

Biswas, Allie, "Anthony Pearson: I am seeking an inventive form as opposed to a clearly conventional one," *StudioInternational.com*, January 7, 2016

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Visual Arts, Design and Architecture

### **Anthony Pearson: 'I am seeking an inventive form as opposed to a clearly conventional one'**

**The artist, known for his refined sculptures and reliefs, explains why he moved from photography to sculpture, why he likes flaws and idiosyncrasy to be part of his work, and why he bans artificial light in his studio, stopping work once it gets dark**

by ALLIE BISWAS

With craftsmanship at its core, Los Angeles-based artist Anthony Pearson has created a body of work over the past decade that highlights his acute handling of materials. In particular, the artist is known for his refined sculptures and reliefs that are forged using plaster, bronze, steel and clay.

The works in Anthony Pearson's current exhibition at Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York reveal a specific engagement with gypsum cement, which Pearson tints, and manipulates by hand, using pouring and carving techniques to create the final artwork. Pearson (b1969) received his BFA from the California College of the Arts, and his MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles.

**Allie Biswas: This is your third solo exhibition at the Marianne Boesky Gallery. Your first show with the gallery, in 2009, primarily featured photographs – a medium that you spent many years working with, particularly earlier on in your career. This current show focuses on two bodies of paintings that take the form of cement-formed sculptural reliefs. Could you describe how your practice has developed over the past few years, and how you came to exploring carving and pattern-cutting using cement?**

**Anthony Pearson:** I do not think of the works in the show as paintings. I think of them as surfaces or reliefs. They mostly engage with concerns related to sculpture. While my background is in photography, my work has engaged with sculpture since 2006. My first use of gypsum cement was for objects that became bronze castings. The poured forms and carved reliefs of the early Arrangements were directly passed on to the Plaster Positives and Etched Plasters (which are presented in this current exhibition).

**AB: What do you think instigated this move away from photography?**

**AP:** I got to a place where I found the conversation around photography, especially abstraction and photography, to be convoluted. A lot of the work that was happening in photography, when I emerged, I felt was expressed with more clarity and immediacy in years past, by artists such as Sarah Charlesworth, Robert Heinecken, and Barbara Kasten. I didn't want to engage in a medium-specific conversation that seemed derivative or impersonal. For a while I lost hope in what I could accomplish with photography. This is one of the primary reasons I moved deeper into sculpture. I am now starting to work with photography again in a new series that is representational. This is the first time I have worked in representational photography since 2004.

Biswas, Allie, "Anthony Pearson: I am seeking an inventive form as opposed to a clearly conventional one," *StudioInternational.com*, January 7, 2016

**AB: Would you draw any comparisons between your photographic works and the sculptures?**

**AP:** The surfaces of the plaster pieces and the quality of the material do connect to the magic that first drew me to photography. I find gypsum to be very sensitive to light and haptic in nature. I associate the use of gypsum with the making of a photograph on some distanced level. This relationship is interconnected to the broader language of my work. I transpose one material with another by paying attention to how it reacts to a given treatment. Plaster seems to develop, cure and set in time. It can be tinted and toned. I crop and format the material for presentation. The sequence of images creates meaning. In these ways I consider photography in my use of sculpture.

**AB: What was the process for making the two bodies of work seen in this exhibition, Plaster Positives and Etched Plasters? Do you have any formal training or interest in printmaking or lithographs, and would you even consider these techniques when thinking about your work?**

**AP:** The process for the poured works is evident in their gravitational flow. The process for the etched works consists of building up pattern over time, with each line being hand-cut. This is a very intensive process and very much related to traditional issues of sculpture. My only formal training is in photography and I am self-taught in other media. At this time, I have no interest in printmaking or lithography. This is mostly because I tend not to make work that is concerned with illustration and illusionistic space. I have been making work that is integral in its material and monolithic in nature. I am, however, interested in the potential of using both gypsum and slip cast clay as a material with which to make an impression. This is something I have been privately working on for some time now. This idea concerns painting more than printmaking. I would also like to make a series of small photogravures, which of course is related to photography. Silver-gelatin photography and etched surfaces in general are related to the process of printmaking in a physical sense. I just have no conception of how to deal with the history of printmaking as a medium and its conventions. I am now more often seeking an inventive form as opposed to a clearly conventional one.

**AB: Physically making – with your hands – is critical to your practice. Do you think this is rare among artists now?**

**AP:** I do think it has become less common in recent years, with the exception of painting. Painting is a medium that is still forged by the artist's hand, for the most part. Sculpture less so in recent years. Fabrication has become a primary mode for contemporary artists. I am invested in the studio being the primary site of production. I find this to be the safest and most immediate way to become immersed in what I am doing. I also think this is the best way to embody a sensitivity with regards to the work.

**AB: The technical process of creating a photograph fits into this too.**

**AP:** Yes, I engage this idea in photography as well. I have always been interested in the darkroom as a site of production and engagement with the work. I want to have a singular artwork that comes from a specific method and site of production, so having things made for me is increasingly less interesting.

**AB: Where do you feel these ideas sit in relation to the meditative quality that is often raised in discussions of your work?**

Biswas, Allie, "Anthony Pearson: I am seeking an inventive form as opposed to a clearly conventional one," *StudioInternational.com*, January 7, 2016

**AP:** In order to make work that is contemplative or meditative in nature, it is important to have a practice that exemplifies a degree of commitment and investment with regards to time. If it takes 100 hours to etch a large plaster, the work becomes embedded with the attention of the hand, and it has its own history. Flaws are revealed and idiosyncratic things happen. I like this to be a part of the work, and believe it translates energetically in the work.

**AB: One of the most noticeable aspects of these two series – as well as your practice, in general – is the reliance on monochrome. Are you interested in colour?**

**AP:** With the plaster works, differentiation in colour does exist in the relationship between individual works. Each work appears to be monochromatic yet, in the shadows and highlights, a degree of tone exists. Especially in the works that are stained black – they can actually deliver a high-contrast dynamic. I like the term stardust. It struck me when someone used this term relating to the large black sunburst pieces. This quality of depth is only possible in the darkness of the black surface. In this way the monochromatic treatment is essential in creating the surfaces.

In the smaller etched works, colour, albeit very subtle colour, is used in each element – French grey, slate, bone, ash, pure white, roman black, vine black, midnight blue and other subtle shifts in hue. These colours are derived from natural earth pigments, as well as mineral-based powders such as iron oxide and mica. This leads to extremely subtle colour. The sober and intentional use of desaturated colour, I think, is more apparent to others than to myself. My foundation is in silver-gelatin photography, so I think differently about colour than, say, a painter would. I tend to think about the work in terms of tone. When I am using colour, I am thinking about its potential in regards to subtlety, and questioning what is actually discernible to the eye.

**AB: The images that are created in each work, through the carvings, could be interpreted in many ways – from body parts and objects, to elements from urban and natural landscapes. I suppose this is the whole point of abstract mark-making. Can you talk about what your source materials might be? Do you have objectives in terms of trying to establish specific imagery?**

**AP:** In recent years I have been increasingly drawn to the space between abstraction and representation. This space is often found in the natural world, so the references you see are correct. The body, the Earth and the cosmos are resonating throughout the work. Also, classicism, modernism, architectural detail, and art historical reference are present. The grid is always reappearing. Further out from there are issues of design – proportion, scale relationships, the relationship of the work to the wall and room, as well as the spaces in between. In the arena of design, the knowing quality of the maker becomes evident. Nevertheless, primordial and sublimated memories and feelings seem to be embedded in the forms.

**AB: How are technical processes connected to the final image?**

**AP:** I try to focus on a sensitivity to line weight, surface and a repetition of form. This tamps down the work and condenses it in some way so that the referential qualities seem less important. In my postmodern ideal, all these images, signs and symbols are interchangeable and disposable anyway. The work is then held together by materials and formatting, and less so by images. I tend to work through the images to the preference of the greater structural whole.

Biswas, Allie, "Anthony Pearson: I am seeking an inventive form as opposed to a clearly conventional one," *StudiInternational.com*, January 7, 2016

**AB: The environment that you specifically create within the gallery also holds together the work. This exhibition is the second time that you have worked with the lighting designer Keefe Butler, which draws attention to the way in which your works are viewed. What kind of setting did you want to achieve for these works, in terms of their display in public?**

**AP:** I work in a studio that has only natural light. There is no artificial lighting at all. When it gets dark, we stop working, and after a certain hour there are no visitors. This means the works are only experienced in natural light until the time in which they leave the studio. Because of the uncertainty this brings, I worked to find someone who could help me with lighting at the gallery. Keefe is knowledgeable and highly sensitive. In the case of this exhibition, we lit the works in a way that separated the two galleries both formally and conceptually. The small works in the front gallery were conventionally lit. The large black sunburst works in the main gallery were lit more dramatically using baffles. This established a more cerebral presentation with one type of work, and a more phenomenological presentation with the other. To control the lighting, so that we could have two different treatments, was important to me.

**AB: Working under these strict conditions – where you ban any kind of artificial light – makes me wonder about the role of consistency, in the sense of relying on the same apparatus, whether materials, lighting, and so on. Would you say that using the same structures plays an important part in how your work evolves? You have spoken about your work “operating within the same frequency”. By this, it could be understood that its significance is through its relation to each other, as a whole unit. Would you agree?**

**AP:** Yes, I agree. I am working to make a lineage of artworks that have a thread running through them over time. I am also working with a rather austere set of parameters that create unification through the work. I do this because I want to attempt to create as much self-connoisseurship and ownership as possible. I want to be very clear and very careful when it comes to what constitutes the work. What these objects and images are, and how they function, is what is at stake. The production of art today is beyond simply pluralism. There is so much art made with so many intentions that you often can't tell what it is you are looking at. The circulation of images and the proliferation of artwork have created a crisis of meaning. Only history sorts these things out, yet we also operate in a time that suffers from art historical amnesia in several ways. I feel the only way I can circumvent these problems is by way of hyper-specificity. This approach, of course, leads to what some people simply refer to as a voice, but I think of it more as artistic responsibility.

**AB: Thinking about art historical contexts, as you have just touched on, as well as the importance of natural light to you, I wonder what influence has California had on your work? Do you feel that your work connects to artistic legacies there?**

**AP:** I am from Los Angeles and the things that fascinated me as a child are often what I try to reclaim in my work. The quality of light is one of these things – the way light reflects off the surface of the ocean – and also the moisture in the air. I'm interested in how things are illuminated in the distance through the haze, as well as the horizontality of the city and its openness, contrasted with the dark atmosphere of the canyons and the ambient light that embodies these places. I grew up on a bluff above the Eames House at Santa Monica Canyon, so the ocean and the beach were a big part of my life as a child. I think these kinds of things have historically affected not only artists here, but architects and designers as well.

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**AB: Your father worked in Hollywood as a theatrical agent. Did that scene have any impact on you?**

**AP:** Hollywood frames everything here. Drama and mannerism is a part of the social contract. In a way, this is sad, but it's something you get used to. I reflect this kind of drama and mannerism in my work as well. Presentation and surface is a huge part of my work. I think this kind of thing represents an impossible ideal that can embody both romance and tragedy, and I like that. Yet, this is contrasted with a more earthy quality that California also exhibits.

**AB: How do you think this contrast impacts on artists working there?**

**AP:** Los Angeles is not a place of culture in the same way that New York or Europe is. Artists tend to isolate and work more inwardly here, and this sometimes makes for awkward or even misinformed work. It also allows for a more inventive and weirder kind of practice to be cultivated. In a way that is what I desire – the impossible dream of individuality, and actualising oneself. Of course, all this is changing as more artists and creative people continue to arrive in Los Angeles. Yet these things always go in cycles. Earthquakes, floods, wildfires, economic shifts and social unrest always seem to lead to an exodus out of California, and then the whole cycle begins again. I have seen this happen several times. I have never lived anywhere else, and I just continue to stay here.

*Anthony Pearson's exhibition is at the Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, until 16 January 2016.*