

ABATTOIR

Thought Forms: John Pearson and Scott Olson

Opening February 5th – 7th, 2021

Annie Besant's 1901 Theosophy treatise, *Thought Forms**, lays out the principles of that late 19th century hybrid of science and spiritualism in case studies accompanied by elaborate, colorful images. Her richly illustrated catalogue of psychic states bridges the earthbound and the astral, depicting invisible auras as semi abstract landscapes. Giving visual voice to the spiritual and emotional plane lies at the root of John Pearson and Scott Olson's work, both Ohio-based artists who approach this problem of conveying a mystical experience by means of the opposing threads of logic and intuition, meeting happily in a correspondent middle.

English-born John Pearson lives and works in Oberlin, where he was Young-Hunter Professor of Painting and Printmaking from 1972 to 2014. Before settling in Ohio, he studied in London and Munich in the early 1960s, and then helped to found—and was Chair of Painting—at the now-famed experimental Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (1968-1970), where the core of American conceptual and language artists worked in rotation, assembled by art critic and historian Lucy Lippard, and including Sol LeWitt, Robert Ryman, Dan Graham, Mel Bochner, and others. In this context, Pearson emphasized the scientific approach of systems art: the possibility of using computers and cybernetics to counter personal decision making and gestural painting with rational grids, pure color and geometric forms. In his early painting, drawing and sculpture, Pearson produced precise compositions often based on a computer-derived matrix. Though sometimes considered within the Cleveland Op-Art movement, Pearson's European formation and conceptual lineage aligns best with the politically invested ethos found within the Eastern European New Tendency group, and early conceptual art as exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art's *Information* show of 1970.

Currently on view is work from two periods—the 1970s and the 1990s-- each sharing a focus on reductive means, form, and color in the service of a pure visual experience. Arranged salon style on one wall in the gallery, the installation evokes the experience of being in Pearson's studio, seeing the work through the artist's eyes as an evolution of ideas. In the serial drawings, Pearson used mathematical

systems to determine the formal and pictorial aspects to conjure spiritual elements. In the drawings, geometric forms in saturated color are supported with numerical notations generating the design. In the 1990s, Pearson made a series of monochromatic wall sculptures—reductive geometric forms in painted poplar wood emanating from several trips to Japan in the 1980s and '90s. In the Shinto series, 1995-1997, Pearson examines the isolated form, developing ideas of his earlier work into three-dimensional space. This series has not been seen in public for many years, though the work was exhibited in several exhibitions in the United States, Europe and Japan in past decades.

For his first gallery presentation in Cleveland, Kent-based painter Scott Olson has installed a selection of works on paper—watercolor and gouache —presented in handmade frames, an installation reminiscent of the refined sense of craft, scale and materiality found in his painting practice. These works, made during the pandemic since March, read at once as intimate and monumental, and derive their complexity from Olson's sublime sense of touch and gesture. The installation recalls the artist's daily studio practice, reflected here in formal language that morphs from frame to frame.

Olson has an alchemical knowledge of his materials, of how pigments thin, interact and combine, of how they are altered through proximity and juxtaposition of colors laid adjacent and apart from one another. A master colorist, he builds translucent layers of color that create gradation and dimensionality. Attuned to their 'subtle differences and inherent nature,' his numinous colors resist easy definition; a mauve green, an ochre red, a sea-blue pink present as unearthly tones, charged with quiet emotions. Watercolor functions by allowing light to shine through pigment, reflecting the tonality of white paper between the particles of color.

Framing and matting are thoroughly considered as integral to the presentation of each piece, another way in which these works on paper follow the continuum of the *gesamtkunstwerk* of Olson's framed panel paintings. Olson's improvisational compositions and lyrical shapes allude to a wide variety of art historical movements. They recall several antecedents, but no one artist in particular. There is a sense of the material history and origins of painting--from early Renaissance fresco techniques and the sensuality of hand-ground pigments, to his compositional attraction to the pure formalism of early modern abstraction. It is as if he is reenacting the birth of abstraction on his own terms, with an intuitive awareness of his art historical lineage. Made in an era when technology and message often overshadow

aesthetic concerns, Olson's unapologetically beautiful paintings require time to grow in complexity, to change and evolve.

Biographies

John Pearson was born in Yorkshire, England in 1940. He studied art at the Royal Academy, London (1960-1963) and the Munich Art Academy (1964) before taking a teaching post at the University of New Mexico from 1966-1968. Following his professorship at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (1968-1970), Pearson moved to Cleveland for a position at Cleveland Institute of Art (1970-1972) and settled in Oberlin, where he was Young-Hunter Professor of Art from 1972-2014. He showed regularly at galleries in New York, Chicago and internationally in Europe and Japan. Solo museum exhibitions of work include the Arts Club of Chicago (1977) Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art (moCa Cleveland) in 1987, and 2000, Museum of Modern Arts Rijeka, Croatia, Ukrainian, among others. He was recognized with several grants, commissions and awards in Cleveland, including twice being recognized by the Cleveland Arts Prize board. His work is included in many private and museum collections worldwide, including the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College, the Akron Art Museum and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Scott Olson (b. 1976, Syracuse, New York) studied at Alfred University (BFA) and Ohio State University (MFA). He has had solo exhibitions in Los Angeles, Berlin and Stockholm. In 2017, the Cleveland Museum of Art organized a solo exhibition of his work at Transformer Station. His work is included in several museum collections including the Hammer Museum, the Albright Knox Museum, and the Cleveland Museum of Art. Olson has been included in numerous group exhibitions, including *Realization is Better than Anticipation*, moCa Cleveland (2013) *Painter Painter* at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2013), FRONT International, Cleveland, 2018, and *City Prince/sses*, curated by Chris Sharp, at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, (2019) among many others. Olson lives and works in Kent, Ohio. He is represented in New York by James Cohan Gallery and in Europe by Nordenhake Gallery, Stockholm and Berlin.



***"On Meeting a Friend," illustration #35 from Annie Besant and C. W.**