



Bruce Pearson: *Encyclopedia 4* (*Lurched from crisis to crisis, what could happen without a decisive move, agreed they had no choice*), 2009, oil and acrylic on Styrofoam, 90¼ by 70½ inches; at Ronald Feldman.

BRUCE PEARSON RONALD FELDMAN

Bruce Pearson's paintings are exquisitely prepared implosions, their daunting optical complexity the result of strategies equally complicated. Worlds within worlds—coloristic, sculptural, verbal, technological and cultural—are layered and compacted in the paintings: polychrome bas-reliefs with surfaces that suggest variously, though consistently within each piece, high-gloss ceramic, crocheted yarn, cast paper, heavily worked expressionist impasto and posterlike psychedelia. They have elaborate titles, as in *Encyclopedia 4* (*Lurched from crisis to crisis, what could happen without a decisive move, agreed they had no choice*), 2009. With its hallucinatory derangement of the picture plane, this work calls to mind computer-generated stereograms, dense pixelated fields that yield a three-dimensional image once you get the focus right. Each painting constitutes a Borgesian confabulation, a library of Babel's interpenetrating codes of thought and sight, accessible if only you had the key.

Pearson uses materials distinctively. With hot wire, he carves slabs of Styrofoam, to which he adds a layer of prepared flat Styrofoam pieces; he then impregnates the entirety with acrylic, often finishing with oil paint. (There were 10 such works on view at Feldman, dating from 2007 to '09, along with 10 gouaches on paper.) Color systems differ from piece to piece, each with its own rules and references. In *Encyclopedia 4* . . . , no color repeats precisely, although the painting's

very subtle distinctions of hue are not necessarily apparent to the eye. Some of the paintings seem at first to be two shades of off-white but contain countless chromatic variations.

The phenomenon of focus itself is paramount, both experientially and philosophically, throughout his astonishing work. Barely legible embeddings of text in each painting are decipherable, if at all, only by toggling between mental and optical regimes. These verbal components—quotations from here and there—comprise their own linguistic modalities, ranging from product promotion and poetry to what we might call "found words," wherever discovered. Pearson likewise derives his imagery from all over. The black-and-white *An answer that was really at the end of the line* (2008) is, for example, based on an aerial photograph of mountainous terrain and a text by musicologist/filmmaker Harry Smith. Like other artists who have reinvented the material terms of painting for themselves—Jane Dickson (oil on Astroturf), Joe Zucker (pigmented cotton balls), Jasper Johns (sculpt-metal on canvas), to name a few—Pearson questions and reinvigorates the perennially beleaguered medium.

—Robert Berlind