

Julian Pretto Gallery

Minus Space, September 6-October 26, 2013

by Pac Pobric | 3 October 2013 | Brooklyn Rail

On May 24, 1995, a short obituary appeared in the *New York Times* for an art dealer named Julian Pretto. He had died two days earlier, at the age of 50, from AIDS-related complications. The *Times* gave a brief biography, listed some of the artists Pretto had exhibited, and noted that he left a number of works from his personal collection to the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut. The obituary closed with a list of his surviving family members. Thirteen days later, the *Chicago Tribune* reprinted an edited version of the same article, but cut the final section. The *Times* piece was 237 words; the *Tribune's* was only 151.

Who was Julian Pretto? That neither newspaper had much editorial space for the dealer was probably just one decision made among many in a busy newsroom, but it may also have been by Pretto's own design. He considered himself a facilitator for art, instead of its main story, and accordingly erased himself from the longer narrative. The nomadic gallerist kept few possessions and lived practically out of a suitcase for periods of his life. The *Times* noted that he "sometimes saved money by living in his galleries." Long stretches of his professional and personal life remain obscure, including several years spent in Costa Rica organizing shows and promoting local artists.

While Pretto worked in the background, the artists he exhibited in New York read like a who's who of post-war art: Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Nancy Haynes, Sol LeWitt, Li Trincere, Stephen Westfall. Pretto gave both Allan McCollum and John Zinsser their first New York solo shows. From the mid 1970s until his death, Pretto showed more than 100 artists, occasionally running several galleries at the same time. He had spaces in the West Village (MacDougal Street), SoHo (one on Sullivan Street and another on Greene), and even in Midtown (57th Street). For a time, he had a gallery on 6th Avenue. Toward the end of his life, he was hosting openings on a weekly basis.

Other details about Pretto's life are patchier. We know that he was born in Chicago in 1945 and was raised 99 miles west in the town of Oglesby, Illinois. After studying at the University of Illinois, he moved back to Chicago in 1968, where he briefly worked as an assistant at the Richard Gray Gallery. Later that same year, he left for New York and found a job with Richard Feigen, but Pretto's ambitions seem to have outstripped any ties to a single job. By the early 1970s, he was putting together his own exhibitions in empty spaces in Tribeca, and in 1976 he organized what later became known as the Fine Arts Building at 105 Hudson Street, which would soon house the New Museum of Contemporary Art, Printed Matter Inc., and Artists Space.

But biographies are more complicated than just what's written down, and *Julian Pretto Gallery* at MINUS SPACE, organized by Matthew Deleget and Zinsser with

Rossana Martinez and Megan Govin, is an attempt to tell Pretto's story through the art he showed. On view are 45 of the dealer's artists, often represented by works that were actually shown in the Pretto galleries. Beautiful pieces by Antonella Piemontese ("Path on an Open Page (43)" [1991], a collaged page from a book with selectively revealed text), Olivier Mosset ("Choke" [1972], an ostensibly monochromatic work full of life and movement), Kathy Drasher ("Untitled" [1990], a small, eight-sided pink picture), and René Pierre Allain ("1st Patch" [1986-88], a steel-framed painting of a cruciform) speak to Pretto's catholic interests. The pieces are all in dialogue without raising the same issues.

Pretto had more than one gift, but among the most important was his lack of overly refined taste. Though he had an affinity for abstraction, he never considered it a monolith; it was instead a conversation to be had, a way of sharing ideas. Patience was his virtue. He would often exhibit work that wasn't immediately palatable because he saw that it was potentially more important than even he could understand. Art for Pretto was a question with many possible answers, and abstraction was just one way of proposing solutions, rather than a mathematical formula for success. That's why, no doubt, some works in the show fail. But Pretto was an artist's dealer. He was willing to share in the risk that every artist takes when making his or her work public. That gamble was his intellectual bread and butter. When it paid off, it did so in dividends. But Pretto always gave that sum back, to his artists and to their audiences, and then receded into the background. Generosity: that was his greatest virtue.

<http://brooklynrail.org/2013/10/artseen/julian-pretto-gallery>