

Roniger, Taney, "Anthony Pearson," *The Brooklyn Rail*, Artseen, July 9, 2013



ARTSEEN

## ANTHONY PEARSON

by Taney Roniger

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Most works of art call attention to themselves by the success or failure of their internal logic—by the degree to which their constituent elements cohere to form a meaningful whole. Occasionally, however, one finds works whose internal demands extend beyond the confines of the frame or pedestal to encompass their entire context, including not just the viewer, but every minute detail of their spatial surroundings, which, in an exhibition of many works, necessarily includes all of the others. Such is the logic of Anthony Pearson's exhibition at Marianne Boesky Gallery, and the result is an arresting show that bears all the precision, elegance, and economy of a mathematical statement.

In the first, and smaller room of the gallery, the viewer is met by four works lining the gallery's walls: three framed plaster relief works and one smaller bronze relief sculpture. The former—what the artist calls his "Plaster Positives" (all works untitled, all 2013)—are all-white abstractions in which dense flows of a lava-like substance are frozen in various organic configurations that occasionally threaten to spill out over the works' pristine white frames. Chalky and matte, the surfaces are so sensitive to light that one is acutely aware of every pock, wrinkle, and fold in their dramatically varied surfaces. In counterpoint to these extroverted pieces, the single bronze relief coils inward, a tightly contained bundle of solid organic matter bound by a shiny



Anthony Pearson, "Untitled (Plaster Positive)," 2013. Pigmented hydrocal in walnut frame, 69 3/4 × 45 3/4 × 4". Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York.

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black shell. It is a curious arrangement, this asymmetrical grouping, and the sense of intrigue prepares the mind for what is to come.

In the gallery's capacious main room, two more "Plaster Positives" and six variously surfaced bronze "Tablet" sculptures are punctuated by two small black and white photographs and one towering triptych of framed digital prints. Surprisingly, it is not the seamless co-existence of the divergent media that is most striking, but rather the palpable sense of syntactic "rightness" that issues from the arrangement and the role played by the carefully calibrated spaces in between the works. Before we even think to approach any one object for inspection, it is clear that these works are to be understood first and foremost in terms of the interrelations between them and the structure of the whole. Entering the space, one has the sense of walking into a symphonic conversation whose overall rhythm and cadence is more significant than any individual voice.

Although the works vary widely in scale and medium, they all share an insistence on material presence (something that is emphasized by exquisite craftsmanship), a subdued, earthy palette, and an understated aesthetic stripped to the essential. Another unifying quality is their curiously dual status as both objects and images; hanging on the walls at eye level, the sculptures register equally as pictorial events, while the photographs' pronounced frames and considered placement relative to the viewer's body underscore their objecthood. Evocations of natural processes such as growth and decay, accretion and erosion, are also evident throughout, as is a concern with "fixing the flux" (the very *sine qua non* of photography, in which the artist had his early training). But the strongest unifying thread here is the sense of mystery and wonder that these works exude. The works' linguistic silence is telling; with their refusal of titular description, these pieces encourage a shift away from discursive reason toward deeper, more intuitive reflection, and the effect is a rich contemplative experience.

The show's relational drama peaks when seemingly incongruous works activate a shared pocket of space. On one wall, for example, one of the small photographs—a solarized gelatin silver print with a mysterious abstract composition—is juxtaposed near a tall bronze wall relief. Totemic in form and looming from high above the viewer, the scale of the latter renders the photograph more intimate than inscrutable by contrast, while the enigmatic quality of the small work heightens, by proximal suggestion, the quasi-religious solemnity evoked by its neighbor. Assonances and dissonances such as this, occurring at every scale and within every subset of the whole, create an experience so laden with meaning that one is spared dwelling on questions about the work's facture or the artist's biography or theoretical agenda. What matters here is that rigorous perceptual activity, stimulated by complexity, contradiction, and ambiguity, is rewarded with subtle insights of the kind visual art shares only with music and mathematics.

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The concern with structural order so evident in Pearson's work, combined with the sense of mystery it evokes, raises the possibility that perhaps there is another kind of order being suggested. For all its material presence, this work seems equally grounded in an immaterial realm, such as, perhaps, that which the physicist David Bohm calls the "implicate order"—the unified whole in which all the apparently separate phenomena of the "explicate order" are enfolded. Being both inaccessible to the senses and impervious to the linear logic of verbal reasoning, this hidden order can only be intuited—and this only by a mind attuned to the subtle patterns and rhythms created by tensions between entities. Sharpening this faculty of apprehension is what art does best, and Pearson's work is a strong testament to its power.

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