

# **Projects 63 : Karin Davie, Udomsak Krisanamis, Bruce Pearson, Fred Tomaselli**

**[Lilian Tone and Anne Umland]**

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63

# projects

karin davie

udomsak krisanamis

bruce pearson

fred tomaselli



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*Thus, the comfort of the familiar always bore with it the frisson of the exotic, and the effect of this conflation, ideally, was persuasive excitement—visual pleasure. As Baudelaire says, “the beautiful is always strange,” by which he means, of course, that it is always strangely familiar.*

—Dave Hickey, 1993<sup>1</sup>

The artists included in this exhibition take a stand on “visual pleasure,” which they incorporate into their work in “strangely familiar” ways. Karin Davie sinuously weaves bodily references into the traditionally abstract purview of stripe paintings. Udomsak Krisanamis cuts up and collages newspapers and other texts to create shimmering night skies. Bruce Pearson uses snippets of conversation scavenged from the contemporary media as the basis for elaborately patterned, sumptuously decorative wall reliefs and works on paper; and in Fred Tomaselli’s lustrous, exquisitely crafted collage-paintings, recognizable real-world objects are sealed beneath layers of transparent resin, displayed for our delectation, rendered at once familiar and strange.

Despite their many differences—in age, approach, and background as well as in subject matter, medium, and style—Davie, Krisanamis, Pearson, and Tomaselli share a concern with visual seduction and its mechanics. Each strives to create artworks with what Pearson calls “a real pleasure component,” artworks that are “enormously rewarding to look at.”<sup>2</sup> There are many roads to pleasure; these artists choose retinal stimulation. The pulsing, vibrating, eye-popping vocabulary of their work has a sensorial immediacy that directly engages the viewer. They also exploit conventions of accessibility inherent in art that provokes a strong perceptual response, the optically overloaded surfaces of their works evoking not only the hyperactive world of screen-savers, video games, and computer-generated effects but the much maligned yet perennially popular 1960s style known as “Op.” This analogy serves not to point to some stylistic influence or to posit a cause-and-effect relationship. Instead it raises some questions about Op and this sampling of 90s art—specifically concerning their shared reliance on visual razzle-dazzle, and the effect of this reliance on audience response.

In 1965, critics responded to this Museum’s overwhelmingly popular Op art exhibition, *The Responsive Eye*—an international survey of paintings and reliefs with strong psychophysiological effects—in a variety of ways. Writers for specialized publications

dismissed Op as gimmicky perceptual trickery that pandered to its audience. Thomas Hess, the influential editor of *Art News*, wrote, “In Op they [the public] sense that art, at long last, is not only meeting [them] half-way [but] will actually come down off the walls and shake your hand.”<sup>3</sup> This image provides a point of entry for considering the “optical” dimension of Davie’s, Krisanamis’s, Pearson’s, and Tomaselli’s work as a means of engagement, allure, seduction, and direct audience appeal.

“I liked using something very familiar, like the stripe, and that had been used in popular culture,” says Davie. “Something that people could recognize. A teacher of mine used to say, ‘You are kind of interested in democratic art.’ It is a funny way of putting it, but I want something somewhat accessible, so that people will enter, and once they are in, all this other stuff will be unraveling, slowly.”<sup>4</sup> Davie touches on issues key to her work and to that of the other artists: the use of familiar imagery as a means of instantly engaging the audience and the desire to achieve a nonthreatening, “democratic” art. Her interest in using the familiar and other strategies to slip past her audience’s guard dovetails with Tomaselli’s frequent references to the “mechanics of seduction,” the nuts-and-bolts aspects of visual pleasure.

It is worth looking more closely at the popularity of *The Responsive Eye* in connection with this current interest in user-friendly art. What accounted for Op’s public appeal in the 1960s? Judging from contemporaneous reviews in the general press, a number of factors were at work. The high level of craftsmanship and impeccable execution seen in Op reassured 60s viewers, as did its mechanical aspect: drips and gestures were banished, as were other troubling signs of the artist’s subjectivity. Op’s message was to be communicated coolly and clearly, with the immediacy of a verbal one-liner. Op was also seen as wildly entertaining. One critic went so far as to compare it to a “roller coaster ride”<sup>5</sup>; many others, doctors included, were fascinated by its physiological impact, its capacity to confuse, to disorient, to modify reality. Comparisons were drawn between the mind-altering effects of Op and those of psychedelic drugs.

Op’s grounding in the familiar gadgetry of “Chinese puzzles,” “souvenir and carnival novelties,” fabric patterns, and quilts points to its connection with the decorative, and helps to explain its rapid absorption by the fashion industry. All of these factors served to secure Op’s lowly position in the annals of art history, as did what was perceived as its retrograde reliance on illusionism and *trompe l’oeil*.

Each of the artists in this exhibition recaptures aspects of Op’s fundamental accessibility, recast-



Karin Davie. *Something Like This*. 1995–96. Oil on canvas, diptych, each 90 x 76" (228.6 x 193.0 cm), overall 90 x 158" (228.6 x 401.3 cm). Collection Mark Fluent



ing many of its qualities in a positive rather than a pejorative light. As a result, their works speak to the ongoing tension between high and low culture while challenging the unwritten criteria used to identify works as merely pleasurable or simply gimmicky. At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge the differences and distance that separate us today from 60s Op art and its audience. Simply to delight the eye, for instance, does not seem to be enough. Witness how Davie, Krisanamis, Pearson, and Tomaselli infuse the contentless, flickering fields of perceptual abstraction with references to the body, pop culture, mass media, and language. In doing so they explore a domain that has figured prominently in much recent painting: the shifting territory between abstraction and representation. And, far from relying on Op's hard-edged geometries as a point of stylistic reference, these artists derive their affinities with that movement from popular culture and psychedelia.

**Karin Davie** embraces Op's inviting opticality while blatantly disregarding its prohibitions against the "slightest clue . . . to some past association with actual objects" and "nonessentials such as freely modulated shape and tone, brush strokes and impasto."<sup>6</sup> In fact, she specializes in representation's "slightest clues" and other "nonessentials." The body lurks beneath the surface of Davie's art. The resolutely nonreferential stripes of high modernist abstraction are made to wiggle, bounce, and jiggle, suggesting that these far-from-purely-geometric lines lead a corporeal and carnal life. When Davie first began to make stripe paintings, she was, she has said, "looking at Morris Louis. It is only now that I realize what drew me to him: it was the body. I see those things as interiors of flesh and blood somehow. They are stained; they have almost a religious kind of feel to them." Davie's memory of an R. Crumb psychedelic poster featuring a melting human face also underlies her interest in corporeal transformation.

Speaking of an early series of stripe paintings, Davie notes that she "really wanted to make an image that felt like it was moving, swinging, like a butt that sways when it walks." Davie's words, her paintings' titles, and her insistence on referencing the erotic all contribute to her peculiarly anthropomorphic brand of abstraction and speak to her psychological resistance to purely formal art. Her most recent works are "less about the exterior of the body and more about the interior, either physically or mentally." Instead of suggesting forms concealed beneath the surface, there is a shift toward an exaggerated, cartoonlike animation and distortion.

In diptychs such as *Something Like This* (1995–96), repetitive mark-making meets up with the messy signs of process. Here as in earlier pairs, Davie obsessively replicates "spontaneous" gestures, drips, and brushstrokes from one canvas to the other, highlighting the performative character of her work. "The early paintings were very much influenced by dance and memory. Because there was a desire to reproduce my body's movements, I would draw the curves and try to memorize exactly at what



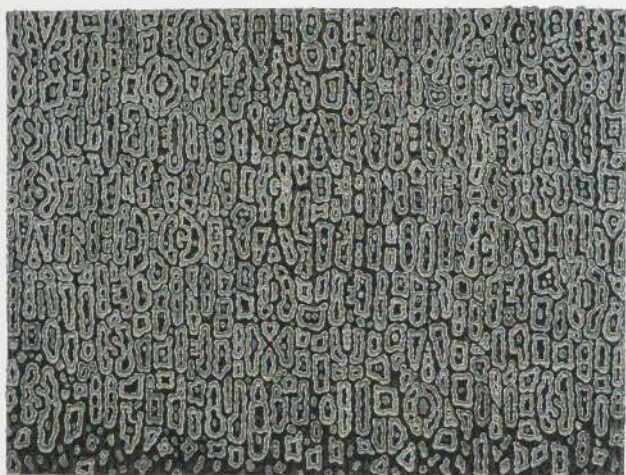
Udomsak Krisanamis. *Midnight in My Perfect World*. 1997. Acrylic and collage on canvas, 72 x 48" (182.9 x 121.9 cm). Collection Nancy and Joel Portnoy, New York. Photo: Richard Nicol

point the brush turned; because there was no predrawn image, no projection, it was just copying. Literally, trying to physically copy." For Davie issues of duplication are bound up with identity. Her carefully choreographed copying ties repetition to the body, while emphasizing generic (as opposed to heroic) aspects of physical movement.

Concealment and repetitive systems of mark-making are also key to the art of **Udomsak Krisanamis**. In *Tears on My Pillow* (1995) he applies black Magic Marker to strips of newspaper, laboriously covering all but the "orifices" of individual letters (the gaps within O's, for example, or the curved inner spaces of P's and B's). Rendering the text invisible, he builds up densely layered surfaces, mottled and ashimmer, replacing language with scintillating optical effect. Much has been made of the origins of Krisanamis's obsessive and time-consuming working process. Having arrived in the United States from Thailand in the early 90s, Krisanamis taught himself English by reading the newspaper, crossing out words he knew as he went along. These densely marked sheets led to collages. Recently Krisanamis's range of materials has expanded to include supermarket receipts, transparent cellophane noodles, blankets, Korean newspapers, and photocopies stained with tea. From kitchen to kitsch effects of contrived aging or faux antiquing, Krisanamis's materials conserve traces of their everyday trashy character. His titles seem equally commonplace, ranging from the sappily romantic *Tears on My Pillow* and *Midnight in My Perfect World* to the more psychedelic, hallucinatory, even ominous sounding *Acid Rain*.

Through what amounts to a chance procedure, Krisanamis approaches figuration. Random patterns dictated by the givens of his collaged and marked sheets evoke celestial vaults, constellatory clusters, and other associations of the infinite sky. At the same time, however, the base nature of his materials, along with the cluttered, irregular topography





Bruce Pearson. *Violence and Profanity Supernatural Strangeness and Graphically Rendered Sexual Situations*. 1997–98. Oil and acrylic on Styrofoam, 72 x 96 x 5" (182.9 x 243.8 x 12.7 cm). Collection the artist

of his surfaces when looked at close up, make his pictures flip-flop back and forth between the celestial and the terrestrial, the sublime and the vulgar, between lofty subject and base matter. On a formal level, Krisanamis plays with figure-ground reversals, positives becoming negatives and vice-versa. His subjects become the silent spaces between things, the voids that litter the printed page.

Where Krisanamis foregrounds the spaces within letters, **Bruce Pearson's** Styrofoam relief constructions give letters palpable material form. Using phrases clipped from popular magazines and newspapers, or overheard on television talk shows, these works too thwart language's communicative function. Mirrorings and reversals of basic sentences provide the departure points for elaborate, often vividly colored patterns that encrypt the original message to the point of virtual illegibility. The overall image is dictated by the shapes of the letters in Pearson's found texts, constituting another chance procedure variant.

"Making language physical, that's one of the contradictions that I love," says Pearson. "I'm just trying to create a really strong image. I like to take idea back to image back to idea. I'm really interested in those kinds of contradictions and in not trying to solve them." Another opposition that interests Pearson is that between illusionistic and "real" pictorial space. On his carved and highly textured Styrofoam surfaces, he may use color to add false shadows despite the presence of real ones. Intentionally sending wrong signals, he frustrates attempts at linear reading, whether of image or of text.

Despite their ultimate illegibility, Pearson's phrases are carefully chosen for content. Playing the role of amateur anthropologist, he checks the pulse of our times, isolating phrases that he views as indexes of "where we are culturally and philosophically." In his search for telling fragments, Pearson draws parallels between his process and that of con-

temporary sample-based music. Both take a "supermarket" approach to culture, erasing distinctions between high and low. Everything is up for grabs.

Pearson's titles often provide the only clues to the original textual fragment upon which his images are based. *Violence and Profanity Supernatural Strangeness and Graphically Rendered Sexual Situations* (1997–98) comes from a movie review Pearson cut from *The New York Times*. Scanning the clipping for "loaded words," he underlined those open-ended enough to suggest multiple narratives. The finished work transforms Pearson's "story" into an oozing, dripping mass, but a sense of the original message reverberates subliminally, spreading out through the picture in hallucinatory rippling waves.

The retinal "buzz" common to Davie's, Krisanamis's, and Pearson's art finds a pharmaceutical counterpart in that of **Fred Tomaselli**, whose hermetically sealed, marquetrylike collages are inlaid with pills and other psychoactive substances. Often including cut-out illustrations and hand-painted elements, his works straddle a tenuous line between fine art, pop culture, craft, and design. Tomaselli sees a connection between Op art's "visual dislocation and vibration" and the "notion of reality modification inherent to the best drugs and the best art." Many works incorporate Op effects of movement and illumination, evoking the visual instability associated with psychedelic drugs. Yet the stimulating dose of pleasure that he seeks to provide is intended to expand perceptual experience without the aid of hallucinogens or other illicit substances. "I think of my work as transportational vehicles that are supposed to take you somewhere else," says Tomaselli. "I really believe in that very old idea that art can take you to another place."

The drugs Tomaselli embeds in his art function in a number of different ways: as metaphors for transport and for the modification of reality, as formal elements, and as familiar found objects enhancing what he describes as the "user-friendly" impulse underlying his art. "I do think that my art can reference pop audiences," says Tomaselli. "They respond to the craft, and they respond to the drugs because drugs mean things to people. They are very recognizable, communicative, incendiary, and loaded." Drugs are not the only familiar elements that Tomaselli incorporates into his works; in *Bird Blast*, for example, hundreds of photomechanically reproduced images of birds, cut from nature magazines and wildlife guides, are each collaged with a picture of a human eye. Further combined with hemp leaves and inlaid pills, these conjunctions create strange hybrids and odd mutations. For Tomaselli, *Bird Blast* pointed to a new level of visual confusion in my work. I tried to make as dense and airless a painting as possible while depicting the gorgeousness of nature."

Seen from afar, *Bird Blast* looks purely geometric and abstract. Close observation, however, reveals any number of what the artist calls "polluting" elements. Tomaselli has remarked that



abstraction and figuration "seem interchangeable and about the same thing. I don't think of them as polar opposites; they are not enemies, but then, I've taken a lot of enemy 'isms' and put them together in my work." In different ways and to different degrees, these words can be applied to Davie's, Krisanamis's, and Pearson's work as well: each of these artists introduces, isolates, and accentuates a variety of oppositions, allowing for the coexistence of contradictions, raising questions rather than answering them, presenting us with work that is visually animated and conceptually open-ended rather than statically resolved.

Between Baudelaire's idea of the beautiful as "always strange" and Hickey's as "always strangely familiar" lie over a hundred years in which the beautiful—along with the familiar and the strange—has been defined in many ways. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," the saying goes. The work of Davie, Krisanamis, Pearson, and Tomaselli, however, underscores that beauty resides not only in the eye but in the beholder's "brain, heart, gut and genitals."<sup>7</sup> Taken as a group, these artists present one of a number of approaches to the readdress of visual pleasure in the late 1990s, providing us with persuasively exciting, sensually stimulating, and intellectually engaging reasons to indulge in their art.

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Grateful acknowledgment is due to our colleagues Amy Hamlin, Laura Hoptman, Raul Loureiro, and David Frankel; to the artists; and to the lenders.

## notes

1. Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993), p. 18.
2. All quotes from the artists are drawn from interviews conducted on March 28, 1998.
3. Thomas B. Hess, "You Can Hang It in the Hall," *Art News*, vol. 64, no. 2 (April 1965): 49.
4. Op has been resuscitated before, most memorably by Ross Bleckner and Philip Taaffe. Of these four artists, only Davie quotes so directly from art history, and, as her words indicate, such quotation is only part of the story.
5. This and subsequent quotations concerning 1960s responses to *The Responsive Eye* are drawn from clippings preserved in the library of The Museum of Modern Art.
6. William Seitz, *The Responsive Eye* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1965), p. 7.
7. Peter Schjeldahl, "Beauty is Back," *The New York Times Magazine*, September 28, 1996, p. 161.

## biographies

Karin Davie. Born Toronto, Canada, 1965. Lives in New York.

Udomsak Krisanamis. Born Bangkok, Thailand, 1966. Lives in New York.

Bruce Pearson. Born Aruba, Dutch Antilles. Lives in New York.

Fred Tomaselli. Born Santa Monica, California, 1956. Lives in New York.

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Cover: Fred Tomaselli. *Bird Blast*. 1997. Resin, acrylic, collage, leaves, and pills on wood, 60 x 60" (152.4 x 152.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase