

Theresa Pendlebury at Mandarin

Everything is a gag.
Charlie Chaplin

Theresa Pendlebury held a brief exhibition of her work in May of this year at the Mandarin gallery in Chinatown, Los Angeles under the name Belle Tenebreux. The name (by way of Tennessee Williams?) comes from the 19th century French term beau tenebreux referring to a solipsistic artist infatuated with their own psyche to the exclusion of the world; later it became a derogatory term to describe an egoist. Belle is only one of various identities that Theresa has used in exhibitions. More often these names are attached to invented bio's that are satires of artist's biographies and their often overwrought descriptions of the "creative personality". The false biography is an approach more common to the satirical novel than to fine art. Theresa's line of attack from the beginning, before her student days at Cal Arts in the seventies, was laced with literary signification – art history was always seen through the low-brow literature of cartoons, biographies, television series and detective novels. As with much of the work from that time narrative was always implied and always put on hold - the tease generated desire to know the full story. The identities that she invented – whether male or female – were comic reactions to the hubris of art world

people (including herself) seeking to become Personalities – writing their own biographies before actually living them. With so many aspiring emperors Theresa brought perspective to the proceedings in the form of absurdist literary/visual play. The two forms fuse in her work and the nature of identity, and the narratives that go with them are manifestly left open to question. Belle Tenebreux's exhibit is followed by a more generous retrospective – also at Mandarin - of Theresa's Pendlebury's work.

The small brightly colored embroidered works on fabric are mounted on wood and have a simple declarative text, often one word, such as *Phooey* or *Take Something Stronger*. Pendlebury explains how she came to embroidery herself: “It was the late 60's and a Bohemian existence was available to all. I embarked on my alternative lifestyle. I moved to the beach and lived among the hippies and surfers. I was embittered by not being able to go to art school so I abandoned the idea of being an artist. Also, I was rather put off by all the people around me who claimed the status of artist. They were everywhere. Take a little acid, live in a van, get yourself a set of marker pens and who can tell the difference? They were everywhere. I disclaimed the title “artist” and described myself as a *drawer* - I vowed I would only make things that were useful. I did macramé and embroidery. At one point,

I had a job embroidering marijuana leaves on work shirts to be sent off to some Third World country for duplication, later to be sold in head shops. Later, I started a business making seasonal decorative items for boutiques and designing needlework kits for a company that sold them in chain stores and craft shops across the nation. Life was hand to mouth, but I kept my own hours and had a tan to envy.” In Pendlebury’s current work the typography mimics the cultural conventions of type as it is used to suggest content – such as using icicles to form the word ICE COLD BEER; the ironic use of these tropes is familiar from Ed Ruscha’s brilliant work, yet the results are very different. In Ruscha the irony is sarcastic, adolescent, detached and in every way superior to the original cultural artifacts – such as store signs and advertising – that inspired the work. In Pendlebury the embroidery has the element of the absurd found in Ruscha, but the work is never superior to its source: the mantle. Similarly, John Baldessari has also satirized the self-delusional grandiosity of fine artists by making text paintings that declare their intentions in the most absurdly literal ways. The irony in this case is where the work begins and ends. With Pendlebury the irony is as thin as ice – and quite intentionally so – and the emotional resonance of the content bleeds to the surface. In this she is closer to Andy Kauffman’s invented grotesques: characters stuck in their bodies and in their

psyches. But all of the work done in the last thirty years that deals with identity is to one degree or another encased – in some cases entombed - in irony. In Pendlebury's work we are allowed to see what might be on the other side of this ubiquitous irony. It is not often that artists (or for that matter anyone) allow such a look – and what do we see?

In *Ain't It Awful Nowadays?* (13X11 inches) the “happy” flowers are rendered in a 70's schoolbook graphic that hints at sixties flower power as well as the term: “pushing up daisies” – a traditional American metaphor for death. The words, in a literal sense, call attention to the distance traveled from that long-ago to “nowadays”. The casual “Aint” and the break in the word “Nowa-days?” speak volumes about just what might have transpired in the intervening time between then and now. The flowers can not help but connote the failure of a generation to really come into it's own and make the changes in the society that would transform a consumer/corporate culture into a civilization of brothers and sisters – which was in effect what that generation of the 1960's wanted and failed to achieve. The demure, almost shy size of the work, its hippie, arts & crafts throwaway character is a response to contemporary bombast, but more seriously it is also the helpless reply of a generation to the next one. The shrug and the gallows humor are

there behind the bright yellow sky on which the letters sit. The melancholy is palpable. The work is both an apology for lost chances and a commiseration for “nowadays”. Unlike the simplistic neo-pop art of the last few years, that is becoming ever so large in size as it becomes ever so small in significance - this work in part by its sheer insistence on smallness – addresses the legacy of pop art to the present condition in a way that has not been done before. In this work Pop in a sense returns to its origins – not in Warhol’s factory but in the suburbs of London. Pop started small. The collages of “The Independent Group” in the late forties and early fifties were the same size as Pendlebury’s embroidered work. But The Independent Group had a madly transcendent belief in the future and its technological possibilities. They also despised much of the culture produced with that new technology. In short their relation to their time was paradoxical. Their simultaneous idolatry and contempt for consumer culture, as it expressed itself in their collages, can be seen in the art made today – that world is still with us – we live that paradox. *Aint It Awful Nowa-days* walks that long walk fearlessly.

No-You Are (11X13 inches) embroidered in purple is the most ambiguous phrase in the group. The *No* sits on a white negative space that could – if

seen as a positive space - also be a portrait. The hair – or perhaps a landscape - is rendered in curlicue arrows in green, baby blue and purple.

No – You Are is a negative affirmation – an oxymoron that suits this whole body of work – that is not in the middle but on the lower right – so it appears to be moving off the page as happens with text on sitcoms. It's the only embroidered work I've seen that is influenced by television – and it does so in a way that is neither sentimental nor a political critique of popular art. The relationship between popular and high art in Pendlebury's work is – contrary to the dogmas of art institutions (as can be seen in the catalog to the exhibit *High & Low*) – symbiotic. The influence runs in every direction with a rampant abandon that we can best describe as promiscuous. Is it any wonder that institutions want to clean up the beast and put a suit on it? Pendlebury says is most succinctly herself: “Personally, I don't see a Mondrian without thinking about Courrage dresses.” The typography also conjures the one-dimensional world of advertising in which the simplicity of an essence – a concept - organizes the world for us, and reduces it to a cliché. But here the ambiguities of image and the discontinuities of text – things which are quite normal in everyday life but never seen (except accidentally) on television or in advertising now come to the fore – in fact there is nothing else to see but the curlicue arrows that look like sperm swimming in white noise.

It Was All So Long Ago is a circular work seven inches in diameter. It also has the “friendly” typography of animated script familiar from television sitcoms. The work places the history of that “It” in suspension. What is “it”? The artist’s personal biographical history? With Tenebreux/Pendlebury that is at best problematic. The grander historical panorama familiar from educational television? The typography belies these possibilities. “It” becomes an ambiguous mélange of possible histories that suggests much but leaves the table before anything definitive has been stated. As if the artist could – with some effort – recall only vague outlines of what once was – and in a fit of exasperation mumbles some humorous aside before leaving the room in silence. With *It Was All So Long Ago* the humor is not distanced by the irony but rather the veneer of irony is something we see through to the underlying tragic emotional feeling underneath. The result has to leave us a bit uneasy, a bit shaken. It’s like asking someone how they are – a cultural trope that is supposed to be answered with a corresponding trope (“great – how are you?”) but in this case the person tells you – in fact – how they are. In that sense the familiar irony that we see at work is completely undermined by the emotional content that can’t be held in such a small container – the effect is both

humorous and horribly melancholic. With Theresa Pendlebury's work the emotional resonance is the key to the work and the irony is the defense mechanism – the veneer - that has become a palimpsest.

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