

**TERENCE DICK in Toronto 02/01/11**

**Ron Terada at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery | Yuula Benivolski at Roadside Attractions | Come Up to My Room & Hard Twist at the Gladstone Hotel**  
 posted by Terence Dick - January 31st, 2011.

There was [an article](#) in the New York Times last week on the possibility of the philosophical novel. The opening line, “Can a novelist write philosophically?” and subsequent less-than-positive response – oftentimes from novel-writing philosophers themselves – came to mind as I perused **Ron Terada’s** quasi-retrospective show, *Who I Think I Am*, at the **Justina M. Barnicke Gallery** this week. Can an artist create philosophical art? Yes, of course, is my immediate response. My drift into art criticism from a long schooling in Philosophy happened through Conceptualism. Most of what I’ve written over the years relies on the underlying assumption that art is a discourse of ideas. Most of the contemporary art that I know and love lives and breathes in that discourse. But then I look at Terada’s nth degree effort to push conceptualism to its limits and suddenly I’m on the other side, dismissing it as arid gestures without any... what?



Ron Terada, *Jack*, 2010, acrylic on canvas (courtesy the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery)

Well, the first thing he gets rid of is himself. That’s an old trick taken from the granddaddies of the scene, Cage and Duchamp, but he adds a post-Marxist twist by holding on to the market value of his name (on the poster, on the catalogue, on the work). The work is about names, which is not surprising for such a text-heavy show. It’s about the marketing of those names and the identity of the artist as he moves through the various machines of culture. Visually, it’s not about much, and that’s another inheritance from his Conceptual ancestors. There is no skill here, only ideas (which is to be expected). To paraphrase the title, who Terada is is only revealed through his choices: the music he compiles on exhibition soundtracks and the artists mentioned in his paintings of gallery ads. These appropriations erase any barriers between art and life (yet another conceptualist gesture); he simply recreates what’s already there in the world as a means of curating along certain themes (the replica of the rock group Big Star’s neon logo is the most telling work here as long as you know the short history of that far from “big” band). The closest Terada gets to a portrait is his multi-panel text painting of mages from Jack Goldstein’s memoirs. The creative anxieties and artistic bravado of the late artist play out against his economic failures and drug-fueled downward spiral in a way that makes you want to track down the rest of the book, but also read into it some identification with Terada. The rigor of his practice must bring him to similar dark places. Though, in the end, you’re left with the question: is that all there is? Be it aesthetic, epistemological, or metaphysical, it certainly is philosophical, but is it art? Sure, why the hell not? But is it any good? Is it worth it? I’d say no, because Terada doesn’t give you anything. He just takes it away. You’re better off making your own mix tape and reading the original memoirs, which sounds like a Fluxus-type call to find the artist within everyone - and it’s not what Terada is getting at - but it’s what I exit the gallery thinking, if only to resist the cynicism that pervades the work I leave behind.