

CHEIM & READ

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

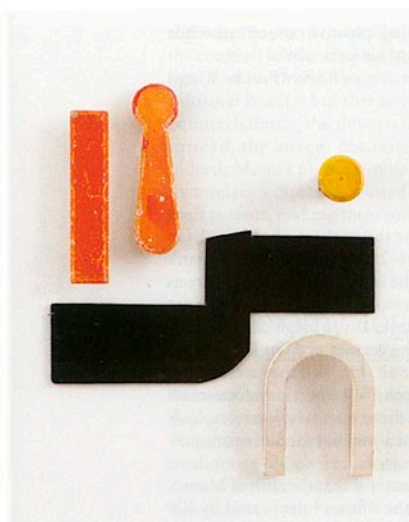
Jack Pierson

CHEIM & READ

Jack Pierson has been long associated with a particular brand of Dumpster diving, one that produces oddly affecting sculptures—part ransom notes, part concrete poetry—out of winsomely all-American salvaged signage. His is the culled and repurposed stuff of roadside diners and theater marquees, but it also became the source of an altogether different kind of folklore in 2006, when his nostalgic style was appropriated by Barneys New York creative director Simon Doonan, who himself employed three-dimensional vintage letters to spell eye-catching and shopper-friendly words like *fabulous* for store displays. I'm not sure how interesting this controversy is now (or even was at the time), except to say that it turned on surprisingly old-school aesthetic criteria. According to Cheim & Read, Doonan's signs were "formally weak plagiarized versions" of Pierson's work. The artist himself was also frankly evaluative, suggesting that anyone who thought the replicas were his own was obviously mistaken because he "wouldn't do it so badly."

I summarize this ruckus here because "Abstracts," Pierson's latest show at Cheim & Read, likewise foregrounded aesthetics as such in the works' refusal of meaning and concomitant privileging of material unchained from linguistic signification, let alone narrative. Thus it signaled a shift in Pierson's project: Moving from nonsensical words to actual words, sentences, proper names, etc., and then to letters that eschew semiotic repurposing entirely, Pierson additionally seems to be newly focused on (related) issues of formalism. Nonobjective compositions abet this, no doubt, a truism with a pedigreed history of its own (the abstract has long threatened to descend into—or become indistinguishable from—the ornamental or the decorative). Yet in Pierson's case, this history seems newly activated out of the very literal shards of vernacular culture held to be long in abeyance by Clement Greenberg and other modernist critics.

Which is to say that though Pierson still takes found characters as a medium, these fragments—their color, shape, texture, and physical



Jack Pierson,
Nice, 2009, metal,
wood, and plastic,
17 1/2 x 15 x 1 1/2".

Abstract Expressionism, Pop, and Minimalism, without becoming a self-conscious primer or, worse, a one-line lampoon.

Perhaps this is because Pierson's target isn't the quirks of any one fashion but the language, as it were, of abstraction. Or maybe—more precisely—it is because Pierson is motivated by an ambition to recover a once painterly Esperanto, a sweetly untenable fantasy. His own words imply an avant-garde hope for communication through non-figurative arrangement: "I want to go further than the sadness my words may give off, overcome it. Not all the pieces are like that, but there is an inherent (and inevitable) sadness in old things when taken out of their natural context, and I want to go further. I'm looking for a kind of universality. . . ."

—Suzanne Hudson

condition—are now very much the subject, too. *Abstract #15*, 2009, for example, rings blue plastic and metal os into a large-scale wreath, the better to compare the units' varying patinated and unscathed surfaces. Like Ellsworth Kelly's later panels that splay color against their architectural support, this and all the other constructions on view here annex the white walls as their ground, achieving effects that are by turns calligraphic (*Flourish*, 2009, for instance, which features a clique of swirling red curlicues), totemic (*Abstract #11*, 2008, and *Lock-Scheme*, 2008, both of which stack letters vertically in Tetris-like formations), and downright playful (*Nice*, 2009, which clusters objects of indeterminate origin around a black horizon line). Furthermore, many reference the visual ties of