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Dominic Molon

SCULPTURE IN A CONTRACTED FIELD:

ANTHONY PEARSON’S TABLETS

In recent years, the critical reception of sculptural practice has quietly and gradually expanded to accommodate presentational formats and sensibilities of a more traditional cast and modest scale. Simultaneously, photography has been characterized by a shift away from pictorial depiction and towards a celebration of material processes and the “objecthood” of the photograph. These parallel developments have mutually signaled a departure from an attitude that has defined an understanding of sculpture since the mid-1960s, when artists such as Robert Morris, Richard Serra, and Robert Smithson began to work in what art critic and historian Rosalind E. Krauss identified as an “expanded field.” Though not exclusive in the movement of sculpture off of the pedestal and into a more expansive use of indoor and outdoor space, these artists set the precedent for what has become the definition of a “critical” sculptural practice—one that responds to and typically expands into the particular dynamics of a given space and determines its own parameters through the manipulation of its given medium. The work of today’s artists is unquestionably and profoundly informed by the sensibilities and approach of figures such as Morris, Serra, and Smithson, yet the impulse towards an occupation of space in a manner that, as Krauss acknowledged, overlaps with architecture and landscape has been tempered in many instances. The pedestal and plinth has returned either as a deliberate allusion to museology, or as a willful reinsertion of the conventional as a once-again viable presentational format. Similarly, a more contracted scale has been prioritized by many sculpturally-oriented artists as a way to achieve a different spatial and physical relationship to the viewer, characterized less by spectacular immersion and more by a sense of “human” intimacy and proximity.

Anthony Pearson’s sculptural practice has developed in parallel and in relationship to his process-oriented and materially-driven photographic work, and synthesizes pre-, high-, and post-modernist approaches to

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the production and presentation of sculpture. The abstract bronze sculptures that he has presented alongside his similarly non-objective photographs are almost hyper-traditional in the casting techniques used to create them and the bases designed for their display. Pearson’s “tablet” works involve a more intuitively hand-crafted method and are disengaged from the pedestal and exhibited on the “pictorial” plane of the wall. This placement, combined with their assumption of a modestly “domestic” scale, encourages a further dialogue with and comparison to the decorative use of modernist abstraction in mid-century modern interior design. Their process-oriented nature of production, however, aligns them more insistently with aesthetic characteristics more closely identified with post-minimalist artists such as Lynda Benglis and Richard Serra, for whom the formal appearance of the work directly correlated to the manner in which its raw materials were manipulated and utilized. Despite their initial appearance as doctrinaire abstract sculpture, Pearson’s work is actually distinguished by its expansively cosmopolitan intertwining of a range of genres, styles, and methodologies characteristic in art since the late nineteenth century.

The tablet works are created through a basic casting process in which clay positives of the various elements are molded and assembled horizontally. These forms are then cast in bronze and given a silver or cobalt patina. Pearson’s use of the clay in this manner allows him to ostensibly “draw” in the material, taking a gestural approach to a substance typically associated with fixity and stasis. The process is also notable for the fact that Pearson does not see the finished work vertically until it is completed and placed on the wall. The more recent manifestations of the tablets are characterized by a long and narrow format (previous iterations were shorter and wider—often resembling an abstract version of Bruce Nauman’s iconic 1967–71 sculpture *Henry Moore Bound to Fail (Back View)*) that exudes an elegant sense of restraint regardless of their “pieced together” construction. This formal polish is exaggerated by the patinas applied by Pearson that create a sense of continuity both in terms of the surface of the works and in their overall appearance. Their structure and shape prompts a further consideration not only about their own modest occupation of the wall, but on the wall itself as both an architectural *and* a pictorial frame, defining these works as much by their material presence as by their displacement of attention to the voids surrounding them. The tablets’ sleek verticality evokes a sustained trajectory of similarly restrained gestures ranging from Alberto Giacometti’s iconic hyper-elongated

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figures of the 1940s and 1950s, to Barnett Newman’s emphasis on the vertical in his painting and sculptures, to Andre Cadere’s performative *Barres de bois rond (Round Wooden Bars*, 1970–78). As much of the sculpture of the past decades has sought to assert a more spatially expansive and materially additive sensibility, Pearson’s more contractive and reductive approach seems willfully and progressively contrary in this regard.

One could also read these more recent tablets anthropomorphically, comparing them to various organic forms such as the human rib cage or spinal cord. Their starkly solid verticality also lends them a totemic character—albeit a totem whose power has been negated by its presentation on the wall for display rather than active use. These references owe much to the human scale of the sculpture, prompting an immediate reconciliation by the viewer between their own physical proportions, and those of the work. Their placement, however, redefines our spatial relationship to the works as a pictorial one, eliciting an appreciation of the manner in which light reflects and refracts on their metallic surfaces, as well as a tension between their materially positive presence and their recession into an overall visual field. In this sense, they become less objects-unto-themselves and begin to resemble the use of avant-garde abstract strategies in sculptural decoration that characterized public and private spaces in the 1950s and 1960s. While the ascription of the “decorative” to work such as Pearson’s recent tablets might initially be read as a pejorative allusion to kitsch, it reflects their multiple levels of depth and dimension in their ability to invoke such a broad range of cultural references.

While Pearson’s sculptures demand and deserve presentation and recognition independent of his photographic practice, their frequent exhibition in tandem with the photographs and their shared engagement of such aesthetic properties as surface dynamics and an emphasis on the material properties of light and shadow suggest that an interpretation of one without mention of the other would be fundamentally incomplete. The parallel exploration of how particular substances visually behave when exposed to varying conditions of light and atmosphere in the second and third dimensions allows for a consideration of time to inform both practices. Pearson’s approach to photography fixes effects of light on a surface that transpired over a specific period of time, while his sculpture reflects and refracts the existing luminosity of its immediate environment to create an effect that is experienced in time.

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His development of an aesthetic idiom across two mediums in a manner that is simultaneously interrelated and individuated also differentiates his overall project within a recent context of emerging photographic artists who have shifted away from the representational/pictorial and towards an appreciation of the photograph as a material object. Thus while Pearson’s tablets extend and mirror aesthetic concerns characteristic of his photographs, they develop his more purely sculptural practice in problematizing an understanding of sculpture as having merely expanded its range of structural possibilities. “Corrupting” a formal trajectory of critical art history in its willful introduction of the decorative and the traditional into a process-oriented methodology, the work inspires a new material and visual potential for sculpture in terms of both its reception and creation.

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