

CHEIM & READ

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Jack Pierson:
Abstract #11,
2008, white neon
and metal, 144 by
49 by 5 inches;
at Cheim & Read.

JACK PIERSON CHEIM & READ

When working with text, Jack Pierson arranges letters recovered from dismantled movie marquees and other commercial signs into generically emotive words, tying the subcultural histories of West Coast assemblage and camp-tragic Old Hollywood into the universal vocabulary of Pop. In Pierson's new work, those traditions inflect the nonsense syllables, stuttered fragments and quasi-lexical signs with which the artist approaches the question of whether any word—even a very common one—can be called an abstraction. The title of Pierson's third exhibition with this gallery, "Abstract," is itself an incomplete version of the word "Abstraction." "Abstract" also refers to a foreword in the form of a summary, generally written retroactively—apt for the name of a show that recaps Pierson's career-long fascination with words, an interest that is often obscured by the nostalgia and eroticism of his imagery.

In the front room were three groups of letters recognizable, more or less, as words. *Abstract #11* (2008) stacks two Ls, one O and six Vs (no E) all made of illuminated white neon tubes in metal casings, the letters turned in various positions and arranged in an upside-down cross. The inversion, sometimes associated with Satanic symbolism, seems to allude, if jokingly, to an instability of cultural codes. On the adjacent wall, a collection of the letters L, O, U, D and I reads as "LOUD" (familiarity with the artist's use of the word "Silence" helps), although you're left with

a number of extras. In the work's center, the letters are combined in the shape of a lock, matching the work's title, *LOCK-SCHEME* (2008), with a clumsy figure. In its archaic script, a third, forklike grouping isn't recognizable as any word at all.

Two works are made of clustered circles, ovals and oblongs that read as groups of Os or as frames hung salon-style; they also evoke sounds of pleasure or sadness, or breathing exercises, or simplistic conceptual poetry. *Abstract #15* (2008) involves 13 such blue circles in various sizes and styles. One appears to be a child's building block and another a found toilet seat, perhaps a joke about the work as a script for a sound suggesting anal regression. *Purest ray serene* (2009) is a kind of puzzle that lines up a sans-serif U and three letterlike sign fragments. The viewer plays a game of substitution such that the merest hint of a word becomes the ground for innumerable permutations.

The exhibition's single freestanding sculpture, *Abstract #10* (2008), involves pieces of letters that look vaguely like the prescription symbol "Rx." It was the show's most direct quotation of the work of Robert Indiana, who loomed throughout. Indiana's queer sensibility informs his Minimalist-influenced, Pop text sculptures, which have successfully insinuated themselves into mainstream culture, perhaps at the expense of their original meanings. Salvaging components from discarded forms of public display, Pierson reconfigures the letters to emphasize their histories, creating signs that defy easy reading.

—Alex Gartenfeld

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