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Forbes

Artist Anthony Pearson Creates An Art Sanctuary In New Exhibit At David Kordansky Gallery

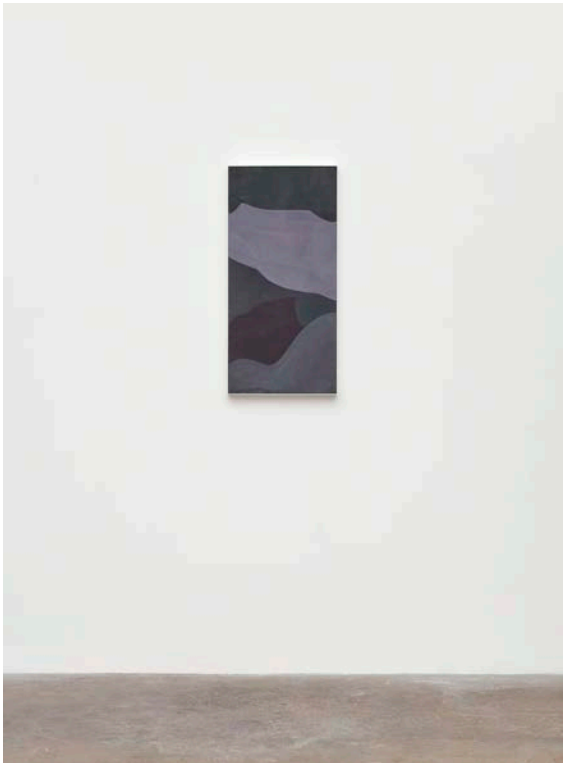
By Adam Lehrer
July 14, 2017

Anthony Pearson, *‘Untitled (Embedment)’* (2017) (detail)

Living in the era of Donald Trump, people try to attach political analysis to all manner of art forms: film, literature, fashion and contemporary art are all viewed through the lens of fascism and demagoguery. Political art can be potent, of course, but it can also be reductive, mere sloganeering posing as fine art. Those kinds of simplistic political art gestures make one long for something more abstract, vague, and contemplative, whether it be the ancient geometric forms of Donald Judd or the opaque and cold beauty of Mark Rothko. Though having little to do with those artists in practice or product, the recent work of Los Angeles-based contemporary artist Anthony Pearson effects the viewer in a similar, subliminal manner. To understand Pearson’s work is to sit with it, contemplate it, and engage with it. His experiments in gypsum and, more recently, hydrocal and etched plaster offer no reward to passive viewers. There is no gratifying easily digestible political slogan, just a deep well of subconscious beauty. His work need not announce itself as important art work, because those that are willing to truly look at it can discern that all on their own. “To me it’s a political act in itself to refuse to make work that is easily reproducible, that isn’t based in pop or blatantly imagistic,” says Pearson. “I’m dealing with surfaces. Not sculpture. Not painting. Not illusionistic space. I’m dealing with textural space where the slowing down of things can be helpful, especially to digital natives that are so absorbed in image-culture. I’m looking for a sanctuary from that kind of experience.”

Pearson’s latest body of work is debuting tonight at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles. This array of works that Pearson calls “The Embedments” finds him stretching a length of cotton fabric in a wooden frame and then pouring over it with layers of liquid hydrocal treated with different pigments to create different hues that form patterns colliding and merging with one another on the canvas. After the material

has set in, Pearson removes the fabric to leave behind the texture of the weave. The result are works that feel painterly but are closer to pieces of sculpture that hang upon walls, forcing the viewer to meditate on the two mediums and consider what constitutes a painting and what constitutes a sculpture. But they are also contemplations on pure, natural beauty. These are not shiny art objects made to stand out at an art fair, they are quiet and breathless works of art that are made to interact with one another in a single space engaging with negative space and light. It’s hard to imagine Pearson’s work appealing to commercial galleries that are always hungry for the next big (read: sellable) thing, and indeed Pearson was turned down by several galleries when he first started showing his art work in the mid-‘00s.



Anthony Pearson, *‘Untitled (Embedment)’* (2017)

But dealer David Kordansky, who as once noted by T Magazine welds “manic enthusiasm” for the often under appreciated artists (that also include the haunting conceptual representational photography of Torbjorn Rodland, the narrative-building multimedia practice of Mai-Thu Perret, and the highly influential post-Fluxus art of John Armleder) that he represents, saw something in Pearson’s approach immediately. Consequentially, the gallery and Pearson have grown in notoriety together, carving out their own space where this market-averse and obtuse approach to the art world could thrive. “My relationship with David has been a long one and a personal one,” says Pearson. “To make work that is so personal and obscure, dark and abstract, and to be involved in the art market through this gallery has been a privilege.”

When you look at these material-based art works that Pearson has been working on for years now, you might be surprised to note that his background is neither in sculpture nor painting. In fact, Pearson is at his core a photographer. And more than that, his background in photography informs everything that he does in contemporary art to this day. Pearson had been a photographer since he shot for his high school year book, but as he emerged as a fine art photographer after receiving a BFA in photography at California College of the Arts and later an MFA at UCLA, he always found himself dissatisfied with the actual images he produced. “You mentioned Torbjorn Rodland,” he says to me. “He creates a space in his photographs that is so peculiar, and strange, and provocative. I could never accomplish that in representational photography. What I loved about photography was alchemical.”

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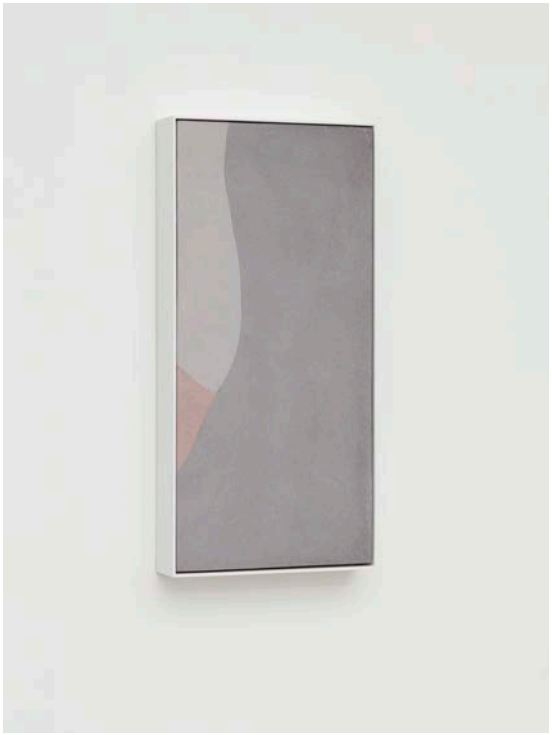
It was the magic of the darkroom that truly enthralled Pearson with the medium. The rush of dipping a piece of film into water and exposing it to light and creating a photograph. As a result, Pearson continuously tried to condense photography down to its most minimal aspects. First he shot portraits, then landscapes with people, then landscapes alone, and then finally boiled down photographs to pure abstractions. Those photographs, or solarized silver gelatin prints, were derived from complex darkroom experiments and processes and slightly echo the photograms of Man Ray or Laszlo Moholoy Nagy or, more recently, the "abstract pictures" of Wolfgang Tillmans. Pearson successfully freed himself from the shackles of the image and illuminated the beauty of experimental chemical techniques. Educated by the iconic fine art photographer James Welling who has always tried to expand understanding of what photography can be, Pearson embraced darkroom production as artistic process. "I felt like the intensity of the real world was never accurately rendered in my photographs," says Pearson. "If the real world is so interesting, how do I create a photograph that does it justice? I need to use the photograph as a material thing."



Anthony Pearson, *'Untitled (Embedment)'* (2017)

It was those process oriented photographic experiments that would lead to Pearson's sculptural work. In his first exhibition with David Kordansky Gallery in 2008, Pearson displayed the gelatin prints alongside bronze sculptures in what he called "arrangements." He immediately detected a relationship between his new sculptural work and his background in photography. In both processes a kind of alchemical control is employed, but ultimately the product that is produced cannot be predicted. This nature of Pearson's work is what excites and ultimately drives him to continue making art. "Developing a photograph in the darkroom is the same as using a bucket of cement with gypsum in it," says Pearson. "I wait for it to materialize and there's a moment where I can go in and then watch it develop. I watch the gypsum harden and turn to stone. It's the same thrill as being a boy with a film camera and watching my photo develop. There's a strong impulse towards that. I like to see something change before me."

Some critics have noted a kind of theatrical quality to Pearson's exhibitions. It is not immediately detectable, but when engaging within his spaces you can start to see interactions between his various objects, the space that they inhabit as well as the negative space, and the light that fills those spaces and illuminates the objects. While as individual objects Pearson's works are beautiful, they are far more

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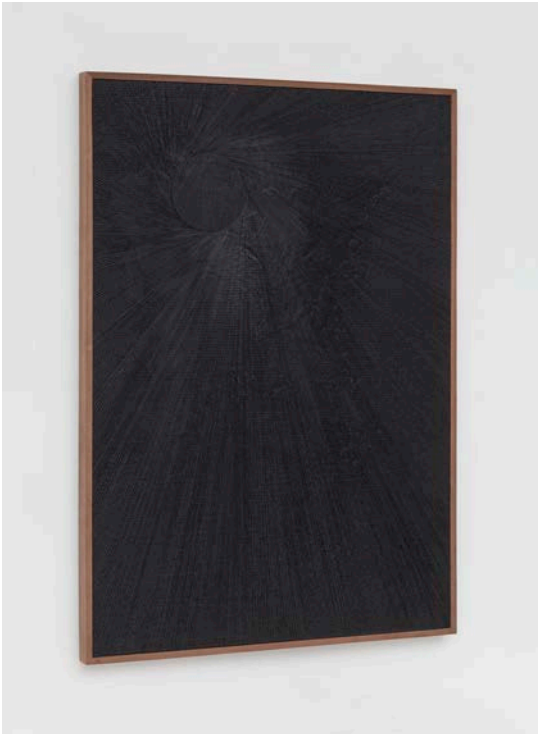

Anthony Pearson, *'Untitled (Etched Plaster)'*

impactful when presented in tandem. Interestingly, Pearson comes from a highly theatrical background. His father was a theater representative who would bring has-been actors that were no longer considered viable in film and television to local theater (fascinatingly, one of those "has-been" actors was the now iconic Buster Keaton, not to mention a plethora of other legends). Pearson was exposed to countless hours of theater. He dined with actors and was inundated in their glamour and was bemused by his father's utter love of film, television and theater. He also grew to absolutely hate it, as teenagers tend to do when their parents force anything down their throats. But after some recent soul searching, he has realized that theatricality has seeped into his sub-conscious mind. No matter how hard he tried to resist it, his father's passion has proved irresistible. In his art work, he can't help but sub-consciously embrace a theatric quality.

"My father was a freak for this stuff," he says. "We'd get to see double features of films before their releases. I saw William Friedkin's Cruising far before it was age-appropriate. Hours and hours of film and theater. I hated it. But I think I took in this notion of theatricality. It was a learned thing on a sub-conscious level. I'm the antithesis of Hollywood and I never go to the movies, but I think I internalized those things that I saw in theater and turn them into static works of art."

But ultimately, Pearson's art work is a reprieve. A reprieve from toxic political discussions and hallow political art sloganeering. A reprieve from easily digestible and entertaining art objects. His work taps into the meditative nature of beauty and worships the sacred practice of art object creation. We need artists like Pearson to remind ourselves what an art object is at its core. "My wife and I love on the ocean," he says. "I realized that looking at the ocean is more interesting than looking at the Los Angeles city scape was at our old place. It's changing. You can see from our bedroom window that the surface of the water and the way the light hits it is different throughout the day, this is the contemplative moment. We have lost the ethereal and the importance of getting aligned with nature and allowing things to reveal themselves over time. Do I think Trump is the worst? Of course. But I want my work to have an earthy, primordial timelessness."

Anthony Pearson opens tonight at David Kordansky Gallery at 6 PM in Los Angeles and will be on view until August 26.