and yet also timeless. It still works in the present, even if we also know that it is a historical trope.

Pearson speaks unabashedly of his desire "to make something peculiar and special"⁵ that he would covet or wish to collect. Yet this condition is understood not as occurring outside a culture of mechanical reproduction, but paradoxically within and in relation to it. Pearson is a vinyl collector, who for years supported himself by buying and selling obscure records, finding unknown "classics" amidst all sorts of genres. He talks about wanting to create in his works the authenticity and intensity of these "beautifully obscure records," to imbue his works with intention and a feeling that is not simply an overlay of discourse but a rich material artifact: photography that is not a surrogate for a concept or narrative, but that holds this intensity within itself.

While working in proximity to painterly practice, Pearson self-consciously stakes out a position diametrically opposed to the spectacular large-scale color photographs of the 1990s, works that were, in his words, “locked in a losing battle with painting.”⁶ Instead, in a 2007 statement, he called for “a more immediate, primary or physical method of practice when it comes to the medium” of photography.⁷ In a complex series of moves, Pearson paradoxically dislodges his own practice from photography by unearthing painterly and sculptural potentials within photography.

Pearson’s work moves surprisingly between two-dimensional and three-dimensional processes and materials that propel each other in unexpected ways. His earliest solarizations were made by photographing a corner of his studio that had been covered in foil, in effect using the architecture of the room to forge an abstraction. The combination of a reflective material and the partial reversal of tones produced by solarization confuses spatial relations and flattens the visual field. Nothing is what it seems, as the resulting pictures resemble graphic compositions or drawings. Whether through solarization or under- and over-exposure, Pearson’s photographs make it hard to distinguish between drawn marks, scratches, gouges, and marks created by the development process itself. A constant shifting of perception between surface and depth also occurs in the white opaque prints that Pearson makes by scanning the backsides of the foil sheets used to make his drawings, revealing the scrunches, scratches and indentations amidst a monochrome field.

While it derives from photography, Pearson’s play between two and three dimensions becomes most palpable in his use of the

relief, a seemingly archaic form that combines object and image, being both sculptural and three dimensional, yet also frontal and pictorial. While his previous bronzes appeared in arrangements with photographs, the recent bronze “tablets” — small relief-like bronze casts of folded forms, and crisscrossed or stroke-like lines — hang on the wall and appear as surrogate pictures. No longer dependent on the pedestal, these sculptures occupy the same space as the photographs and operate in the same indeterminacy between picture and object, and between representation and abstraction.

This complex formal indeterminacy results from Pearson’s characteristic way of working, which usually begins with a hands-on studio practice but then distances or mediates that through photography or through casting. Photography becomes a way to reframe painting, to freeze it and hold it up at a distance, to translate it into a new medium. Pearson notes, “I like that I can use a representational medium (photography) to forge an abstraction. Not the material of photography (for example a photogram) but the actual lens picturing a nonrepresentational image.” In addition, the act of photographing turns a slight and ephemeral drawing into a thing, into an object with permanence and presence: “When I picture one of my drawings with the camera it is a bit of a reification for me. It makes something so inanimate take on an energy because it is made up of two things that do not belong together. The representation and the abstraction do not usually get collapsed on top of each other like that. It just comes across beautifully odd to me.” And indeed, a strange energy and ambiguity comes from this discrepancy.

For Pearson, photography also provides a means of collecting and archiving, and of standardizing and leveling, these spontaneous moments of gestural expression. Pearson notes that, although “I am not committed to any particular form or attitude” of painterly abstraction, “I am committed to the photograph in its scale and process and paper stock,” explaining: “It’s like having a record collection with many different kinds of music or a library full of many different kinds of writings. They all fit on a shelf together but are all a world in and of themselves.”

This archival analogy reveals how the dialectic between two types of processes — one gestural and painterly, the other photographic and reproductive — intersects with a deeper structural tension between an ongoing serial practice and the unique individuality of the works. Curiously, rather than using photography to proliferate unique drawings, Pearson does nearly the reverse: using photography to freeze and individualize a ceaseless proliferation of drawings. Pearson makes a lot of prints, which he then sorts and selects, pairs together and arranges, working like a collector or connoisseur to orchestrate specific groupings and placements. The initial studio practice is rough, erratic, and process-driven, and much of the “art” comes from this secondary process of culling and selecting. The actual “drawings” don’t necessarily look like much; they are incidental to the larger process, and they exist only to produce the photographs, which are the unique auratic works.

Yet these unique prints take on their meaning as individual iterations of a larger practice, understood as ongoing, as “an endless series.” Presented and arranged differently in different contexts, they are “always meant to appear as a singular and continual

body of work.” Pearson’s attention to spacing and display is paramount. The small 6×4.5 inch prints are placed in considerably larger frames and surrounded by large white borders. These frames are specific and integral to the work, as they serve to fix and preserve the photograph, to suspend it in a larger field, just as the photograph preserves and fixes the prior drawing.

Over and over, Pearson’s practice moves back and forth between apparently polarized positions: the handmade and the mechanized, the gestural and the automated, the aleatory and the ordered, the single image and the series. As Pearson remarked in an earlier interview: “There is something about the idea of permutation and anomaly that is very essential to this process. At one moment I can emulate Helen Frankenthaler from the 70s, and the next go into something more crude and frenetic, but the end result is simply a frontal photograph of a temporal artwork. The regulated print size and the process of solarization suppress anomaly and flatten a free and immediate gesture into a very rigid, formatted image.”⁸

Yet, what is this space for the gesture, for the gestural, that seems to promise access to bodily and subjective expression, and yet then blocks it, by translating it through the photograph? How do we understand Pearson’s bifurcated practice, which is very process-based, material and expressive, and yet which then introduces a procedure of fixity and control? Why is it necessary to *mediate* this studio practice, to distance it via photography, or via casting?

To elucidate what may be at stake in the contemporary re-engagement with abstraction, one set of terms can be drawn from

Benjamin Buchloh's recent essay on the work of Eva Hesse, in which Buchloh proposes a provocative typology of drawing, arguing that "Ever since Cubism (if not before), one of the principal dialectical oppositions in the medium of drawing has been between the authentic corporeal trace and the externally established matrix."⁹ Against a prevailing modernist model of drawing as bodily mark and libidinous flow, Buchloh diagnoses what he terms the "diagrammatic order" of drawing — a disciplinary order representing not "unfettered subjective expression" but subjection to insurmountable regimes of pervasive and microscopic control that suffuse every aspect of our lives, including our unconscious thoughts and urges. Providing "a dissenting voice to the heroic chorus of abstraction" championed throughout twentieth-century utopian modernisms, the far more dystopic model of the diagram serves instead the "purposes of spatio-temporal quantification, surveillance and registration."¹⁰

The diagrammatic, in Buchloh's view, is a visual emblem of constraint, one that correlates with a historical experience of bodily life, and psychic and libidinal life, as already ruled and regulated, as already inscribed within complex and over-determined cultural regimes. In such a matrix, no freely generated gesture or action is ever truly possible — as even the most deft and fluid autographic stroke merely traces over long and over-determined histories of such mark-making. For Buchloh, since the early twentieth century, drawing has been torn between submerging itself in such readymade matrices and continually attempting to articulate residues of autonomous subjective experience.

This dichotomy between gesture and constraint illuminates Pearson's ongoing practice, which revolves around a productive

oscillation between the subjective and objective operations of the recorded image, and a continual intersection of the bodily and the recorded. Already, in his works from 2010, the register of drawing has shifted somewhat. If the mark-making in Pearson's earlier works felt freer and looser, the recent works appear more architectural and schematic: we can feel the artist lay down lines, and allow them to build up something that becomes more structured and premeditated — and yet which then produce not predetermined structures or diagrams but new fields of marks. Rather than being torn between gesture and diagram, Pearson uses these orders to generate one another. Rather than suppressing autographic anomaly, the photographs amplify singularity to a radical graphic extreme.

Pearson's "transmissions" (2010) replicate and analyze an image in three dimensions. Each sculpture comprises three steel screens, mounted in a cement base, and arranged in a towering frieze-like array. The jagged linear forms resemble scattered sticks or some sort of broken architectural diagram. Cut from half-inch steel plates using CAD technology, the thin black bands appear light and delicate, as if suspended in air. The sculptures' size allows us to walk around the forms, to navigate them bodily, and observe their jumble of jagged fragments from up close and far away, to look up and look down. Then, from one precise frontal viewpoint, we see the forms line-up and turn into an image — reproducing one of Pearson's small solarizations. The process is uncanny, like manipulating screens or transparencies to watch an image suddenly register, and it is disorienting to see delicate hand-drawn marks replicated in large scale and in such a rigid and solid material. Yet, as we move, this moment of totalization is only temporary, and the screens again become fragments,

unhinged from this pictorial schema, dissolving into lines and angles and shards of metal.

In works like these, and in the recent tablets, we see Pearson's practice come full circle. Sculptural processes that emerged from working with photography come back around, and in a sense produce images. By embedding the unique hand-drawn mark into the photograph, Pearson in effect folds the gestural into the diagrammatic — even, in the transmissions, using these gestural compositions as templates for objects in space, objects which then flatten and pictorialize, albeit into apparent images that exist only in the momentary sightlines of a standing viewer: from drawing to photograph to sculpture and back to drawing. These moves recall moments from mid-century modernism, like the flattened shapes of David Smith's sculptures that form and deform as we walk around them, yet Pearson brings these tropes into the present by foregrounding the role of photography, and delving into the messy and generative relations between two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms. At a time when any number of crucial art historical models — from the readymade to Warhol to conceptual art — have become overly canonized and nearly exhausted, Pearson's art explores other paths, pursuing the undercurrents of weird process-based post-minimal practices, and engaging the legacies of modernism by continually skewing and deforming them.¹¹

Notes

1. This quote appeared in a statement that Pearson wrote in 2007 for an exhibition he organized: Anthony Pearson, "Material Photographs" (press release), Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago, January 7 – March 25, 2007.
2. The choice of *Dorian Sweep* (by the exhibition's uncredited curator, Jon Pestoni) also put into historical context a whole line of recent painting (such as that of Jutta Koether) that aims to activate painting or render painting performative by accompanying it with music, painted walls, theatrical lights, etc. For a description of this more recent trajectory, see David Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself," *October* 130 (Fall 2009), pp. 125–134.
3. For diverse takes on this phenomena, see the discussions and debates collected in Alex Klein, ed., *Words Without Pictures* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2009).
4. To draw on the terms of Achim Höchdorfer, in his insightful discussion of contemporary painting in relation to certain unexplored legacies of the early 1960s; see Höchdorfer, "A Hidden Reserve: Painting from 1958–1965," *Artforum* (February 2009), pp. 152–59.
5. Unless otherwise credited, all comments from Anthony Pearson come from conversations and emails in September, October and November, 2010.
6. Pearson, "Material Photographs" (press release), Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago, January 7 – March 25, 2007.
7. Ibid.
8. "Interview with John Rasmussen and Anthony Pearson," *Anthony Pearson: Solarizations* (Minneapolis, MN: Midway Contemporary Art, 2009) p. 62.
9. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Hesse's Endgame: Facing the Diagram," in Catherine De Zegher, ed., *Eva Hesse Drawing* (New York: The Drawing Center and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) p. 117.
10. Buchloh, p. 119.
11. My thanks to Anthony Pearson, for discussing his work with me, and to Evan Holloway, Alex Klein, Brandon Lattu and Jon Pestoni for conversations that helped focus and develop my thoughts.