

Bruce Pearson at Ronald Feldman

"Look at any word long enough," Robert Smithson wrote, "and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void." Far from being a stable thing, language is filled with slippage and corrosion. This is especially important in Bruce Pearson's paintings, in which short, enigmatic phrases, culled from the artist's reading, are combined with intricate, mind-bending abstract forms, often in vivid colors, and other eclectic images that can be just barely discernible. Words come into view only to fragment into brilliantly colored bits and purely abstract patterns.

Pearson's unusual technique involves constructing his paintings from chunky Styrofoam panels that he cuts and shapes with a hot wire before applying both oil and acrylic paint. This perfectly fits his subject matter. Craters, crannies, ridges and protrusions make the impastoed surfaces quite three-dimensional, and subject the picture planes to upheaval and disruption.

This exhibition, with nine paintings from the last two years and a selection of related gouaches on paper, underscored how explorative and nuanced Pearson's eye-popping works can be. Some of the more electrified paintings, with their amusement-park colors and psychedelic excesses (mind-altering experiences, whether via drugs or something else, are among Pearson's many references), also have subtle political themes. *An effective low-cost solution for combating mind control* features orange, dark orange, green and blue letters crazily radiating toward the borders, along with an assortment of abstract shapes. A combina-

tion of free-form improvisation and ultra-precise patterning loosely suggests a Tibetan mandala and a topographic map of some fantastical world.

The title *Encyclopedia 3 (relative calm sounds of gunfire and footsteps sadly familiar sheds some light)* includes words taken from a *New York Times* article about Iraq. The painting's swirling, parti-colored shapes and patterns, however, counter the title's message, pushing things to festive, even ecstatic, levels. This is one of many instances when Pearson's paintings convincingly strive for transcendence. The artist often fuses current and historical information: this painting, for example, features renditions of images from an 18th-century pictorial encyclopedia. *Uncovering facts they would prefer you never hear about*, with the words of the title partly obscured by multiple, wavy bands, seems prescient amid mounting government scandals.

Elsewhere, Pearson's hybrid abstractions have a sublime streak, for instance the gouache on paper *State of non-descent*. White splotches float above a blue ground crammed with letters. Though abstract, the work conjures undulating waters, drifting clouds and, more implicitly, the distant view of our beautifully blue, cloud-covered planet when seen from space. From a large piece in multiple shades of white, replete with a dense array of mystical, religious and extraterrestrial references, to works that suggest strange new life forms emerging from even stranger environments, this exhibition emphasized Pearson's range as an abstractionist, in visually riveting paintings that are also chock-full of linguistic, cultural and personal references. —Gregory Volk

Bruce Pearson: *Encyclopedia 3 (relative calm sounds of gunfire and footsteps sadly familiar sheds some light)*, 2005, oil and acrylic on Styrofoam, 90 by 72 inches; at Ronald Feldman.

