

INTERVIEW BY
CHRISTIAN
VIVEROS-FAUNE

Bruce Pearson

BRUCE PEARSON is, simply put, one of America's most important exponents of painting this decade. Along with a reduced company of artists, like Karin Davie, Fred Tomaselli and Lisa Yuskavage, Pearson has helped inject new life into the Lazarus corpse of painting, in his case abstract painting.

Pearson's large-scale works, made more monumental by their deep-relief quality, look at once like swirling coral reefs and hallucinatory 3-D landscapes, rapturous fields of color and highly textured surfaces of well-calibrated, but ambiguous, meaning. Cast from phrases literally or figuratively clipped from, among other sources, fashion magazines, product catalogs, bad television and modern literature, Pearson's dense pictures are carved from modest styrofoam, then painted a welter of clashing or complementary colors.

Giving language a palpable, material form and unabashedly keying into the look of 60s psychedelia, Pearson achieves what few of his contemporaries manage: an active melding of high concept and the look of popular culture, a rigorous, critical, complex content and a seductive, no less sophisticated, accessible visual appeal.

Visiting him just a few weeks before his exhibition at Manhattan's Ronald Feldman gallery, I found Bruce Pearson's Williamsburg studio in an uncharacteristic tizzy. Overrun by a film crew, the painting quarters had been momentarily commandeered into a makeshift dressing room for actor Steve Buscemi. Crowded around the walls of the studio were most of the contents of Pearson's newest show, including a striking painting titled *Ecstatic Explosions of Romantic Love*. The painting, the artist informed me, referenced Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* for its color scheme. Intrigued, I set out to explore what the ambitious Bruce Pearson was on about.

Let's start by talking about your working method. Where do you start?

Usually what I do first is compile a lot of text. It's all found text. Whatever I'm reading goes in there.

But I know you, you don't exactly read aimlessly.

Well, it's amazing how much stuff you can simply get from the newspaper. I get quotes from all over, from journals, from books I'm reading. I compile the stuff, put it into notebooks. I work on about six different series of paintings simultaneously. Each series has its own conceptual structure and the series are interrelated. I find text for each series. Then I do a drawing. If the drawing engages me, then I move into the painting.

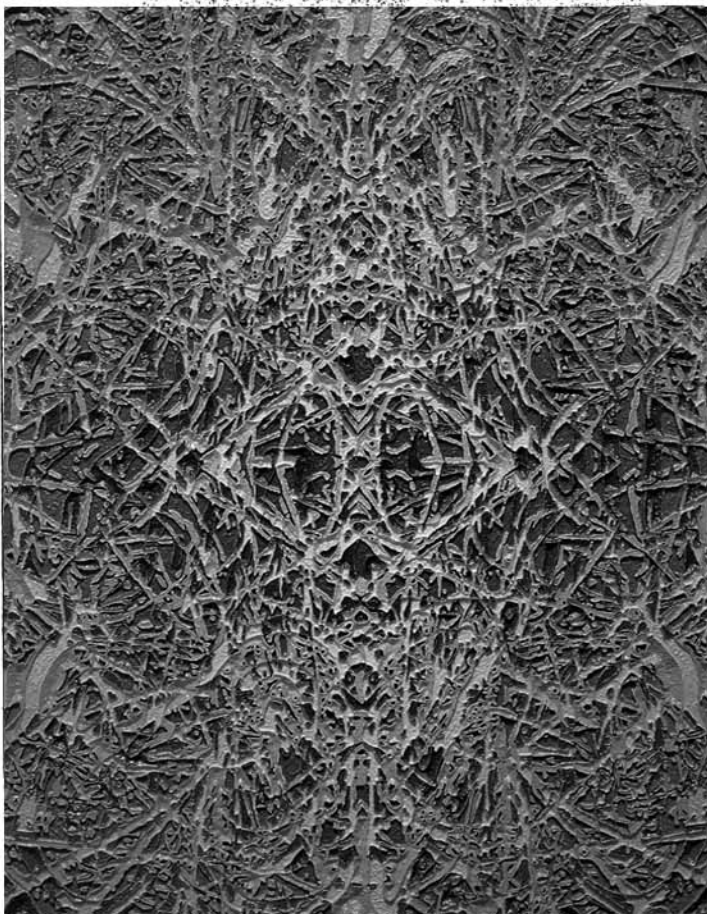
Do you do any other preliminary work besides the drawings?

Well, I do some notebook sketches to try and push the ideas around a bit. A lot of this body of work has started off as photography. I took, for example, a photograph of grass that I used in one painting [he indicates a large, vibrantly colored painting]. The image is of a patch of tall grass, about 4 inches high. I took it with my digital camera, did a little cutting and pasting, then inverted the image.

So, this beautiful orange, violet and green landscape had its source not in found text but in one of your photographs?

No, no. I always use text. I always start

Art



BRUCE PEARSON, COUNTER SONGS, 2000

Making reference not only to Op but also to psychedelia.

out with text. The text is rather difficult to read with this light, but it's definitely there. The text is very important to this piece, as it is to all my work. There's a C, then an O, a U, an N, a T, an E, an R and so on... "Counter Songs."

Right, right. I see it now.

I project the image on top of the text. That way, the image appears wherever the text and the image intersect. If you concentrate on the text, you miss the image. Both components tell a story, but they can't be read at once. You get a third reading if you examine the whole structure of the painting. Deciphering either the text or the image becomes impossible then. To activate one or the other, you have to separate out each component from the painting as a whole.

You mentioned that you were working on six series at a time. Are these series that you're working on specifically for your show at Ronald Feldman or are they ideas that you've been working on for a while?

They are ongoing series. I'm always trying to add new things to them, like

linity" series. That series references the way the male has been represented since feminism. This painting, for instance, is titled *Why Can't Love Come in a Six-Pack?* Originally, I used Ralph Lauren interior decorator colors for this series. Lately, I've been pushing for a more complicated palette. The new painting in the series is titled *My Planet Wants Me Dead*. In that painting, I used the palette from Leonardo's *The Virgin of the Rocks*.

Now that we've touched on some of the ideas in your work—like your use of text, your changing palettes, your quotation of the mass media—I wonder: How did you arrive at your particular style? How did you wind up making work based on optical art and these thick reliefs?

Well, I was trying to reference psychedelia, which I've had a fondness for since high school. I started by using text and it immediately occurred to me to make it hallucinatory. At some point I did a drawing that was very Op-driven. After that, I thought to myself, "My God, I'm committing artistic suicide!" Ironically, I got very, very nervous moving into this work because I was dealing with what seemed to be the most despised art movement of the 20th century. Conversely, that very fact interested me. It seemed to me that it was something to look into...because it had been so...well, in its own way, forbidden, placed beyond the pale.

There's a Warhol quote where he talks about "doing the wrong thing at the right time."

Yes, very much so. Six months after doing this work, my whole life changed. I had my first show at Pierogi. Then MOMA came into the picture; they were doing a reexamination of Optical art in their "Projects" series of exhibitions. They had observed a number of younger artists making reference not only to Op but also to psychedelia.

You were in that MOMA "Projects" show with Fred Tomaselli, Karin Davie and Udomsak Krisanamsa. Now, there's a line of yours that I used in a previous article that I want to repeat to you. You said by way of explaining the sudden explosive turn your career took: "I had a show at Pierogi, then I had a show at MOMA."

Boom.

Boom. That's quite impressive.

Before the Pierogi show I had come to think that nothing was going to happen to me in my lifetime, that everything was going to pass me by. Then, eight months later, I had a solo exhibition, there was a group show at Exit Art, there was MOMA. A lot of people had not seen my work, so that's when I gained my first real exposure.

Did the impulse to do Op-inspired work and text come at the same time?

It started with a collaboration with another artist. We had this idea to do an art piece a day based on talk shows. We would write down all the text, concentrating on material that would exemplify what was being discussed. Eventually, I did a series of psychedelic posters based on these texts. I began to deal more and more with specific ideas. I started by using domestic situations as content. Then, I started thinking about other things in the world. I started a series of white paintings based on spirituality today. I'm not talking about the Virgin Mary, but about people who claim to have had sexual encounters with extraterrestrials and crystal energy grid systems and remote healing, which is actually the title of one of my paintings. I wanted to use this idea of whiteness, of our instinctual relationship to white and its associations with notions of clarity, purity. Then I began work on all-black paintings. I wanted to see whether I

could stir instinctual reactions to certain palettes. I found out, for example, that my black paintings were received by people as mysterious or powerful. They lent themselves to that interpretation. I noticed that if you use a certain kind of palette, then people will generally respond in a particular way.

Perhaps your use of monochromes in your early paintings also had something to do with your working out the relationship between abstraction and text. Those two have historically not gone well together. There's the well-worn purist tradition of abstraction to fight against.

Well, what I'm really trying to do is to investigate the ideas of abstraction, image and text. How they interrelate, how they move back and forth to open things up rather than shut things down.

So are your paintings abstractions? Or are they qualified abstractions?

They are abstractions, but they are also image and they're also text.

So you're really straddling—

No, I'm not straddling, I'm weaving. I'm weaving together all these elements. And I think they do get woven together as a single structure.

Maybe this is a good time to elaborate on the sculptural or relief elements in your work. When did you begin working with these elements?

As a student, I looked, along with everyone else, at Rauschenberg and Johns. Stella's shaped canvases were also around. There seemed to be this idea in the air about breaking down traditional notions of what painting could be. I've always thought of my work as painting, because one of the fundamental things that defines painting is that it is essentially frontal. Even though my paintings have a relief quality, I still think of them very much as painting and not sculpture.

But your use of relief is extraordinary; they are not reliefs like you'd find in a print or a painting heavy with impasto. Your reliefs jut out from the wall about 5 inches.

Well the whole object is around 5 inches thick. The relief part only comes to about an inch or so.

But your work is not just simply pigment applied to canvas. What are the materials that you use to make your paintings?

It's paint on styrofoam. I carve the styrofoam with a hot wire. I came upon styrofoam as a medium after some experimentation and advice from friends. I had this friend with this heavy Parisian accent by way of Tokyo, and she said, "Why not use the stuff that they pack refrigerators in?" Well, I was with a group of people, and it took us 45 minutes to figure out what she was saying. Then another friend said that he cut styrofoam to build theater sets. He mentioned the use of the hot wire. He told me all I needed was a car battery, a sewing machine pedal and the hot wire. He said he'd hook me up. So a couple of days later we went down to Canal St. and got all the stuff. I've been working with it ever since.

Let me go back for a moment. When did the idea of doing art first occur to you?

I wanted to be a cartoonist starting in grade school. I didn't see a lot of art exhibitions when I was young. Then I saw the "Dada and Surrealism" exhibition at the L.A. County Museum of Art. That experience totally changed my life. I was so overwhelmed, I wanted to do something besides cartooning. I became very interested in the history of art. I learned to draw the figure properly, drew perspective and began devouring volumes on 20th-century art...

I always knew that I wanted to be an artist. What changed was the form the ambition took. When I graduated high school I visited the San Francisco Art Institute. I really wanted to study there, but my parents made it tough on me.

They wanted you to do something practical.

They wanted me to go to a community college for a couple of years. But the community college hired all my high school art teachers. I'd already learned all I could from them. This made me even more dead set on going to art school. Eventually my parents relented and paid for my first year. I got scholarships after that.

Did you think then that it was possible to make a living as an artist?

Well, I sort of thought: "There must be a way." Of course, I never thought it would be as rough as it was. After the Art Institute, I went through this phase where I thought living was more interesting than art. When I got over that, I returned to making art and moved to New York... I hung out with a lot of experimental musicians. Eventually, I connected with a lot of the artists living in Williamsburg. I was living out here myself then.

And eventually you curated a very large show of Williamsburg art called "Just What Do You Think You're Doing Dave?" A lot of people still talk about that show when describing the development of the Williamsburg arts scene. Why do you think that is?

Well, I think it was the first large survey of the artists in the neighborhood. A lot of great people were in it. There was Amy Sillman, Fred Tomaselli, Rory Paine, Joe Amrhein, Charles Spurrer, Polly Apfelbaum, Eve Sussman, Simon Lee, Greg Stone, David Brody... James Siena, Sean Mellyn, Peter Soriano... I wish I had the card with me... David Byrne, one of the guys from Sonic Youth, David Scher... Essentially, I had been doing lots of studio visits. Then, I was given this opportunity to use this building that could accommodate a lot of great work. So I thought to myself, "How hard could it be?" [laughing] After losing 10 pounds, I realized just how hard it was. In retrospect it turned out to be very satisfying, but not satisfying enough to want to repeat the experience.

I'm aware that this is something of a cliché as a question, but I'm going to ask you anyway. What artists have you found to be defining influences on your work?

The two painters that most interest me right now are Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke [and] how they are able to deal with lots of ideas in their respective bodies of work. Another big influence is John Cage; his ideas about chance and indeterminacy, about opening up the work to different experiments. I've also been rereading writers like Joyce, Calvino and Georges Perec. I'm continually interested in how they deal with structure; essentially, I would like to parallel what they do in visual terms. In my new work, for example, I'm looking to access an intellectual and emotional range that goes beyond the simple, attractive surface quality of Pop and Op. I'm looking to combine fashion photography, classical palettes and found text.

I'm always reminded of an excellent survey exhibition in the mid-90s at MOMA called "The Maximal Sixties." That exhibition showed that the era produced strong figuration, strong conceptual work and very strong abstraction, while also entertaining many other artistic currents. The 60s was a period of great experimentation, not only in the visual arts but in music as well. Then came Minimalism, which, as lovely as it can be, was this driven, puritan movement that was about shutting down possibilities. Now, it seems to me, things are opening up again. There are new media and the resurgence of old media, and both are being interpreted in brand-new ways. Many artists are being affected by these new possibilities. Today I believe there are probably more possibilities for art than ever. And that of course is very exciting.

Bruce Pearson's new paintings are on view through Feb. 10 at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, 31 Mercer St. (betw. Canal & Grand Sts.), 226-3232.