

# Art issues.

September / October 1999

number 59

## Brad Spence

at POST, 4 June–3 July

Nothing is sacred in Brad Spence's austere satirical show, "Philosophy Minor." Five airbrushed paintings of philosophy book covers encircle the gallery like a kitsch mausoleum of thought. On each poster-size image, Spence has reproduced the proportion, color, and design of the original, but has removed all of the text, exposing a naked-looking sampling of art history. He pokes fun at art, philosophy, and even his apparent vehicle, revisionism.

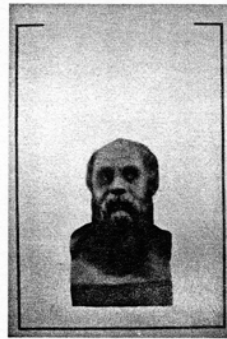
Scanning the five different styles of imagery, a viewer could mistake Spence's paintings as color separations of exhibition posters for the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Classical Sculpture of Antiquity, Biomorph Abstraction, and Neo-Geo Painting. Like a Rolling Stones song turned into muzac, the original work of art is vaguely recognizable in these tastefully institutionalized images used in the service of hack de-

sign. Learning that the paintings are based on philosophy book covers, a game of "Concentration" begins, matching the image with a remembered title of a text. If you don't recognize the book right off the bat, you can make an educated guess: *Socrates* (all works, 1999) sports a marble bust of the philosopher on a white ground framed with a thin double line open at the top edge where the title must have been. The game need not go far, since Spence has titled each painting with the title of the book it depicts.

Knowing the title of the book, however, doesn't necessarily identify it. The titles are as generic as the covers. I could have sworn *Objectivity*—an army of interlocked crosses drawn in perspective marching across the bottom half of the rectangular ground—was the cover image for

Deleuze and Guattari's *Thousand Plateaus*. Whether or not you know the actual books to which Spence's paintings refer, the images become illustrations of the titles' philosophical catch phrases. In *Theory of Ethics*, the abstract image anthropomorphizes under the influence of the title: on a field of white, a bunch of vertical red lines wobble uncertainly over a thick band of black. A Giacometti sculpture of a lone man illustrates *Irrational Man*, striding toward the edge of the steel gray rectangle of the cover. We are adept at reading art as an illustration of a philosophy. In deleting the text from his images, Spence calls up our Pavlovian responses to image-text relationships, and then turns them on their ear. Instead of focusing on the ideas of the texts, or the art on their covers, he looks at the pedestrian manifestation of both.

Spence's project mimics a third

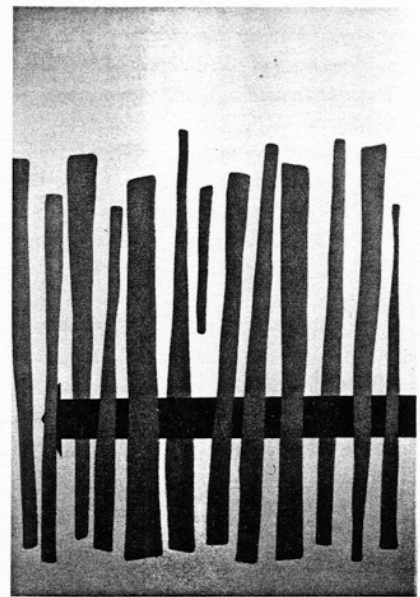


practice: Structuralism. His pieces could lead one to think that by appropriating visuals from philosophical and art-historical canons, he is engaging in a critique of white male hegemony. But in fact Spence reverses the strategies of such artists as Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer. While the means of advertising conveys their "personal is political" message, Spence empties the philosophy books of text and turns them into the most politically suspect of all mediums: abstract painting. From a distance, his images appear to be mechanically reproduced, but up close, the velvety texture of pigment on rag paper reveals his stylized graphics to be made of paint and applied by airbrush. Significantly, it is only after Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons that Spence's slick, professionally executed imagery could

conjure the canon of painting.

In accordance with the role philosophy books play in popular life—in contrast to, say, Campbell's soup cans—Spence presents the packaging of philosophy texts separately from the name of the product. In so doing, he circumvents our knee-jerk belief that ideas are immune to packaging, that the images attached to ideas are incidental to their true meanings. The fact that we don't use philosophy books everyday sets a seesaw between recognition and forgetting in motion, and emphasizes the obscurity and value of the texts themselves. Surprisingly, the guessing-game Spence throws us into reveals just how inextricably entwined words and images are. His pictures of objects recall actual experiences of individual books; dog-eared copies banging around students' satchels, traveling in milk crates with every move, and temporarily resting on the shelves of used bookshops. As in a dream, we encounter Spence's larger-than-lifese philosophy book covers wordless and beautified, as familiar friends whose names we have forgotten.

Ingrid Calame is an artist and writer who lives in Los Angeles.



Brad Spence  
*Socrates*, 1999  
Acrylic on paper  
63" x 42"

Brad Spence  
*Theory of Ethics*, 1999  
Acrylic on paper  
63" x 42"