

IN CONVERSATION

# Bruce Pearson

## with Chris Martin

The Brooklyn Rail visited Bruce Pearson at his Williamsburg, Brooklyn studio on a rainy evening in early May. The studio is compact and efficient. Shelves are filled with acrylic and oil paints, flat files hold finished gouache drawings. Several work tables are piled with art books, CDs, brushes, and tools, including a thin "hot wire" connected to a battery. The walls are covered with large new paintings leaning one on top of the other. The paintings have an intense, almost shocking physical presence. The dense overlapping forms are cut inches deep into styrofoam and covered with layers of vibrating color. Underlying text, images of landscape, and swirling mandala patterns slowly emerge and compete with each other in pulsing and hallucinatory color shifts. His new show opened May 13th and runs through June 21st at the Ronald Feldman Gallery.

**Chris Martin (Rail):** Bruce, do you think you would be making these paintings if you had never taken LSD?

**Bruce Pearson:** I think that was an early formative experience. I'm interested in the whole idea of the psychedelic experience being transformative, where, if you take some substance then that's going to make you go through certain changes. So I've been very interested in art that makes you experience perceptual changes.

**Rail:** So that the art is a drug (Laughter)

**Pearson:** Amongst other things.

**Rail:** There also seems to be a more direct relationship between this work and psychedelic vision. These paintings seem to capture the actual kind of patterning and intense color light that are manifest under the influence of psychedelics.

**Pearson:** Well, I'm playing with that vision. It's been a thing that I've always really liked a lot. So, for this particular series, I'm drawing upon all of that history, in a very intentional manner.

**Rail:** You mean the look of 1960s Fillmore and Avalon Ballroom posters?

**Pearson:** Yeah, it's coming out of that whole psychedelic idea. You know, I was experiencing all this stuff first-hand, growing up in San Francisco, during that time. When I was very young I wanted to do posters, I wanted to do the record albums.

**Rail:** Did you make psychedelic posters?

**Pearson:** When I was a high school kid, sure. And then I went to art school and I became a minimalist. I was working with squares for a long time. I was defining the square within the square within the square and they became thinner and thinner and less and less material, and I was reaching the point where I thought maybe two more paintings and there wouldn't be anything left for me. (Laughter) I started looking out again, instead of looking in. Now I feel that I can move in almost any direction that I want. It just keeps opening up instead of closing down... So ten years ago, when I started using text, I started to do these hallucinatory images drawing upon hallucinatory yet, in the sense of its unreality, texts found in TV talk shows for instance. So, I wanted to be playful with that language and it was one of the first things that I started to explore.

**Rail:** Psychedelic imagery came back because of the decision to use text?

**Pearson:** Yes. I started to realize that by using text, I could move into a lot of other areas. I could use language to move into other languages of image, languages of color...

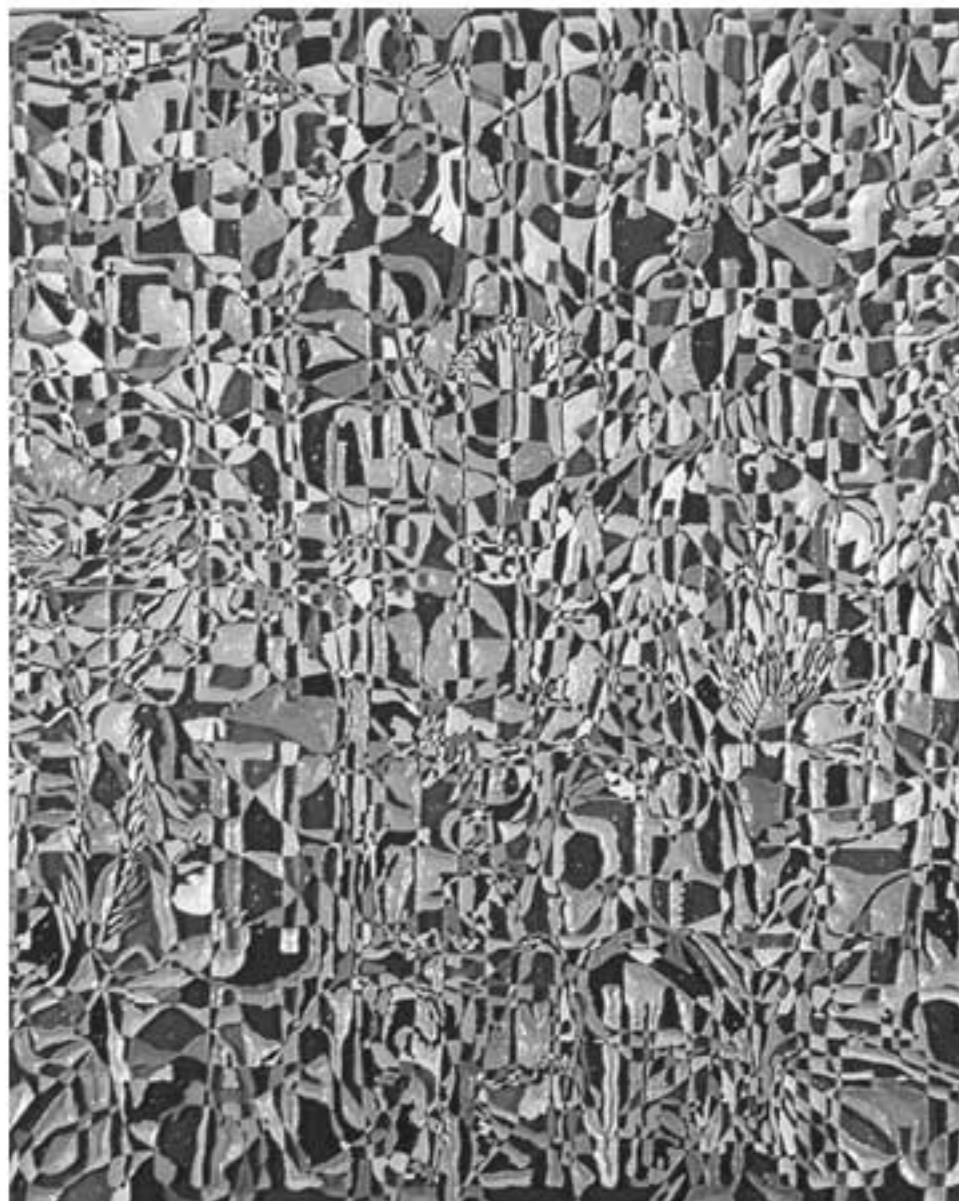
**Rail:** Your name came up in conversation the other day

and this young painter said "oh the Styrofoam guy..." So I guess the technology of your paintings is kind of unique. Let me ask you— how do you make these paintings?

**Pearson:** Well it's very low-tech. I always start with a drawing. I work on the ideas on paper. Whatever I can draw I can cut, so that after I've done the drawing on paper I transfer the drawing to parts of the Styrofoam and cut the Styrofoam with this hot wire.

**Rail:** So you cut the drawing into a relief on the styrofoam and then begin the painting process?

**Pearson:** Yes. I start with about six gallons of different kinds of acrylics, modeling paste acrylic, and build up my surface. And then, after painting it with acrylic, I continue to paint over the image with oil paint. I coat everything with two layers of oil to get the luminosity of color. Then I take a roller, a hard rubber roller, and I roll over the whole painting and I find the physical high-lights. Then I paint an



Bruce Pearson, "Encyclopedia #1 (Lines Scattered from Chantal Razares & Father's Plus False Names)," (2003), oil and acrylic on Styrofoam, Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. Photo by Zedman/Fremont.

illusionistic high-light on top of the original high-light so that it gives it an extra added kick. But I always start with the words of the painting.

**Rail:** So the drawings start with text?

**Pearson:** Yes. My original structure is all letters and then on top of the words I do different types of manipulation. Sometimes I use photographic images that I have taken and manipulated via computer so that the image is intersecting the words. In this painting, "The Ridiculous Bodies of the Spirits," the image and the text, everything merges.

**Rail:** I see the initial image is of light on the water, it looks like light on the ocean.

**Pearson:** Right.

**Rail:** And then woven inside of that is the text.

**Pearson:** Yes.

**Rail:** Now this text is very hard to make out. Do you want people to be able to make out the text?

**Pearson:** I mean, if they want to, some of it is very hard to make out and sometimes words just pop out. You can physically see the letters, because each word, physically, is all there. So all the information is continued, it's just that it's

getting intersected with the image. I am playing on the romantic tradition and the idea of transcendence. The text "The ridiculous bodies of the spirits" comes from a French prose poem, from the turn of the last century.

**Rail:** So the language you use is found language.

**Pearson:** It's almost always found text, sometimes it's appropriated. I've been getting most of my text from radio, television, or newspapers. Whenever there's something that I really want, I write it down and save it.

**Rail:** It's interesting that you only use found text. You're a well read and articulate person, do you ever use your own writings?

**Pearson:** No, no.

**Rail:** But you collect writing.

**Pearson:** I collect writing from everything that I'm reading. I'm interested especially in Oulipo writing and Georges Perec, sound text poetry, and writing that comes after *Finnegan's Wake*.

**Rail:** So on the one hand you're using snippets of found text, and also you're saying that the layered structure of your paintings is influenced by larger literary structures.

**Pearson:** That's been a big influence. I'm trying to combine the literary with the visual so that both these things keep turning over on themselves. These paintings are dealing with image, abstraction and texts, simultaneously weaving them in different ways. Sometimes the text comes out front, sometimes the image comes out front. Sometimes it's playing the abstract of the image and sometimes it's the reverse. But they all start with text—the text is my grid. Now in this painting that I'm calling "Encyclopedia #1" I've assembled the text from different news sources. Over the last couple of years, I've become obsessed with news, as a number of us have. I underlined key words from different articles. I would choose an article and underline the key phrases, and then compile them and choose some fragmented phrases from the story.

**Rail:** Hearing you describe this procedure, it sounds almost like John Cage's use of elaborate chance systems.

**Pearson:** Well I'm a gigantic Cage fan. I'm crazy about him. I love him. I have almost all of his recordings and was lucky enough to have met him a few times.

**Rail:** Yes I met him too. Just an amazing presence...

**Pearson:** So actually yes, this does have a lot of elements of chance going on because then, I also came across this beautiful 18th-century image encyclopedia and Diderot's encyclopedia, and so after I've written out the text, then I project fragments of the encyclopedia's illustrations on top of the text to layer these particular images of seashells, butterflies, and moths and things. And so it creates this embedded meaning. In "Encyclopedia #1" no color repeats, every color here is different.

**Rail:** You know when I look at that painting it's visually overwhelming, almost hallucinogenic. If this was the first painting of yours I ever saw, I wonder if I would even locate text.

**Pearson:** If you know that it's there you can start to decipher it... but, you know, I love the idea of the subliminal, and dealing with things that are there but not there.

**Rail:** Well your work has an immediate, intense impact as an abstraction, but then there seems to be a natural desire to then come up to the painting and examine it, almost, topographically, inch-by-inch. There are all these peculiar little swarms and conglomerates of form that are very specific. Then as I back up I start to see text... Do you expect the viewer to take the time to slowly decipher them? Do you give people the titles?

**Pearson:** I do give titles and generally— with some exceptions— the title is what the painting says. You can physically decipher it, if you want to. In the drawings it is much easier to spot; in the paintings someone can puzzle over them. But I think part of it is I want this work to be seen over a period of time. And, you know, it's not something that you are going to be able to figure out in three minutes or something. I'm trying to set up a complex system that's going to take the viewer to a lot of different places. So there's not a single place one arrives at. Each viewer is going to have a different experience each time

they encounter the work.

**Rail:** How do you draw in these landscape images?

**Pearson:** I use an opaque projector. I take photographs of water and project them on the surface.

**Rail:** Have you ever exhibited photographs?

**Pearson:** No. The photos are things that I use as working drawings. I use a computer to weave the information together in a rudimentary manner. The photos I manipulate with Photoshop. Sometimes I divide the photograph into four and I turn it into a mandala or a Rorschach. I take some of these black and white photographs of whirlpools and I turn them into four parts of a mandala. And then adding information with color and text pushes the image into another place.

**Rail:** I think of your work as abstract. I don't know why I put that label on it. But now I see images of landscape in many of these paintings.

**Pearson:** Well, I push it towards the abstract— abstraction is very important to me.

**Rail:** This weaving of information is camouflaged. One has to decode your paintings.

**Pearson:** I'm very interested in camouflage and the topographical— these are key words for me. I want this thing to be constantly transforming. So when you start to go one way, it takes you to another place.

**Rail:** Transforming before your eyes?

**Pearson:** Yes. It's not a static experience. It can't be reduced to one image you know... This layering is going to present an experience that makes you go through changes while you're looking at the painting.

**Rail:** When my brain starts reading words, I stop experiencing just the color, for instance, and I stop looking at larger visual patterns. When I am focused on specific, coded information then I stop just seeing. Then when I forget the text I flash back to visual pleasures...

**Pearson:** Yes, exactly. It's constantly shifting. Someone was recently over and said that these paintings make you use both sides of your brain. I like that.

**Rail:** Each of these paintings seems to have a specific individual color scheme. How do you come to the color for each painting?

**Pearson:** I'm drawing upon different types of information for different palettes. Originally I was exploring received ideas of color and good taste and I was drawing upon Ralph Lauren color chips and stuff, but then I got bored with that. I was recently in Italy and I fell in love with Italian Renaissance painting again. I've been investigating that particular palette and doing reproductions of some of the books that I have, and trying to break down the colors in the computer so that I can understand the palette in these particular paintings. So for this one, "Cybergasm, Machines, and Male Hysteria," I broke down an element of a Bellini landscape and I drew it against a Giotto with these blues and grays and I was trying to understand what the Italian sky palette is. In the painting "Everything Is Not Trauma," I was looking at a lot of Indian miniatures; I've been very fascinated by their palette... I love those paintings. I tried to understand some of the elements of that particular color, and ebb it into the painting. I get these weird violets, against these gray-blues and off-pink and strange ochres.

**Rail:** So you're coming up with specific art historical references to layer the color?

**Pearson:** Yes, and to layer the meaning, and to make reference to visual memory. I have been working on another series— *Spirituality Today*— with texts like "Crystal Energy, Grid Systems And Remote Healing," and "Sexual Contact with Extraterrestrials." They are all white paintings. Actually though they aren't really all white because I use up to 120 different whites for these paintings.

**Rail:** I saw a beautiful one the other day at Cliff Diver's loft. Are you serious about these spiritual ideas or are you being cynical?

**Pearson:** Well, I'm being irreverent, but I'm also being playful. I have a regard for these ideas and yet at the same

time I'm being a little light-handed with it. Spirituality has been so debased by a lot of religious and fundamentalist people that I'm ambivalent about it. A lot of these things involve certain paradoxes. So I wouldn't say that they're cynical because like that painting that you saw at Cliff's is a very serious painting even though the text, yes, is a little playful.

**Rail:** I think that most white paintings reference some spiritual territory...

**Pearson:** It's like playing off a Robert Rauschenberg, so when you read about Rauschenberg, it's always about his spirituality, so I'm playing into these received ideas like white equals spiritual purity. I want to explore these assumptions about language and color.

**Rail:** Well, that painting at Cliff's house has this wonderful inch by inch beauty with all the different pale pinks and blues and off whites. That painting gives so much pleasure. This is something about your work that I feel you share with fellow painters like Fred Tomasselli or James Siena, and that is the inch-by-inch particular finish and intensity of the paintings. And you all share an intense work process. You have developed an almost insane personal craft to make your paintings.

**Pearson:** Yeah, I mean at this point, I don't even realize the

intensity of the labor, I mean I've developed this kind of idiosyncratic way of working with relief and I've been working this way for over twenty years now. It was just something that happened in order to realize what I wanted to do. So I'm really clueless about how much work is involved.



Bruce Pearson, "A Utopia of Dust" (2001), oil and acrylic on Styrofoam 47 1/2 x 64 x 5 1/2 inches.  
Photo by Zedman/Tremont, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

**Rail:** How long do you work on one of these paintings?

**Pearson:** Usually it takes about two months. I've worked with someone over the last five years, the amazing Kristi Brunfeld, who helps a great deal so I can do about 12 paintings a year.

**Rail:** Another aspect of this is that you will have a blueprint or system of what you're doing and then you set about executing it. Do you ever stop in the middle and change the whole thing?

**Pearson:** No. That's why I do a lot of preparatory work beforehand, to make sure that this is something that I want

to explore further. I've been working for so long... I've been an artist, a pretty serious artist, since I was a teenager so I pretty much know what it is that I want

**Rail:** You know what you're doing.

**Pearson:** I sort of know what I'm doing. (Laughter)... and sometimes not. In a way I'm constantly not knowing, but I can work out a lot of the new ideas on paper on the flat surface. Of course the physicality of the relief really does change things. During the two months when I'm building up the surface, when I'm building the painting up, I can go through a lot of different colors, and in terms of the color, it's going to give a very different experience.

**Rail:** Can you talk about some specific contemporary influences?

**Pearson:** There are just so many influences, and they keep changing all the time. I'm influenced by what's happening in the world, I'm influenced by what I read, and what I listen to as much as what I see in the galleries and museums. I loved Johns for many years although I feel that the last twenty years of his life he's been on the decline. I really liked the Chuck Close retrospective, the way that it started strong and it just kept getting stronger. Richter is also like that for me and Polke is a very interesting artist because he

keeps changing things up and staying fresh and being inventive and catching me off guard all the time and I'm going "Wow, you know, this is how I want to work later on."

**Rail:** You have worked quite steadily— I mean you weren't a hot twenty-something artist. Like a number of painters we know here in Williamsburg, you were a mature and complex artist already by the time you started to receive attention.

**Pearson:** Well, I mean, my career is just getting started.

**Rail:** You were a founding member of this Williamsburg art community. Can we talk about that?

**Pearson:** Well the great thing about being in this community for twenty plus years is that I feel that artists of our generation shared something of the history of where and when we grew up. We were drawing upon things that artists of the previous generation weren't drawing upon. Then there's all these fabulous artists that I know that were around here so it's been great to be in dialogue... you know, to go to people's studios to see what they were working on, to hang out with them at parties, to see their shows. I have incredible respect for anyone who is a serious artist and you know the whole community has been amazing. Although now it seems to be shifting a bit because we are all working so hard.

**Rail:** You mean less parties? We all go home earlier? (Laughter)

**Pearson:** Yeah. You look back on that time and you go "That was pretty nice," the whole thing. But I feel better about my life now than I've ever felt before. I feel like I've been working all my life towards what it is that we do as artists. Which I guess is making art. I've always admired artists that just kept gaining depth in their life. The artists in history that I really love— a lot of them are ones that just kept building on what it was that they were working at. So instead of being a crash-and-burn artist, by the time I'm old I want to be kicking harder than I've ever kicked in my life. ■