

BIRMINGHAM, UK

## Ron Terada

IKON GALLERY

The first thing that should probably be said about Ron Terada's project comes at the end of the catalogue for his largest exhibition to date, in the acknowledgments: "It is more than obvious that my work is indebted to others." Few artists have so consistently pursued the hypothesis that originality is merely a "modernist myth" by noting that even the dumbest, bluntest, most literal uses of words, when framed as quotation, skitter endlessly out of the author's control. The catalogue itself makes the point brilliantly, turning the authors' presumably original contributions as well as Terada's own pieces into quotations by presenting them as if they were scans from other catalogues, books, and magazines. As artist Anne Low points out in her essay, Terada's paintings, photographs, signage, and other works are based on the discrepancies and incongruities that arise when language becomes a set of "formal objects in space." The big highway sign rendering the words of a title, *Entering City of Vancouver*, 2002, self-evidently states a falsehood when situated in a gallery in the English Midlands, yet is equally true insofar as it and the other artworks installed there instantiate what a songwriter might call a Vancouver state of mind—the cool, undemonstrative style that Terada shares with precursors such as Ian Wallace and Rodney Graham. Some might find the sign a *reductio ad absurdum* of that sensibility, just as they might see Terada's 2003 exhibition (at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver) of the names of the donors whose cash made the show possible as a *reductio ad absurdum* of both the institution and its critique.

Terada often seems to have wanted to escape the institution while remaining attached to it. His *Soundtrack for an Exhibition*, 2000, was originally presented by Western Front in Vancouver during its summer closure: Terada's poster listed a dozen tracks (by the likes of the Magnetic Fields and Broadcast) as an imaginary accompaniment to the nonexistent show; he also produced a CD of the actual songs. (Clement Greenberg said of artists, "I like them better without the soundtrack," but Terada turned the accompaniment into the lead, and his choices had an immediate and lasting effect on my own musical interests.) Since then, Terada seems to have made an uneasy peace with the exhibition convention. Here a revised version, with new songs, was exhibited as a video showing a sequence of vinyl records playing on

Ron Terada, *Jack* (detail), 2010, sixteen panels, acrylic on canvas, each 30 x 24".

In the end, I want my legacy; that's the most important thing for me. As it is, I went much farther, I did much better than I expected. I keep remembering Matt Mullican, who had some real wisdom; he was always telling me that the thing we had to do was to wait for the previous generation to die out.

Matt said that it's like the base of a triangle: It gets narrower as it reaches the top. As those who are at the top die out (if not literally, then at least their reputations), there will be room for people like us to push in, and that's what happened. With the opening of Metro Pictures in 1980, a new decade began; all of a sudden there was an upsurge of galleries, and those of us who had come from CalArts, with our ideas about pictures and appropriation, got a lot of attention.

After I returned to Southern California, I lived for ten years as a failure. What had I done wrong? I had made so much work but didn't know what would happen to it. Now it is being kept alive again. Some people are keeping alive what I did, but for so long I worried it had been lost and forgotten.

Myths about my drug use have been following me for over thirty years; someone who was involved peripherally with the artworld came in to see my April 2001 show at Brian Butler's, someone I hadn't seen for years. Even she knew about my alleged drug use. If you can't

a gorgeous Thorens turntable; an LP of the whole mixtape was a giveaway in the gallery. Though the tracks on it are unidentified, I can guarantee that Magnetic Fields front man Stephin Merritt is again to be heard on it, as are newcomers like the Pains of Being Pure of Heart. Terada has even returned to painting, the mainstay of his production in the 1990s. *Jack*, 2010, is a sixteen-panel sequence presenting a chapter from Jack Goldstein's autobiography in white lettering on a black ground. Goldstein's tormented relation to art and to himself—his sense of envy, ambition, self-justification, and self-loathing—seems worlds away from Terada's elegance, detachment, and exquisite taste. Yet the exhibition title, "Who I Think I Am," begs us to wonder whether the identification doesn't go deeper than one thinks. Surely Goldstein can be Terada's doppelgänger if Birmingham can be Vancouver's.

—Barry Schwabsky