

CHEIM & READ

Art in America

OCTOBER 2015

EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Jack Pierson:
Untitled, 2014,
watercolor on paper
mounted on linen,
14 by 11 inches; at
Cheim & Read.

JACK PIERSON

Cheim & Read

A basic appreciation of abstract painting might begin with allowing oneself to be seduced by the formal elements of composition—color, shape, line and texture. To be actually moved by such work, emotionally pulled in, one has to be accepting of—if not engaged with—its transcendental possibilities. That is precisely what Jack Pierson requested from visitors to his most recent exhibition at Cheim & Read, “onthisisland,” which consisted of a dozen small abstract paintings on canvas, some 50 works on paper, plus one large, untitled installation of found items, including driftwood and seashells.

The New York- and Southern California-based artist is perhaps best known for the photo-based works, ink-jet paintings and signage sculptures he has produced over the past 25 years. Abstract painting, however, has also remained within the quirky, queer and multifarious range of his oeuvre. Some 20 years ago, in the midst of the AIDS crisis, Pierson made a series of monochrome blue encaustic paintings. He used the color symbolically in rather melancholy exercises that were all about romantic longing and loss, as pointed out by critic Jan Avgikos in this show’s catalogue.

The new works (all 2014 or 2015) similarly reflect Pierson’s romantic sensibility, but the aims here are vastly different. Part of a personal, introspective exploration, the paintings resulted from a self-imposed solitary confinement last winter on North Captiva Island, a remote and relatively tourist-free retreat off the coast of Florida, in the Gulf of Mexico. With only his pet Chihuahua and the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, including his 1836 essay “Nature,” as companions, Pierson worked en plein air for his

four-month stay.

Grouped together in a front gallery near the entrance, the oil paintings are especially seductive. The spare and elegant compositions feature informal arrangements of small patches of color, and thick serpentine lines set against grounds of contrasting hues. A mixture of sand and wax, combined with the oil pigment, enhances the rich surface textures. The artist’s palette is quite complex in paintings such as *The West Wind* and *Redfish Pass*, culled as it is from nature—earth tones, the colors of tropical vegetation, sand, sea and sky. *Dissolving the Order of the Star* (2015), the largest painting on view, at 16 by 12 inches, contains an intricate network of sinuous white and gray lines; it recalls certain recent paintings by Brice Marden, but in a more intimate scale. With the intensity of the simple imagery, and the density of the surfaces, Pierson’s work feels even more closely akin to early modernist experiments by artists such as Arthur Dove or Marsden Hartley.

Pierson’s approach is looser and his marks more fluid in the many works on paper, which were arranged in rows or small groupings on the walls of the largest galleries. Some of the pieces hint at vegetal shapes—foliage and flowers. Others suggest more overtly sexual imagery—phallic and vaginal forms—as if the artist were probing the fundamental truth of nature. In these watercolors and pencil drawings, Pierson often conveys a kind of wild fecundity. The works are also intensely gestural, their marks serving as idiosyncratic and deeply personal expressions.

—David Ebony