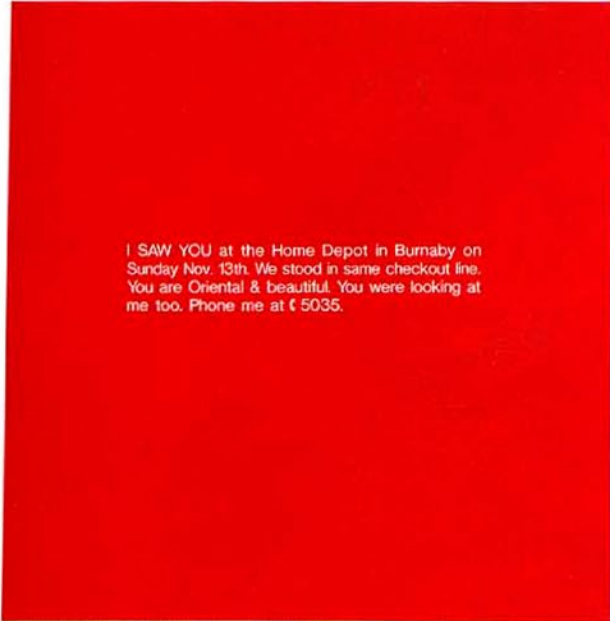


[ Spotlight ]



I SAW YOU at the Home Depot in Burnaby on Sunday Nov. 13th. We stood in same checkout line. You are Oriental & beautiful. You were looking at me too. Phone me at 6035.

SOME TIME LAST FALL, I ran across a Ron Terada painting I'd never previously seen, installed at the Vancouver Art Gallery as part of "Recollect," a salon-style survey of recent acquisitions and works from the permanent collection. While most of "Recollect" implied business as usual for modernism and post-Duchampian plurality, Terada's painting was bold enough to critique the conceptual roots of both practices.

Like all of Terada's paintings, the bright pink monochrome bore a text—this one borrowed from a local paper: "I SAW YOU at the Home Depot in Burnaby on Sunday Nov. 13th. We stood in same checkout line. You are Oriental & beautiful. You were looking at me too." Then, a little telephone symbol and a voice-mailbox number.

Terada, born in 1969, makes paintings that link two aesthetic forms often considered incompatible. One is the monochrome—a virtual emblem of modernist abstraction's stately withdrawal from the world. The other is text culled from a wide variety of pop-cultural sources: *Artforum* gallery ads, newspaper personal ads, and high school-yearbook quotations. More recently, Terada has used the answer-as-question format of the TV game show "Jeopardy!" to produce paintings equally indebted to Lawrence Weiner and Alex Trebek.

## Mono Maniac

Ron Terada puts home truths in the mouths of stately monochromes

By Christopher Brayshaw



Tom Taylor

For those who shunned me, you had your chance. Judge not the sword weak by the sheath that hides it. Look on this and remember.

In a sense, all of Terada's paintings are "Jeopardy!" paintings. Behind the ads for exhibitions by Terry Winters, On Kawara and Thomas Struth; the banal self-promotions of lovelorn urbanites ("My mother says I'm handsome"); and the dubious wisdom of suburban graduates, are more pressing questions: What good is painting? Why paint at all?

Terada's answer is complex. Before photography, painting provided important ways of reflecting the world. Painting depicted significant events in the life of a community, like military campaigns or political upheavals, and like its literary cousins, the epic poem and the novel, effectively placed no restrictions on content, often depicting the real and the imaginary side by side.

By the late nineteenth century, photography had assumed many of these social functions. Confronted by technological pressure, serious painting retreated into abstraction.

Nowadays, much abstract painting seems hopelessly

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ABOVE: **Ron Terada**  
*Jeopardy Painting Untitled (In "Cool Hand Luke"...)* 1999 Acrylic on raw canvas  
166 x 147 cm Photo Chris Gergley Courtesy the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery

OPPOSITE ABOVE: **Ron Terada**  
*Personal Painting Untitled (I Saw You...)* 1995 Acrylic on canvas  
122 x 122 cm Photo Chris Gergley Courtesy the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery

OPPOSITE BELOW: **Ron Terada**  
*Grey Painting Untitled (Tom Taylor)* 1997 Acrylic on canvas  
112 x 112 cm Photo Chris Gergley Courtesy the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery

outdated. There's no pressing reason to care about a swirl, stain or drip, no matter how skillfully executed, unless these marks speak to things beyond themselves, things larger than the painter's mind and the closed world of the studio. Terada, more than any other young Canadian painter, deliberately closes the gap between abstraction's formal demands and the awareness that successful paintings, however abstract, must never lose contact with the world. He accomplishes this by refracting painterly modernism through its historical other, late 1960s Conceptualism's "withdrawal of the aesthetic," or in other words, the "look of art" from art.

As art historians like Thomas Crow have argued, the substitution by conceptual artists of unfinished plywood for patinated bronze, industrial grey enamel for oil paint, and language or other kinds of neutral "information" for the rhythmic play of shapes in space, were motivated by the artists' belief that modernism required radical reformulation. Art would replace the studio with the world.

This presumption was, in many ways, a total failure. The artworld was not destroyed by Conceptualism. Rather, it now tends to treat many vintage text-and-information works as charming period pieces. The recent excursions of senior conceptualists such as Robert Morris and Joseph Kosuth into painted relief sculpture and more orthodox installation-based work have an attitude of weary resignation about them. This is



Ron Terada  
*Jeopardy Paintings* 1999 Installation view Photo Chris Gergley  
Courtesy the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery

not lost on recent art-school graduates, who divide into two opposed and equally unprofitable camps. Either paint, and ignore Conceptualism's implications for studio practice; or "make whatever" and ignore your work's relationship to older pictorial traditions.

Terada's work points a way out of this dilemma. He began making monochromes out of sheer necessity. As a young painter who could not measure up to the formal demands of figurative painting, Terada solved his technical dilemma conceptually. In the words of Christina Ritchie, assistant curator of contemporary art

at the Art Gallery of Ontario, "Taking for granted the validity and authority of the monochrome as art *per se*, he adopted it as a base for his developing practice."

By analyzing the production of monochromes as a studio procedure, Terada avoids stylistic repetition. Unlike critics who see the production of monochromes as a purely conceptual gesture, Terada treats the monochrome as a valid genre that admits as much formal and thematic innovation as do portraiture and history painting. His paintings to date are richly varied, encompassing the translucent pearls and mist greys of the *Grey Paintings*, the *Personal Paintings*' gaudy, come-hither Day-Glo shellacs, and most recently, the *Jeopardy Paintings*' flocked and sprayed surfaces, suggestive of AstroTurf, and perhaps the colour fields of late modernists such as Jules Olitski.

Terada's imposition of text on his monochromes not only rescues the monochrome from its blind retreat from the world, but also brings the "look of non-art" into dialogue with its historical and conceptual other. In this sense, Terada's works are not really "cultural ready-mades," but are actually "rectified ready-mades." Joined with the monochrome, their texts gain conceptual intelligibility through their affinities with older pictorial genres like history painting, portraiture and still life. It's not that far from Manet's concert halls to Home Depot's crowded aisles.

By physically superimposing social history on the surface of his monochromes, Terada reintroduces a temporal, or narrative, dimension into the atemporal genre of monochrome painting.

For example, the *Grey Paintings* simultaneously evoke the present and the past by superimposing texts taken from the artist's 1987 high-school yearbook over steel-coloured grounds. These paintings play with time by asking viewers to consider the difference between the young, idealistic personalities the texts evoke, and the very different people common sense tells us they must have by now become. The odd poignancy of a work like *Untitled Grey Painting (Trung Pham)* is the result of a conflict between our inclination to dismiss its angst-ridden Pink Floyd lyric ("You are young and life is long and there is time to kill today. Then one day you find ten years have got behind you. No one told you when to run, you missed the starting gun"), and our awareness of its inner accuracy.

Elsewhere, time's disappointments are spelled out more explicitly. Take the forlorn message of this *Personal Painting*, executed in black type on top of a dark green monochrome: "YOU: BEAUTIFUL, Tanned brunette, landscaping Denny's Kingsway last summer. Me: tall, dark guy in cutoffs, Van Dyke beard. We agreed on a beer. You said: 'Sounds good to me.' I got stuck in traffic. Been looking for you ever since."

We sense that the writer's message, like his year-long search, is futile. The ad is not so much a plea for reconnection, as it is a small monument to loss. The text and monochrome spur contemplation of the missing time between them, gently mocking the writer's attempt to recapture the past, and, by extension, Terada's own attempts to wed art history to contemporary art practice, even as they paradoxically echo the plaintive hope that, one day, past and present might somehow converge. ■