Klein, Alex P., “Anthony Pearson’s Ecologies,” Anthony Pearson, designed by Mark Owens, Los Angeles: Inventory Press, 2019, pp. 39-41, 67-69, 103-105, 141-143, 169

Anthony Pearson’s Ecologies

by Alex Klein

The geography of Los Angeles writes itself across the surface of artist Anthony Pearson’s work. Two miles north of Santa Monica off the Pacific Coast Highway, Chautauqua Boulevard veers right and begins its steep ascent along Rustic Canyon. It is here, as architecture critic Reyner Banham noted in his landmark 1971 study of the city and its four ecologies, “where Los Angeles first came to the Beaches.” “From the garden of Charles Eames’s house in Pacific Palisades,” Banham continues, “one can look down on a collection of roofs and roads that cover the old camp-site to which Angelenos started to come for long weekend picnics under canvas from the beginning of the 1870s.”[1] A century later, in the twilight years of both Eamesian modernism and the New Hollywood, Pearson would grow up just a stone’s throw away.

1
Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), 44.

Living just above Chautauqua, he enjoyed a view of the ocean and would walk past the Case Study Houses at the end of the block. The actor Walter Matthau, best known for playing lovable curmudgeons in comedies like *The Odd Couple* and *The Bad News Bears*, was a neighbor. At home, Pearson’s father owned a talent agency that specialized in managing the careers of faded stars from the days of vaudeville and the silent screen as they worked the regional playhouse and dinner theatre circuit—for the better part of two decades Buster Keaton was a client. Charles and Ray Eames, it is said, chose the site for their 1949 Case Study House No. 8 for the play of light and shadow across the row of eucalyptus trees at the edge of the meadow. Their advance on the Miesian glass box would thus transform early modernism’s transparent,

Eames House interior. Photograph: Antonia Mulas, © 2019 Eames Office, LLC (eamesoffice.com)

Ben Pearson (right) with Buster Keaton at his Woodland Hills residence, 1964

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horizontal view into a prismatic play of frames and reflections organized by the camera viewfinder and the arrangement and rearrangement of everyday objects.[2]

2
Beatriz Colomina, “Reflections on the Eames House,” Alex Coles and Alexia Defert, eds. *De, dis, ex: The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity.* volume two (London: Black Dog, 1998), 128–32.

Too old to be hippies, Pearson’s parents were much closer to the Eames’ generation, and his formative years were shaped less by the influence of the counterculture than by the lingering presence of a certain late-modernist ethos and the showbiz bohemia of an earlier era. His father was an audiophile who kept a stash of 78s in a cabinet. Mother played piano. An uncle in Baltimore collected modern art. Meanwhile, the natural environment of the Palisades was a site of endless childhood discovery, and its earth tones and Mediterranean atmosphere would come to shape an aesthetic sensibility attuned to the dynamic subtleties of the Southern California landscape.

By the mid-1980s, when Pearson was a teenager, the west side of Los Angeles had become the backdrop to a depthless sunshine noir whose petty cruelties, absentee parenting, drugs, and general withdrawal of affect were chronicled in novels like Bret Easton Ellis’ *Less Than Zero*.[3] At Palisades High, the decade saw a rash of car accidents, overdoses, and mysterious deaths just as the city was witnessing the dawn of the AIDS crisis and the arrival of crack cocaine. Seeking an escape from the vacuous hedonism of his peers, for the first time Pearson found refuge in music and art—he took up photography, published a fanzine, and started a band.

3
Brett Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985).

While his brother was skateboarding and listening to Black Flag, Pearson gravitated to post-punk groups like Joy Division, New Order, and the Cure, for whom the utopian, hermetic, and antibourgeois urge of modernism still offered a dark glimmer of transcendence. “I got into art because I grew up in Hollywood

Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, Simon and Schuster, 1985. Cover: George Corsillo

Joy Division, 1979, photograph © Paul Slattery

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with actors and people who wanted attention all of the time," he recalls, "I thought if you got into music or art you could be more of an internal person." From the start, this desire locates Pearson's practice in a meditative mode that connects his work to earlier, more occult strands of West Coast art making.

In particular, we might think of the Beat Generation, jazz, and the work of Wallace Berman and Jay Defeo. Equal parts poet, publisher, and beatnik shaman, Berman used the early Verifax copier to create high-contrast, serial works that explored the graphic possibilities of the mediated image and the mystical potential of the Hebrew alphabet. Like Pearson's *Arrangements*, Berman's sculptural assemblages evoked a dark spirituality, while his so-called "parchment paintings" were described as "poems coming in on the ether," artistic transmissions that united his interests in the Kabbalah and radio technology.[4] After moving to San Francisco in 1957, Berman pursued a more private art practice, self-publishing his poetry magazine *Semina* and exhibiting artworks out of his apartment.

Among these were a series of portraits of DeFeo in her studio in ritualistic poses and standing in front of large-scale works *The Eyes* (1958) and *The Rose* (1958–1966). The latter, a heavily striated, monumental painting-cum-sculpture, was worked and reworked over the course of eight years and occasioned Defeo's near retreat from the art world—it was only when she was evicted that it was deemed "finished." Eight inches thick and weighing well over a ton, *The Rose* could only be moved by demolishing a wall and lowering the crate out the opening with a forklift. Edited to the strains of Miles Davis's "Sketches of Spain," Bruce Connor's film of the removal, *The White Rose* (1967), captures the quasi-mystical quality of the piece, which Connor has described as "almost alive."[5]

4
Ken D. Allan, "Radio-Mastery of the Ether: Wallace Berman, Mysticism, and Meaning in the 1960s," Claudia Bohn-Spector and Sam Mellon, eds. *Wallace Berman: American Aleph* (Kohn Gallery, 2016) 73.

5
"Jay DeFeo's *The Rose*: The enormous painting that was 'almost alive,'" https://www.sfmoma.org/jay-defeos-the-rose-the-enormous-painting-that-was-almost-alive/.

Wallace Berman, *Untitled (Self-Portratit)* c. 1960. Courtesy the Estate of Wallace Berman and Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

Burt Glinn, Jay Defeo painting *The Rose*, 1960. © Burt Glinn/Magnum Photos

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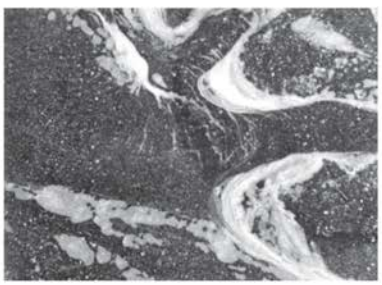
Within modernism Pearson found a form of artistic permission that was at once hermetic, physical, and transcendental. Living in Santa Cruz after high school, he studied black-and-white darkroom printing with masters who had worked for the likes of Ansel Adams and Brett Weston. To support himself he also took a job in Adaptive Physical Education, assisting patients with brain injuries and neuromuscular conditions. This engagement with human bodies connected an interest in lens-based media to the empathic and sensorial, leading to a period of experimentation with portraiture. At the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, where he would receive his undergraduate degree and also meet artist Ramona Trent, he studied with Larry Sultan, Chris Johnson, and Viola Frey. There, exposure to theory and conceptual approaches to photography prompted him to turn a critical lens back on his own upbringing and to produce a series of color portraits of women in his mother’s orbit.

On the strength of this body of work, Pearson was admitted to the UCLA MFA program, and in 1996 he returned to Southern California. He and Trent moved into a modest craftsman in Venice purchased from the children of the beat guru Robert Alexander. The home had been the former site of Alexander’s The Temple of Man and still featured the remnants of an altar reportedly built by Wallace Berman out of charred pieces of the derelict Pacific Ocean Park pier. In its heyday the Temple had been the site of poetry readings, yoga classes, and hot tub weddings.[6] Just around the corner on Abbot Kinney, the Eames had shot their first 16-mm film, *Blacktop*, in 1952, an eleven-minute study of soapy water flowing over an asphalt playground. Scored to Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*, the film united Charles’ interest in cinematic technology with Ray’s painterly love of abstraction.

6
Kate Wolf, “Humanness Always Comes First,” *East of Borneo*, March 14, 2012. https://eastofborneo.org/articles/humanness-always-comes-first/.

Robert Alexander (right) officiating a hot tub wedding in Venice, 1978. Photograph by Lyle Mayer, from *WET Magazine* (May/June 1978)



Film frame from *Blacktop*, a film by Charles and Ray Eames. © 1952, 2019 Eames Office, LLC (eamesoffice.com)

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In the 1990s Venice was both wilder and cheaper. Los Angeles was still recovering from riots and earthquakes, and the old Venice canals were overrun with drugs, prostitution, and gangs. At the time UCLA was one of the hottest art programs in the country, strongly associated with a new breed of sculptors such as Evan Holloway and Liz Craft. In a 1997 profile in *SPIN Magazine*, Dennis Cooper observed, “... if UCLA were a rock scene, it would be Seattle right after *Nevermind* went platinum,” and dubbed it “the world’s top artist-producing machine.”[7] Faculty such as John Baldessari, Lari Pittman, and James Welling provided crucial guidance during these years, but the pressure was intense, and Pearson sought new creative outlets and a more reliable source of income.

7
Dennis Cooper, “Too Cool For School,” *SPIN Magazine* (July 1997) 88.

With the help of a friend Pearson began trading in rare records, coordinating with dealers in the U.S. and Japan to track down and export hard-to-find vinyl sourced from thrift stores and used record shops. Almost immediately, he found he had a knack for the particular kind of connoisseurship and typological thinking the work required. Soon, he and Trent were crisscrossing the country, buying deadstock from distributors and entire collections from retired record producers, engineers, and executives. In the early years of the internet practically all of this business was conducted by mail, fax and phone, but as online auction platforms gained traction competition increased dramatically. Collector’s genres like jazz, blues, and tropicália became increasingly scarce, and Pearson found himself drawn to the more esoteric ends of the musical spectrum. Early electronic music, “private issue” New Age LPs, and recordings by human potential groups like Arica had never been big moneymakers, but they were rare and fun to find, and their zen-like qualities resonated with the more contemplative turn in Pearson’s work.

From *Arica: The Temple Ritual* by Oscar Ichazo, 1978.
© The Arica Institute

Arica Audition, private-issue LP, 1972.
© The Arica Institute

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He describes the photographs he was making during this time as “atmospheric New Topographics.” Eventually, these images of landscapes and architectural silhouettes became more abstract, and as he removed himself further from the UCLA hype machine, Pearson embarked on investigations into form that felt more intuitive. In 2005 he joined up with former classmate Holloway and converted an old typewriter factory on the edge of Echo Park into a raw studio. Working in the space allowed Pearson to begin to open up his approach, engage with new materials, and explore ideas in the round. This period marked a radical shift in his work. Photography was no longer simply a tool to record information from the external world, but was instead employed to mediate private performances and internal experience and as a formal means by which to engage drawing, sculpture, and sound.

At this time Pearson began making what could be considered his first mature body of work, the *Solarizations*. In the studio he began to experiment with a form of material drawing in space. Employing paint, tape, ink, foil, paper, and even fire, he started performing a kind of mark-making on the walls, in the corners, and in a small outdoor area. Once satisfied with these expressive gestures, he would carefully photograph his interventions using black-and-white medium format film. After enlarging the image in the darkroom to 6 by 4½ inches, he would then “solarize” the print, a process in which a white light is flashed on the photographic paper while it is still in the process of developing. The resulting image retains a distinctive graphic quality and metallic sheen that makes it difficult to discern its medium. Framed using large white mats and often displayed in pairs and grids, the *Solarizations* inaugurated a spatialization of form that would transform Pearson’s practice forever.

Anthony Pearson, *West Coast Silhouette*, 2006.
C-print mounted to acrylic in artist’s frame

Anthony Pearson, *Untitled (Solarization)*, 2012.
Solarized silver gelatin print in artist’s frame