

Art in America

FEBRUARY 2014

EXHIBITION REVIEWS



View of Bruce Pearson's *Inhale*, 2013, mixed mediums, dimensions variable; at Ronald Feldman.

BRUCE PEARSON

Ronald Feldman

Whether by coincidence or zeitgeist, throughout the fall of 2013, New York was full of writerly art: Christopher Wool's Guggenheim Museum survey; the Drawing Center's "Drawing Time, Reading Time" exhibition and a related show in the Drawing Room of manuscripts by Emily Dickinson and Robert Walser; Suzanne McClelland's scriptive abstractions at Team Gallery; and Bruce Pearson's show of recent work at Ronald Feldman. While Wool long ago dropped text from his paintings, Pearson, like McClelland, has fruitfully kept written language at the core of his work. If text has continued to be a successful generative device for Pearson, it has been largely because he is a ceaseless innovator, constantly folding new procedures and content into his work. Pearson's restless curiosity was especially evident in this show, which included, by my count, five new formats or mediums, along with impressive examples of the more familiar Styrofoam relief paintings and large gouaches.

One new procedure could be seen in *Itch* (2013), a painting in which the artist has carved completely through the Styrofoam support in places. Because the painting, which juxtaposes a grid of tilted squares and the word "itch" in heavily outlined letters, is held out a few inches from the wall by brackets, the pattern of colors on the painting's surface is enriched by the play of light and shadow on the wall behind. *Itch* achieves an unlikely marriage of Lucio Fontana's slashed and punctured Concetto Spaziale (Spatial Concept) paintings and the tradition of Islamic screens.

Shadows were also crucial to *Inhale* (2013), a kinetic sculpture in which an overhead light passing through two sheets of painted glass projected the word "inhale" on a white tabletop. Because the sheets

of glass (suspended from a motorized device) were slowly going in and out of alignment, the word itself seemed to be breathing. Several models and gouaches related to architectural projects that Pearson has been developing. *Premonitions*, done in collaboration with architects Ilias Papageorgiou and Christina Papalexandri, will be an outdoor 40-foot-long mirrored stainless-steel tunnel spelling out the word "premonitions" in stretched and curved letters. The key to the piece is the mirrored surfaces that will reflect whatever environment, and whatever colors, surrounds them. A second architectural project, *Contains Real Hard Won Insights* (2013), created in collaboration with architect Victoria Meyers, features a pair of intertwined freestanding walls; one gouache study suggests a kind of psychedelic Richard Serra sculpture.

There are many strands of word-based visual art. Pearson's use of language connects directly to, and builds brilliantly on, the mid-century experiments in distorted alphabets by Raymond Hains and Brion Gysin. But focusing exclusively on the textual aspects of Pearson's art risks overlooking his substantial contribution to the medium of painting—as a devotee of materialist/visionary color and haptic surfaces, he is the rightful heir to Yves Klein, Alfred Jensen and Ralph Humphrey.

—Raphael Rubinstein

'Bruce Pearson: Free Getaways' at Ronald Feldman Gallery

By Will Heinrich 11/12 5:36pm

Bruce Pearson's system is most transparent in a painting called *And who hasn't dreamed of growing up to become a princess 1.* A 6-by-8-foot sheet of Styrofoam is divided into a grid of 18-by-24 boxes, over which the title phrase is drawn in wavy letters. Then all the lines are cut with a hot wire cutter, and every other piece is removed and affixed to a thick backing of more Styrofoam. After digging irregular pits into the protruding pieces, always leaving their edges intact, Mr. Pearson paints each little section a separate color. (The lush, dizzying palette of *And who hasn't dreamed* brings to mind a circus operated by the occultist A.E. Waite.) From right in front, the bumps, chasms and undulations, all bright as silk and glossy as a new car, defy your urge to grasp the whole at once; but from across the room, you can still make out the text.

More often, though, Mr. Pearson builds his patterns by overlapping multiple layers of thematically related image and text, and what sounds like an all-too-literal cataloging of influences results in a genuine feat of alchemy. The ingredients synthesize and disappear, but the all-or-nothing new whole they form is composed of resolutely autonomous segments that refuse to be summarized or looked at dishonestly. And they remain, despite the white highlights and black shadows created by their projections, paintings, creating impressions not of sculpted space but of supernaturally animated flatness.

Intoxicating flow, for example, in black, infra-purple and amphibious green, is so complex that its shapes read as texture. *Life before during after*, an opera of swooshes and spirals in a range of blue-green-tinged off-whites, is like watching the movements of ocean foam. And *Clearing 80 to 90 entities that attached themselves to your endocrine system 18 lifetimes ago*, a gorgeous tall gouache, is like reading a secret message at the bottom of a pool. (Through Nov. 16)

Heinrich, Will. "Bruce Pearson: Free Getaways' at Ronald Feldman Gallery." *The New York Observer*. November 12, 2013. <http://galleristny.com/2013/11/bruce-pearson-free-getaways-at-ronald-feldman-gallery/>



Bruce Pearson, 'Contains real hard won insights,' 2013.
(Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery)

reviews: new york

Bruce
Pearson**Ronald Feldman Fine Arts**

Bruce Pearson's stunning new work radically alters the relationship between art and language. While the artist always explores the ambiguous frontier separating painting from sculpture, here he amalgamated those genres to create language-objects that are words, paintings, and sculptures simultaneously.

His antecedents are clear: illuminated medieval manuscripts, building inscriptions, newspaper snippets in a Picasso collage, and Ruscha's painted words. But Pearson creates his own niche by subtly alluding to a calligraphic tradition in which the act of inscribing words is itself a way to make art.

Inhale (2013) brilliantly illustrates Pearson's innovations. Viewers encountered a white-surfaced table with two transparent sheets hanging above it and inscribed with the word "inhale," which a computer brings in and out of focus, as if breathing. Light from above casts the word first onto the sheet below and then as a shadow—there and yet not there—onto the tabletop. It is a precarious, ephemeral structure that reflects the way we perceive it: we read the word *inhale* (figuratively) with one eye as we assimilate the total structure with the other.

We assume we understand the word, but our understanding is frustrated by the context. Pearson sets language free by uncoupling words from any verbal context, although here the word does invite (or command) us to breathe in—to be, therefore, "inspired" by the work of art.

All of the other pieces in the show—paintings and structures—were composed of words we must labor to decipher. The model for a proposed eight-foot-tall sculpture, *Contains real hard won insights* (2013), created in collaboration with Victoria Meyers, derives from the words in the title, but it is also a verbal labyrinth. *Intoxicating flow* (2013), a dense, black painting in his signature acrylic-on-Styrofoam format, is a tour de force, a black-hole communication. We immerse ourselves in this work and our reward is to experience semantic communion with it and with its creator.

—Alfred Mac Adam



Bruce Pearson, *Inhale*, 2013, mixed media, dimensions variable. Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

Carlin, T. J. "Bruce Pearson."
Time Out New York, April 9-15,
2009, p. 52.

Bruce Pearson

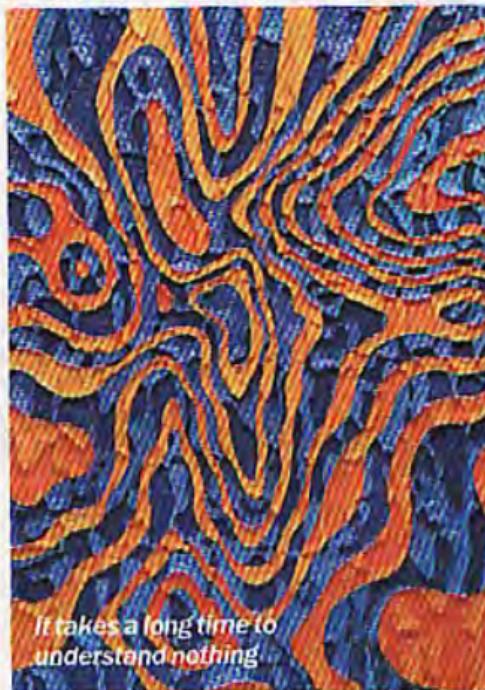


Ronald Feldman Fine Art, through
Apr 18 (see Soho)

It takes a long time to understand nothing is the title of one of the pieces in Bruce Pearson's latest show, but it could also serve as a warning. It is best to take in these behemoths of oil over carved Styrofoam slowly, by walking back and forth between the paintings and allowing them to reveal the nuanced intricacies of their surfaces, composed of sinuous plastic rivulets.

Color plays a central role here, and assiduous observation is highly rewarding. The hues in *Encyclopedia 4 (Lurched from crisis to crisis, what could happen without a decisive move, agreed they had no choice)* seem like a throwback to the garish psychedelic clash of supergraphics. Painted in tightly woven patterns, their effect is one of impenetrability; entering the rhythm of the work feels like the visual equivalent of mastication.

Nearby, several mostly white pieces provide a contrasting exercise in chromatic understatement. In the crevices of Pearson's deep textures, you can make out hints of very pale mint and the lightest icy cyan,



It takes a long time to understand nothing

dispersed throughout an otherwise snowy field. These works are undoubtedly the most accessible in the exhibit.

Pearson's lengthy titles inject a certain sense of humor into a series of objects, which, by dint of their physical presence, can seem a little overwhelming. As a collection, they effect a decided push and pull, landing us in that strange and sometimes disorienting territory of unhurried scrutiny.—T.J. Carlin



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, 90½ 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 Berlinc

February 2006

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.



Bruce Pearson Ronald Feldman

Where do language art and biology meet? Can they be seen to have a common root and might any one of the three exist in its particular form contingent only on the forms of the others? Art, one might say, would be impossible without language, which is predicated on biology. Art, another might argue, preceded language, both of which have become forces affecting biology. One place the three certainly meet is in Bruce Pearson's paintings on display at Ronald Feldman Gallery.

For Pearson language is primary. He begins his now well-known Styrofoam reliefs by carving text—sentences and fragments that often double as the title for the piece—into the surface of the Styrofoam. These texts provide the impetus for the richly textured and colored surfaces that comprise his finished paintings, which is where biology comes in. The incessant carving gradually breaks the surfaces up into a network of interlaced planes that summon imagery of cellular proliferation and aerial views of geography, the latter reference intensified by the deeply pitted topography of the painting's physical surface. The whole has a hallucinatory effect that, in this case, amounts to prismatic vision—the world seen through a turning crystal. Vision in Pearson's paintings is rearranged into a new and beautiful symmetry of two unlikely orders: the mandala and the grid.



Bruce Pearson, "Encyclopedia 3 (relative calm sounds of gunfire and footsteps sadly familiar sheds some light)", (2005), oil and acrylic on Styrofoam.
Photo: Alan Zindman. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

"Uncovering facts they would prefer you never hear about" a painting in sticky sweet primary and secondary colors employs the grid on a slight diagonal. Its evocative title is but a prelude to the thing itself, which, if you are not steady, may cause you to physically sway. Across the room is "A displaced game of cat and mouse," which could derive from a picture of the planet seen from a pole, the fragmented land resolving itself into pattern. It is based on the mandala, its structure radiating from the painting's center in golden yellow over blue and purple.

The grid and the mandala are two ostensibly opposed motifs. The grid is the field of power. It subsumes form and localizes power with the seer. The mandala centers power in the object. It is the fearsome face humankind gave nature to appease it. It radiates power and humans bow before it. It is not so much the wedding of these poles in Pearson's painting that is strange as that wedding's base in language. He seems to suggest that these perennial forms, on which artists have relied to give body to their visions for centuries, may be seen to have a root in the abstraction of language. So if one examines language with care, one might find in its structure forms analogous to those of art and science. There is, it would seem, a deeply rational root to Pearson's art.

Or is there? Maybe we're just being pushed through the looking glass into a world where our vision is so beautifully impaired that all things just seem one. In "Encyclopedia 3 (relative calm sounds of gunfire and footsteps sadly familiar sheds some light)," all trace of the underlying text has been eradicated and Pearson's carving reaches an intermittent pitch of delicacy, like eddies in a stream. Its mooring in language comes undone, no rational underpinning can be found for this painting. Its colors seem never to repeat and one has the delicious feeling of having fallen into the rabbit hole for good.

—Ben La Rocco

Bruce Pearson

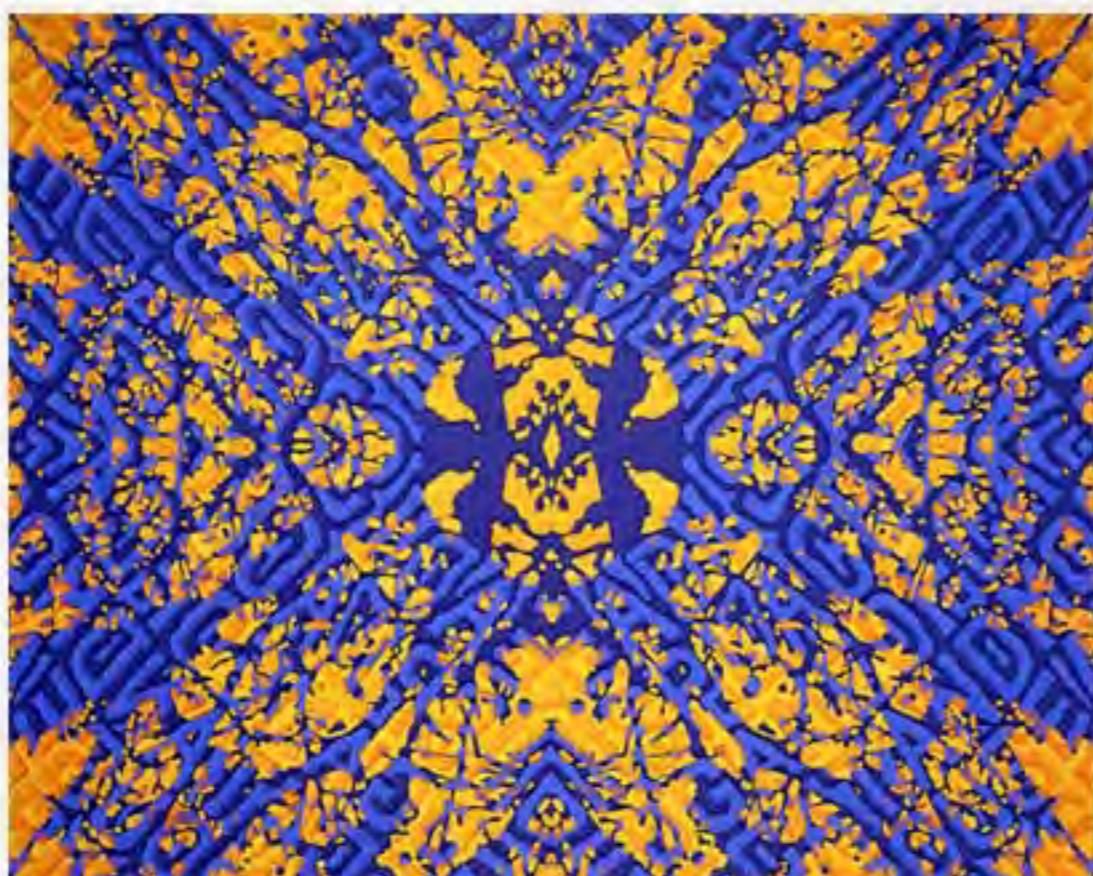
Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

In his recent work, Bruce Pearson has continued to develop his distinct style of psychedelic abstraction. Pearson carves up thick Styrofoam panels and then covers them with layers of oil and acrylic, combining optical pyrotechnics with sculptural presence. His paintings also have a linguistic dimension: text Pearson collects from newspapers and Web sites provides the title and underlying structure for each piece.

The large, horizontal works *A displaced game of cat and mouse* (2005) and *An effective low-cost solution for combating mind control* (2004) are oversize Rorschach tests in acid-trip colors. A certain skepticism emerged in *Uncovering facts they would prefer you never hear about* (2005), a diagonal grid of wavy lines that bends the colored bars of an emergency broadcast system graphic into a hallucinogenic version of a Sol LeWitt drawing. In some paintings, color parted ways with texture: *Maybe evolutions going in reverse* and *Talk back* (both 2005) feature big splotches of orange and yellow paint, whose outlines diverge from those of other splotches incised into the Styrofoam.

Overall, the best paintings were the most intricate. The monochrome surface of *58 common indicators of UFO encounters or abductions by alien beings* (2004) comprises more than 70 shades of white that coalesce over a crowded relief of mystical symbols. *Encyclopedia 3 (relative calm sounds of gunfire and footsteps sadly familiar sheds some light)* and *Rejection endurance lunch* (both 2005) are indebted to Paul Klee and required a slow, close reading of colors and shapes, while the titles became a melancholy meditation on daily life in the 21st century.

—Megan Heuer



Bruce Pearson, *A displaced game of cat and mouse*, 2005,
oil and acrylic on Styrofoam, 72" x 90" x 4".

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

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...

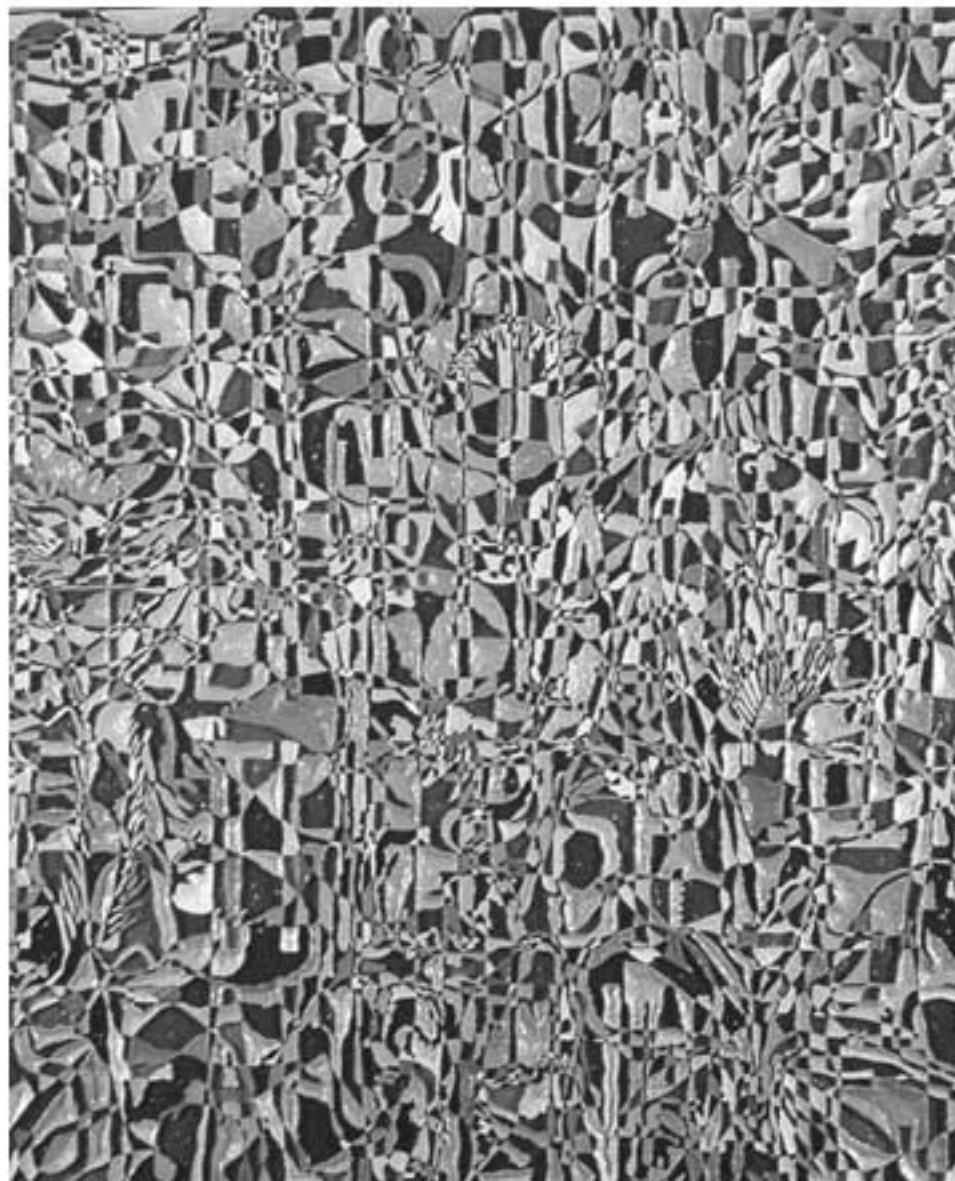
Rail: Your name came up in conversation the other day

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, "Encyclopedias #1 (Lines Scattered from Chained Remains a Father's Plea For Names)," (2003), oil and acrylic on Styrofoam, Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. Photo by Zindman/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.

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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 Zindman/Fremont, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

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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 (*Laughs*)

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 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. (*Laughs*) 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...

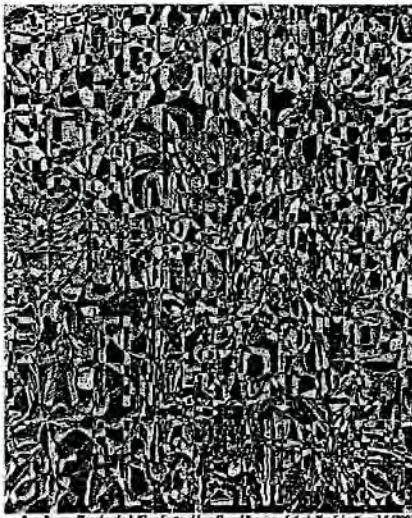
Rail: Your name came up in conversation the other day

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, "Encyclopedie #1 (Glass Scratches from Chipped Hammer & Father's Plan Felt Hammert)", 2003. Oil and acrylic on Styrofoam. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. Photo by Endyay/Frameart.

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 "Encyclopedie #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 underline 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 "Encyclopedie #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's 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 photograph?

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 Hygiene," 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.

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Bruce Pearson, "A Depth of Dust" (2001), oil and acrylic on Styrene, 47 1/2 x 44 x 5 1/2 inches.
Photo by Zevaner/Freudon, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

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

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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 knew 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.

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ZINDMAN/FREMONT

Bruce Pearson,
Encyclopedia 1,
2003, oil and acrylic
on Styrofoam,
89½" x 71½" x 4¾".
Ronald Feldman.

Bruce Pearson

RONALD FELDMAN

Bruce Pearson's handsome acrylic and/or oil-on-Styrofoam slabs, all from 2001 to 2003, were either psychedelically colored or muted scooped-out reliefs that resembled an update on champlevé enameling. Their grooves and raised edges were like blown-up botanical cross sections or hectic riffs on the grid. Codes within codes, Pearson's lively designs at first appeared abstract but turned out to contain the artist's trademark—fancy, nearly indecipherable letter-

ing that emerges only gradually.

In these works, the hidden text doubles as title—"A dangerous game of love and faith," "And everything is not trauma," "In 1994 a commercial fisherman won a debate arguing that life does indeed have meaning"—and offers a tantalizing, more philosophic version of a now-you-see-it-now-you-don't visual game akin to caricaturist Al Hirschfeld's Nina gambit. Patterns can be flipped and repeated like Rorschach blots and transformed into semblances of embalmed landscapes, mandalas, water imagery, and so on.

Pearson investigates the methods and meanings of painting now, beginning with the sheer physicality of his thick, grandly scaled panels, a concreteness that was lacking in the gouache drawings.

As you look, everything starts to jump around; Pearson's plasticized op art and text hybrids—part painting, part sculpture, part abstract, part representational—continue to pack a provocative punch as they push back the boundaries of painting, making us question at least part of his title: "Rock and roll is dead, the novel is dead, god is dead, painting is dead." —Lilly Wei

8 Painters: New Work

These eight individualistic, New York-based painters embrace a wide range of approaches and styles, from figurative to abstract. Among the elements appearing in their recent work have been cartooning, video, assemblage, found poetry, kitsch imagery and biblical narratives.

BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

On a Personal Note

I'm trying to figure out why it has taken me so long—five years!—to write a sequel to my last roundup article on contemporary painting. My silence may be partly explained by strictly personal concerns: a few months after "Nine Lives of Painting" appeared [see *A.i.A.*, Sept. '98], I became a father, a joyful event that, however, seriously reduced my gallery-going and studio visiting, to say nothing of international travel. I learned that it's very hard to write about contemporary art without seeing a lot of it. In fact, constant visual overload may be a necessary part of being a frontline critic, if only because it compels you to initially set aside your prejudices and just take things as they come, fast and furious, good, bad or indifferent. Anyway, I guess I've started getting out more and seen enough new paintings to feel competent to write about a few of them.

But lack of time wasn't the only thing affecting my critical activity. I was also derailed by the death, in early 1999, of the painter Norman Bluhm. For much of the preceding decade, one of my main concerns as a critic had been to get to know Norman's work as fully as possible, to understand how it evolved from gestural abstraction in the 1950s to the architectonic, quasi-figurative paintings of the 1980s and 1990s. I'd just finished writing a long essay on his career (see the monograph *Norman Bluhm*, Mazzotta, 2000) and had opened "Nine Lives of Painting" with a discussion of one of his recent multipanel paintings. In the eight years that I knew Norman, I had come to believe he was the greatest painter working in this country, and to see him die at the age of 78 with his groundbreaking work rarely exhibited and barely acknowledged by the art world

was extremely dispiriting. I felt that I had failed in my efforts to help bring attention to his work, and that anything more I might do would be coming too late (though I don't feel this way today).

I also had the sense, at the end of the 1990s, that I had completed a cycle of articles that addressed a band of abstract-oriented New York painters closer to my age and also important to my thinking about painting—among them Richmond Burton, Lydia Dona, Jonathan Lasker and Fabian Marcaccio. For the moment, at least, I felt that I'd said what I needed to about their work, and although there were certainly other compelling painters around, they didn't fall into any similarly cohesive grouping. At the same time, as I've described recently in "A Quiet Crisis" [see *A.i.A.*, Mar. '03], I was beginning to feel disillusioned about the state of painting and the discourse (or lack thereof) around it. So, temporarily losing touch with the full range of current painting, for all the reasons I've just suggested, I turned toward the past, writing articles about Alice Neel, H.C. Westermann, Oyvind Fahlström and the early work of Sigmar Polke. I knew that I would eventually come around to contemporary painting again; I just didn't think it would take quite so long.

The eight painters I've chosen to discuss here are all basically New Yorkers, even though some of them have been recently spending time in other parts of the country (Texas, California). They make paintings that are abstract, figurative, computer-assisted, presented as freestanding sculptures; paintings that double as video screens, explore 1960s politics, private psychosexual realms and the Old

Testament; paintings that reference Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism and psychedelia. Apart from David Humphrey and Amy Sillman, who have made paintings together (joined by a third artist, Elliott Green, they called themselves Team Shag), these artists are not, for the most part, in close contact with one another. The majority of them are in their 40s; a few have had museum shows, but none of them is super-famous. Some teach, others improvise, a few live by their work alone.

If these eight painters have anything in common, it's perhaps simply the ability to hold the viewer's attention (at least this viewer's) for a substantial amount of time. How do they do this? The usual (or maybe that should be "unusual") means: technical mastery of their medium; discovery of unexpected and multilayered content; intelligent dialogue with art of the past; persistence, daring and the ambition to achieve something more than instant success.

Bruce Pearson:

Hot-Wired & Slowed Down

If visual overload is a necessary occupational hazard of busy art critics, it's also a risk run by viewers of even one of Bruce Pearson's paintings, with their high-key colors, intricately furrowed surfaces and dense interweavings of image and text—which is exactly as the artist seems to want it. Pearson's compositions involve superimposed images and texts that are expressly designed to interfere with each other, and the confusion of content is only exacerbated by the narrow, labyrinthine channels that cut through the impastoed surfaces of the paintings. But while image, text and surface

subvert one another's visual autonomy, they also work together to create a rich synthesis of pattern and color.

The paintings in Pearson's most recent show, at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York last spring, included some of his most detailed compositions ever. For instance, *Encyclopedia I (Clues Scattered from Charred Remains a Father's False Plea Names)*, 2003, is made up of many hundreds of irregularly shaped, diversely colored tesserae that blanket the surface of the painting like mutant, festively hued ivy. Incredibly, no color is repeated within the painting. Here, the overlaid elements include the phrase of the title (a kind of found poem Pearson assembled by underlining phrases in a newspaper story) and images of seashells and butterflies taken from one of the plates in Diderot's encyclopedia. Although Pearson has also made less tangled, landscape-based compositions, such as *The ridiculous bodies of the spirits* (2003), his work is always encoded to some degree with near-subliminal information, giving it an arcane, quasi-mystical character. In the context of painting, his work also has a distinctive presence because of thick supports that push the painted surface out into the viewer's space.

Critic Christian Viveros-Fauné has perceptively likened Pearson's paintings to "swirling coral reefs." A casual viewer might think that the artist has painstakingly built up these colorful topographies with paint alone. In fact, underneath the paint is a support of Styrofoam that Pearson has carved into with a heated metal element or "hot wire." To guide his hand as it shapes the Styrofoam, he projects composite image-and-text designs onto the panel. Then, when the carving is done, he begins to apply paint, to conceal the Styrofoam and differentiate individual shapes. For some series he employs palettes derived from classic paintings by old masters or Impressionists. During the final phases, Pearson uses a roller to apply paint to the highest points of the surface and then uses small brushes to add highlights.

Where to place these highly individualistic

paintings? His haptic work has a modeled, viscous quality that seems to ally him with sculptors such as Jeanne Silverthorne and Charles Long as much as with other painters. But the labor-intensive, densely patterned aspect of Pearson's work is something he clearly shares with painters Fred Tomaselli, James Siena and Greg Stone, who, like him, have emerged from the Williamsburg, Brooklyn, scene. (By employing often eccentric techniques that are minutely detailed

and sublimely obsessive, artists such as these may be looking to establish orders of excellence that don't rely on old-fashioned formalist criteria.) Pearson's work has also been linked, via a number of shows, to a renewed appreciation of Op art, an influence that Pearson acknowledges, along with the psychedelic poster art of his youth. While his work still affirms these connections, Pearson's increasingly broad and vibrant palette and the growing complexity of his



Bruce Pearson: *Encyclopedia I (Clues Scattered from Charred Remains a Father's False Plea Names)*, 2003, oil and acrylic on Styrofoam, 7½ by 6 feet. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

compositions also invite a new, quite unexpected association: postwar Parisian abstraction, in particular the Cubist-derived paintings of Jean Bazaine, André Lanskoy, Charles Lapicque and Marie-Hélène Vieira da Silva. His new paintings also evoke another body of work from that period: the abstract films made by Raymond Hains and Jacques de la Villeglé in the early 1950s. Even more unexpected, given their over-the-top retinal properties, these boxlike objects take up ideas about surface and support broached by Donald Judd in some of his early relief paintings.

Essentially, what Pearson has done is to radically slow down his paintings, both in the way they are made and in the way that we look at them. Refreshingly, he doesn't equate "slow painting" with tamped-down colors and minimalist vocabulary, proving that one doesn't have to paint like Agnes Martin to elicit the viewer's prolonged attention. His distorted, camouflaged phrases can be taken as a metaphor for the painting as a whole; they are the artist's way of telling us that his work is not designed for instant consumption. Of course, it's no great achievement to withhold content from viewers. What is a great and all-too-rare achievement is to keep viewers hypnotically engaged as they puzzle out a painting's gradually emerging complexities.

Bruce Pearson**Ronald Feldman, through Feb 10
(see Soho).**

For the past few years, Bruce Pearson's work has provided a strange mix of attraction and repulsion, sense and nonsense. This time out, in a strong solo show at Ronald Feldman, one of these aspects seems to have intensified. It's just hard to say which.

Pearson begins his process by stretching snippets of found text into sinuous, elongated shapes. He then cuts these shapes into Styrofoam with a hot wire, assembles the separate jigsawlike pieces into large flat panels, and covers them with alternating layers of oil and acrylic (imagine a texture with the dubiously sensuous merit of day-old cake icing). The gallery refers to the works as paintings, but they might also be thought of as sculptural reliefs. Yet despite their ponderous thickness and size (some are up to eight feet tall), there's a dizzying, dancing optical quality to the text-based shapes—which keeps your eye, and mind, buzzing over the surfaces.

For my money, the more abstract the compositions, the better. *Sileneus* is a large, orange-red monster of a "canvas" that has glyph-like shapes resembling molten pelvic bones. The equally massive *My Planet Wants Me Dead* features flesh-col-

ored, vaguely ominous shapes (think of '40s-era Arshile Gorky) that look like so much flayed cartilage floating in space. Works like these free the viewer from reading them on a literal level. Instead, the embedded words take on rhythmic, linear hum, like the patterns that sounds make on an oscilloscope's screen.

It's been said that language is something so ingrained in humans that we simply can't hear a word or see a letter without immediately "reading" it, instantly forming conceptual associations in our minds. Maybe Pearson is trying to find a way to cut that synapse and break down the rapid-fire reaction into something more intuitive, more poetic and purely formal. It's a funny but ultimately profound sort of surgery. As he pummels and stretches words beyond recognition, he proves that they are still bound to leave their rippling effects on the world.

—Sarah Schmerler



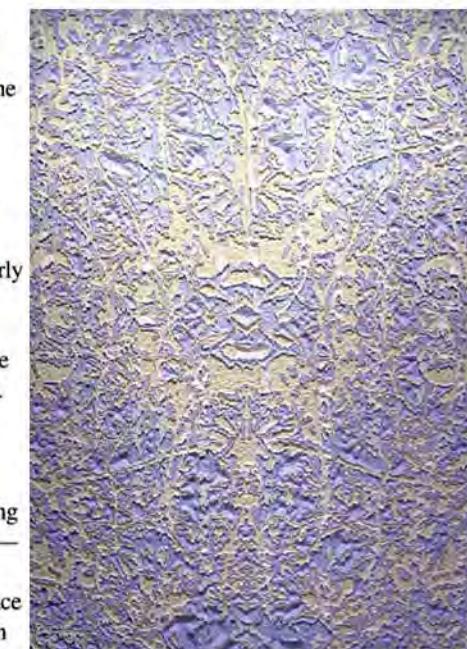
Bruce Pearson, *Hope and Comfort from the Other Side*, 2000.

Helguera, Pablo. "Bruce Pearson." *Tema Celeste* XVIII, no. 84 (March-April 2001): 97.

Bruce Pearson

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

For all the impact they have on us at a first sight, Bruce Pearson's paintings are surprisingly elusive. Entering the gallery, the viewer is immediately confronted by the powerful intensity of color and texture in Pearson's work. But it is precisely that intensity which acts as a temporary veil to more subtle tensions, which are perceived only gradually. Pearson's works play cleverly between extremes: although paintings in theory, they have a decidedly sculptural quality, evoked by the massive nature of the styrofoam slabs from which they are made. The technique Pearson applies is not dissimilar to that of a woodcarver. Each image initially seems to be a single work. However, after a time—as with the changing reflections on the surface of moving water—we encounter a fierce debate between two sides: a landscape fights against a flat surface and vice versa. One image can only be seen if we mentally remove the presence of the other. The most important aspects of Pearson's work are easily missed at first glance. It is only on closer examination that the hidden texts in each of the paintings start to emerge. Although it could be argued that a painting is ultimately a four-dimensional piece—since, like any other artwork, it is also experienced in time—our understanding of Pearson's work can only truly occur over time, as our eyes slowly adjust to the forms and colors, and we draw on the mental process through which we turn symbols into language and language into meaning. While a child is learning to read, at a certain point single words begin to make sense in groups and form phrases. The effect with Bruce Pearson's work is similar: initially illegible, enigmatic Rorschach texts, they challenge us to discover their meaning. Later they start to unfold, and the texts—which are in fact the titles of the works—can finally be deciphered. Once we have read the words—which make provocative declarations such as, "I am lonely without my pain" or "Ecstatic explosions of romantic love,"—a whole new series of associations are triggered off in our minds as we stand before Pearson's paintings: meanings surfacing from the quicksand.



Bruce Pearson,
Broken Silence,
2000, oil and acrylic
on styrofoam,
244 x 180 x 15 cm.
Photo by John Lamka.

Pablo Helguera

Viveros-Faune, Christian. "Bruce Pearson." New York Press, January 10-16, 2001, pp. 30-31.

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 dizzy. 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.

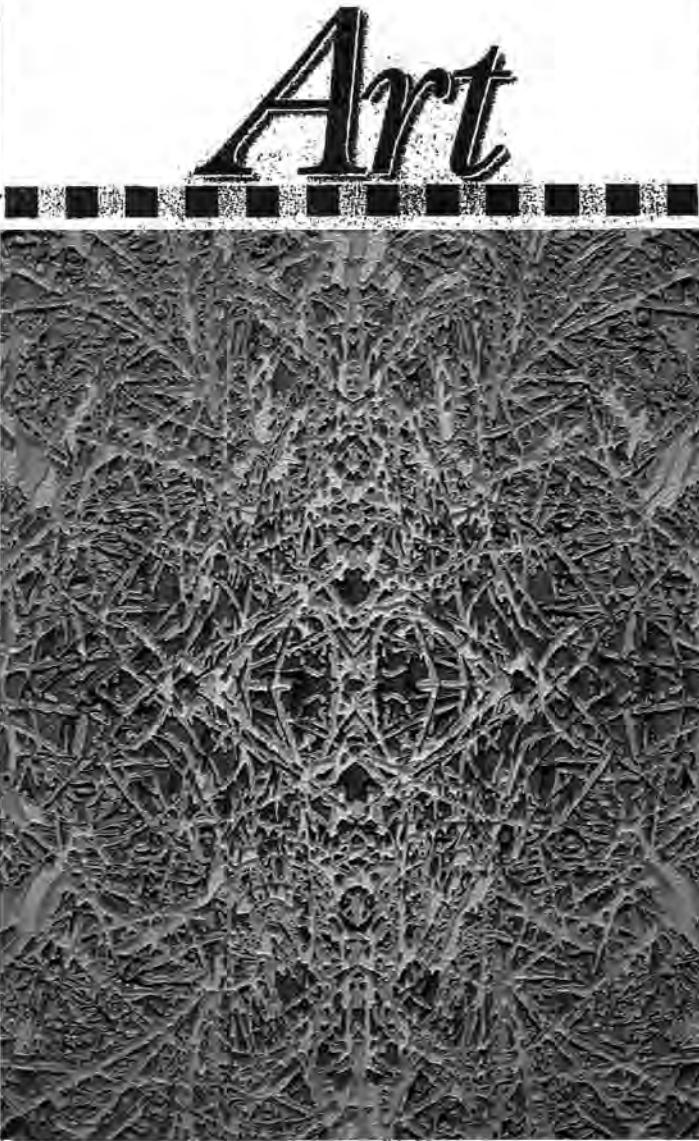
Well, it's amazing how much stuff you can simply get from the newspaper. I get quotes from all over, from journals, from books I'm reading. I compile the stuff, put it into notebooks. I work on about six different series of paintings simultaneously. Each series has its own conceptual structure and the 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 photographs. 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



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

these photo-based effects. One of them, for example, is my "12 Steps" series, which is based on recovery language. I've been using a book of medical illustrations for that series that a doctor friend gave me. I use images of dissections of the brain and project them on top of found text. The recovery language can be pretty brutal. This one here, for example [an image of the 1999 painting *Step 2*] says, "Today I will not give in to suicide." This one [an image of the 1999 painting *Step 1*] says, "You deserve to be with someone who doesn't hit you."

Now, where did you get that text?

I got both of those texts from watching *Oprah*. I was watching TV and this psychiatrist came on and was saying these things that struck me as, you know, banal but significant. So I fused the text together with these images to establish a sort of Rorschachian final image. I've also been accessing Impressionist palettes for this series. This painting in particular [*Step 2*] accesses a Bonnard palette. This other one [*Step 1*], a Monet palette. Another one of my series I call my "Post-Feminist Masculinity" 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 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 Krisanamis. 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 Silman, Fred Tomaselli, Roxy Paine, Joe Anthein, Charles Spurrer, Polly Apfelbaum, Eve Sussman, Simon Lee, Greg Stone, David Brody... James Sienna, Sean Melnyk, 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 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 Minimal 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. (between Canal & Grand Sts.), 226-3232.

Bruce Pearson

Ronald Feldman
31 Mercer Street, SoHo
Through Feb. 10

Bruce Pearson's striking neo-psychedelic paintings first came to light in the mid-1990's. Inspired by melting-word, acid-rock posters of the 60's, Mr. Pearson repeatedly carved single words or found phrases into big plastic-foam slabs, using a heating element. He painted the resulting reliefs in saturated, high-contrast colors, producing zany, optically electric, near-abstract mandalas with subliminal messages that added hints of hallucinogen-induced paranoia.

Mr. Pearson's new work continues in this vein, but rather than developing in wilder and crazier ways, the trend is toward greater refinement and, one fears, a certain conservatism. In "Ecstatic Explosions of Romantic Love," for example, the illegible words of the title create a roughly Cubist field overlaid by semitransparent Art Nouveau-ish shapes. Painted in a lovely palette of powder blue, jade green, raspberry pink and beige, the picture has a tasteful, Impressionistic look that is not unappealing but runs counter to the essentially funky impulse of the artist's enterprise.

Other paintings are more aggressively garish, but then the rectangular format of all Mr. Pearson's works feels restrictive. Why shouldn't his absurdist imagination lead to a more inventive play with painting's conventional boundaries?

On the other hand, in his gouache-on-paper studies, particularly a radiating composition of wavy diamonds and loopy shapes titled "Silenus," Mr. Pearson achieves a near-perfect equilibrium of precision, luminosity and goofiness. It will be interesting to see where he goes from here.

KEN JOHNSON

"Bruce Pearson." *The New Yorker*, (January 29, 2001): 18.

BRUCE PEARSON

The Williamsburg painter hides words or phrases ("Who's to Say That a Shoe is Not a Piece of Sculpture," for example) within mazes of carved and colored patterns. The results offer the retinal aggression of Op art, with a playfully cryptic afterglow. Instead of just staring at the patterns till they feel woozy, viewers get to do something—hunt for the hidden text, and then, presumably, mull over the difference between reading and looking. "My Planet Wants Me Dead," the most seductive of the images, is full of glistening inky-green hollows that give Pearson's cleverness the painterly gravity it sometimes lacks. Through Feb. 17. (Feldman, 31 Mercer St. 226-3232.)

NEW YORK REVIEWS

Bruce Pearson

RONALD FELDMAN

Bruce Pearson's new, eye-catching abstractions continue to look like paintings on steroids, decked out in snazzy, high-contrast colors. Made of double layers of Styrofoam slabs, they teeter between painting and relief. Pearson hot-wires them to cut the grooves and channels of his patterns—like cloisonné without the inlay—then colors them in with oil and acrylic paints. He also uses a computer to scan his drawings and then reverses them to produce symmetrical compositions.

At first, many of the paintings look like Rorschach tests, but they are actually based on texts, well-known paintings, nature, and Pearson's photographs of nature, abstracted to the verge of the subliminal. There's certainly enough going on here: Botticelli's lyrical palette from *The Birth of Venus* appears in *Ecstatic Explosions of Romantic Love*, a title lifted from a romance novel; Matisse's *Dance* is the base of *Danse?*, inflected through Pearson's Pollock-inspired drawing; while others look like dappled and moiréd Impressionist paintings. And there are great titles, such as the philosophical *Who's to Say That a Shoe Is Not a Piece of Sculpture?* (especially when it costs as much) and *Food Love Air Light Trees and Architecture*, a critic's summary of French cinema, the press release says.

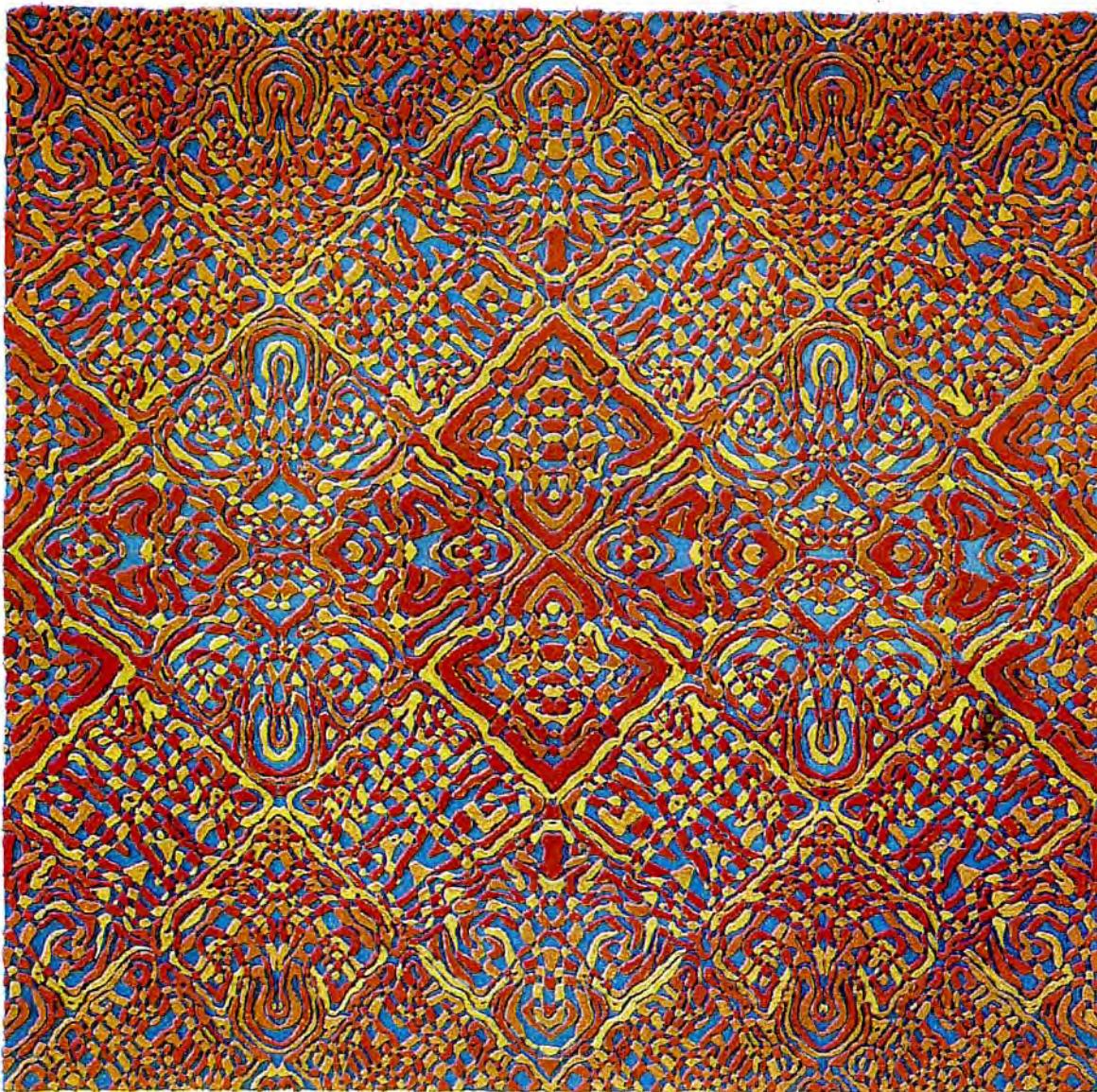
It's all fake, embalmed, nature seen through the wholly artificial. It's all laminated surface; the glare of orange, pink, green, yellow, red, blue rebuffs the gaze. Even white is whipped to a high sheen like mounds of Cool Whip. Surface rules. And the paintings work. While there is nothing particularly new here, Pearson packages it in smart, shining ways.



Bruce Pearson,
*Who's to Say That a
Shoe Is Not a Piece
of Sculpture?*, 2000,
oil and acrylic on
Styrofoam,
60" x 48" x 6".
Ronald Feldman.

—Lilly Wei

The Vocabulary of Beauty



"A SIMPLE ANSWER," 1999, BY BRUCE PEARSON

PHOTOGRAPH BY ZINDMAN/FREMONT

Critic Dave Hickey predicted that "The issue of the nineties will be beauty." Indeed, in an age dominated by digital and mass-produced media and imagery, a large number of painters are appearing across the United States and Europe who are creating objects of great visual allure, and reinvigorating art by reintroducing the artist's hand, making the primal mark. While beauty has been a key issue, the aesthetic of new painting is also profoundly shaped by the conceptual and post-modern art of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. Using the formal vocabulary of visual effect, recent painters critically reflect upon the tradition of painting and often employ post-modern irony as a vehicle for addressing questions about contemporary culture. Building upon the histories

of modern painting, conceptual, and post-modern art, a group of contemporary artists has reconceived painting to make it relevant to contemporary society.

Bruce Pearson participates in the reincarnation of abstract painting, creating colorful relief paintings that seduce us with their beauty. . . . Pearson has flatly stated that he attempts to create works with "a real pleasure component." His paintings are, however, more than simply visual. While Hickey believes that beauty, with its "iconography of desire," is what "redeems" us, he unequivocally concludes that "We die from lack of meaning." Pearson recognizes this. He engages us in the visual appeal of his picture surfaces, and, once he has our attention, gradually reveals complex layers of text and images. We become

immersed in excavating his sublimated texts and uncovering the artist's critical commentaries.

First impressions of Pearson's reliefs recall Op Art and the psychedelic designs of the 1960s. He does not deny this resemblance to popular visual culture. He dances the line between mass culture and high culture, balancing popular texts and style within a rigorous conceptual process that integrates multiple layers of visual imagery and content.

The text is by Joseph D. Ketner, director of Brandeis University's Rose Art Museum, where the exhibition "Bruce Pearson: A New Visual Language" is on view through October 17. The text is from the exhibition brochure.

creates a system both corporeal and logical that mirrors back our human condition. The necessity of circulation also courses through three other works, *Table Lands (Mesa)*, *Mixing Memory and Desire*, and *Statuesque*, water sculptures that explore the processes of geological erosion, mnemonic apprehension, and erotic regeneration respectively.

These branching systems are further charted through computer-generated drawings. Suggestive of cellular mitosis, a single line keeps dividing and forking until the whole 40-inch square of the paper is filled in with a sprawling dendritic web. At this technosomatic juncture, we witness the human imagination being hard-wired into a neurological diagram in which science and art intersect. In *Scroll Version*, the lines presumably proliferate into the rolled-up ends of an eight-foot sheet, ironically contextualizing the insidious nature of Western expansion within a traditionally Eastern form.

Stone's drawings suggest maze-like structures that harken back to Greek myths that lure us Minotaur-like into the artist's sculptural clutches. In *Hanging Mazes (Ariadne's Way)*, a gold cord is threaded through nine dictionary-sized boxed mazes covered with glass, which in turn are suspended from Shaker-styled wood pegs that run along opposite walls, inviting not only our eyes but our bodies to traverse the gallery space. At times austere, even ascetic, Stone's mazes hint at a kind of Minimalist dead-end game that culminates in *Head Maze*, the exhibition's showstopper. This "walk-in maze" is hung upside down from the ceiling at head-level so that only one's head is actually inside the wood maze, thus making literal the mind/body split even as one navigates through this masterful work of art back into the real world.

Timothy Liu is a poet who lives in Hoboken, New Jersey.

Bruce Pearson

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts
31 Mercer St., 10013
212/226-3232

Bruce Pearson's exhibition of jewel-bright, acrylic-on-carved-Styrofoam paintings offer a virtuoso display of visionary craftsmanship. Pearson has achieved the kind of celebratory quantum mass possible when process fuses seamlessly to sensibility.

The paintings lit up the two gallery rooms with the deeply structured disorder of hallucinatory bonfires. There was a giddy air to the space, an exhalation of pleasure; pleasure for the viewer to be sure, but more interestingly, a palpable sense of delight emanating from the other side of the paintings, from the artist's side.

The pieces seemed to radiate the fine scent of sweat in their edgy sensuality. The plywood foundations of the paintings lay beneath abstract Styrofoam carvings, which

are painted over in rich, thick agglutinations of color. Faceted sections of the paintings extrude like concave mesas from a surface comprised of a complex series of canals and valleys. Pearson left the bottom sides of a few works unfinished; a stoop and a peek provides a backstage glimpse at his quotidian materials and emphasizes the magic of his alchemy.

Pearson's method was somewhat explicated by the four gouache studies in the exhibition, which correspond by title and design with several of the paintings. The color fields in the gouaches are separated by swooping, cross-cutting boundary lines, with pigment dropped neatly but somewhat arbitrarily into place. The paintings follow a similar organization; the added complication of the raised and carved surfaces simply elaborates a process similar to the doodles one might have idly pursued during junior-high-school math class.

Bruce Pearson

No No No . . ., 1998. Oil and acrylic on Styrofoam, 48" x 48".
Photo by Zindman/Fremont. courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

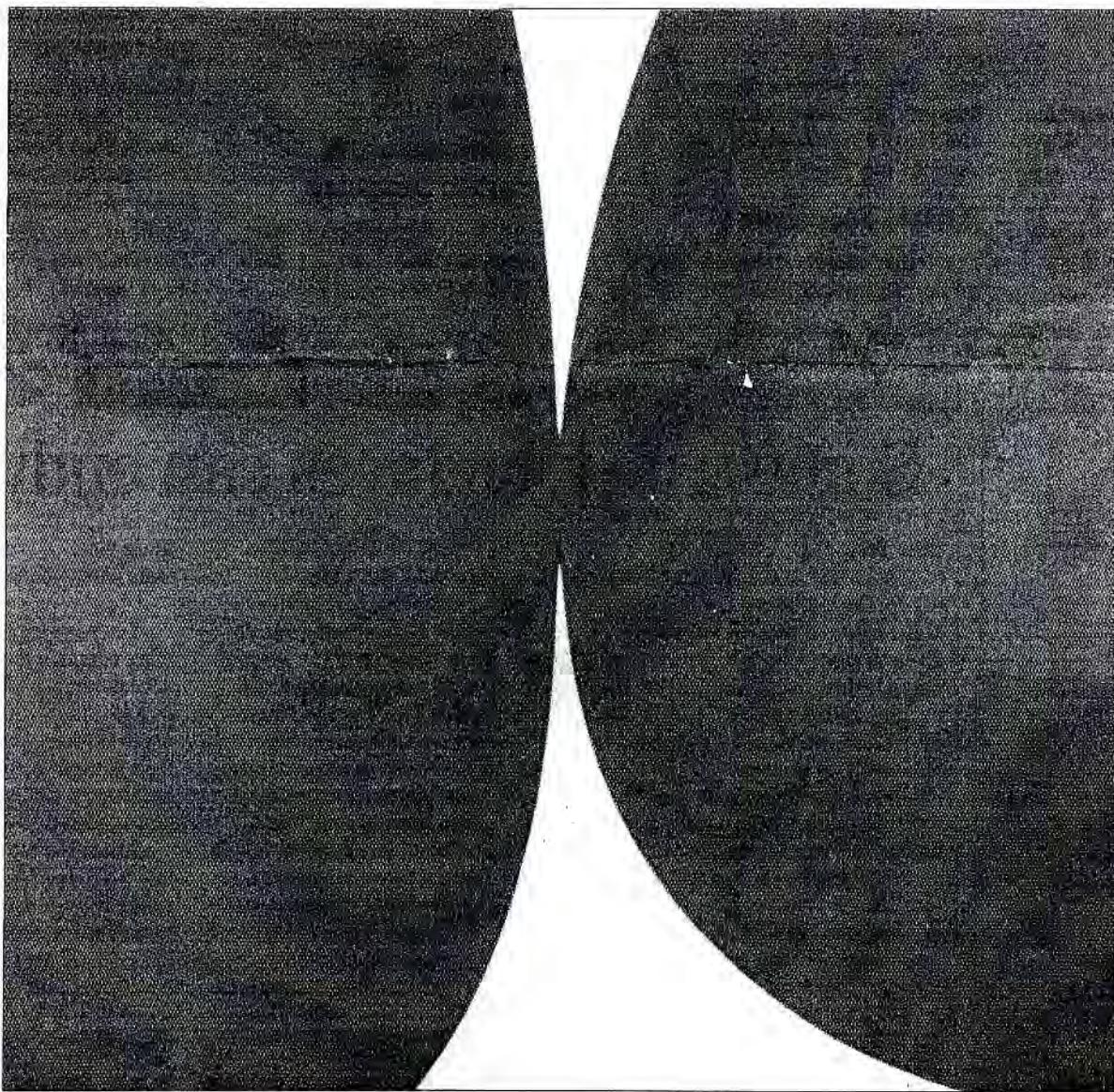


Much has been made of Pearson's aesthetic debt to Op art and of the conceptual origin of his imagery in Pop culture-inspired words and phrases. Certainly his veiling system, chopping and reorganizing subject and ground, is informed by such particulars. But beyond providing a docent-level insight—"Look, you can see . . . No. No. No, right there!"—the knowledge of Pearson's point of departure reveals little of his deeper interest in the preverbal tensions between wild urge and deeply considered resolution. It seems he is seeking to resolve the paradoxical symbiosis of organization and freedom by revealing the release gained when perfect control is attained.

The longer one stares into Pearson's mandalas the more likely one is to fall into them. The master who produced them fell in long ago. The rigorous lifetime of a seemingly self-imposed apprenticeship has yielded the artist a transporting, exhilarating freedom of movement.

Matt Freedman is a sculptor and writer living in Brooklyn, New York.

McQuaid, Cate. "Ronse Revels in treasures of the '60s." The Boston Globe, September 24, 1999, F13, F16.



Rose revels in treasures of the '60s

Exhibit ranges from Pop artists to Neo-Dadaists

By Cate McQuaid
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

WALTHAM — Brandeis University opened its doors in 1961, a moment of transition in the history of art. The Abstract Expressionists had

**Art
Review**

had their say over the previous 15 years, splattering and emoting their magnificent talent (and their magnificent egos) over canvases that changed the way we defined art.

What next? In 1962, Sam Hunter took the helm of the Rose Art Museum and with \$50,000 began to build a collection. Hunter didn't look back. His purchases were pinned to the moment, both courageous and prescient. "The Alchemies of the Sixties," co-curated by current Rose director Joseph Ketner and Nancy Tieken, formerly of the Denver Art Museum, uses

ROSE, Page F16

Ellsworth Kelly's Minimalist painting "Blue White" (1962) is curvaceous and alluring.

■ ROSE

Continued from Page F1

the work Hunter acquired to explore the '60s gestalt in the art world. The show strives to answer the question: After Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, what followed?

The answer seems to be a fascination with the everyday and a return to form. From Pop artists such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein to Neo-Dadaists like Jim Dine, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns, the '60s demonstrated a trend away from the mythic soul of the artist played out by Abstract Expressionists toward the power of ordinary life. Those who didn't retreat into the banal settled into a more stringent formalism, which Pollock and de Kooning would have shrugged off.

The handsomely assembled show groups pieces from the Rose's collection according to such themes, and encourages conversation among the varied works of art. Gene Davis's "Moondog" (1965), a vast Color Field painting pulsating in vivid vertical stripes, grabs attention on the main floor. If you stand on the stairway, you can see the painting beneath it on the floor below: Ellsworth Kelly's Minimalist "Blue White" (1962). Both are made of clean, pure color and shape, but Kelly's is curvaceous and alluring while Davis's more linear painting asserts itself on the viewer like a hard rainstorm.

The curators create other pleasing segues from one movement to the next. Around the corner from Color Field, you'll find Pop artists, such as Lichtenstein, utilizing garish colors similar to Davis. Pop, of course, doesn't only revere the ordinary and the kitschy but capitalizes on it. Warhol's "Saturday Disaster" (1964), a painted silkscreen of a car wreck, presages the media culture, graphically transforming the horrific into the glamorous.

Across the gallery, the Neo-Dadaists show a different take on ordinary life. Jasper Johns's 1957 "Drawer," an encaustic assemblage, is simply a construction of a closed gray bureau drawer, flat and spackled roughly with waxen paint. Rauschenberg's "Second Time Painting" (1961) is gestural and drippy with shrouds of colored paint, chopping the picture plane into sections. It also features torn swatches from a pair of work pants, a T-shirt, and an athletic bag. An upside-down clock projects from the top of the canvas. Both Johns and Rauschenberg elevate the shreds and details of life into high art.

Downstairs, the Minimalists like Kelly break up and cool off a confrontation between conceptual artists and figurists. Yayoi Kusama's "Blue Coat" (1967), however, is a conceptual figure. She hangs a dress

THE ALCHEMIES OF THE SIXTIES

BRUCE PEARSON: A NEW VISUAL

LANGUAGE

At: Rose Art Museum, Brandeis

University, 415 South St., Waltham,

through Oct. 17

with soft, blue fabric protuberances. "Blue Coat" braces the posturing a good wardrobe allows against the mute assertion of desire.

Philip Guston's untitled 1969 painting of two pink, bald heads, presented from the rear, has a typically rough, comedic quality to it while romancing with form. Emilio Cruz's 1968 "Beethoven Machine," a reference to the novel "A Clockwork Orange," shows a Cubist joker in a bowler hat with broad pink swells that hint at particular body parts arcing away from him. The painting is full of slyness and foreboding amid the crazy geometric carnival of shapes.

"Alchemies of the Sixties" is a strong show, a testament to the directions art took after the explosion of Abstract Expressionism died down. Its strength is in no small thanks to the visionary collecting of Sam Hunter.

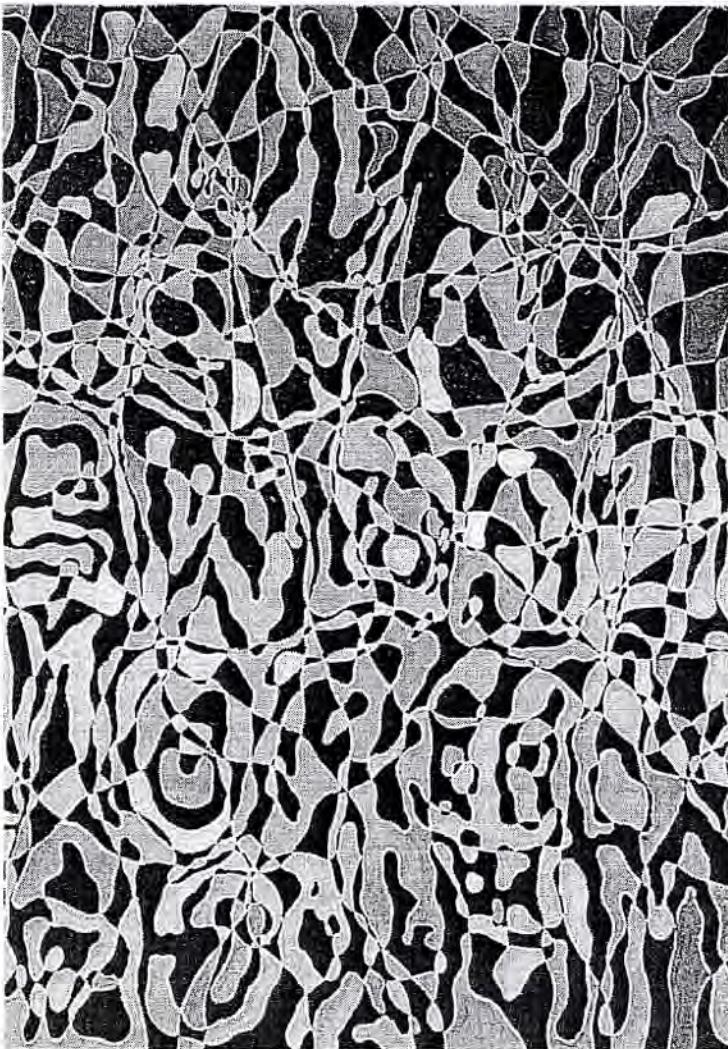
Also at the Rose, in a neat companion exhibition, contemporary art-

ist Bruce Pearson shows work that harkens back to the '60s in its psychedelic colors and patterns, and artificial materials, but very much addresses issues of the '90s.

Pearson carves wild patterns from styrofoam. He bases the patterns on text, which he carves into the positive space and shapes into the negative space of his picture plane. Then he applies color. The result is visually ravishing; it isn't until closer examination that you discover you're taking in words and images along with the eye-popping colors or patterns.

"Violence, Profanity, Supernatural Strangeness and Graphically Rendered Sexual Situations" was a warning published in a film review. Pearson melds those words into wormy, squiggling shapes that lose their readability yet somehow render their meaning in a painting with that title. "Step 1" and "Step 2" look like magnetic resonance images of the human brain; the text embedded in these mandalas was taken from preachy affirmations Pearson heard on the "Oprah" show.

Ultimately, these are seductive works of art that subtly critique popular culture. They slow you down with their enigmatic beauty, then grab you with their ironic sensibility.



Bruce Pearson at Ronald Feldman

A glance at Bruce Pearson's heavily textured paintings brings to mind those of Alfred Jensen.

But the differences are vast—and informative: Pearson's are bigger; their relief is not due to built-up paint but carved Styrofoam; imagery is based not on numbers but on words; and rather than being embedded, shapes seem to dance happily across the field.

In fact, Pearson's works sustain a tone of euphoria. The nine paintings and four gouaches in this show (all 1998 or '99) consist of book titles lettered on surfaces so complicated by hue change or texture that one can barely puzzle them out. The titles supposedly derive from self-help books, but one suspects parody: works on view come from the "Post-Feminist Masculinity" series and the "Recovery Language" series, among others.

But whatever verbal games he plays, Pearson doesn't forget visual interest. The paintings are woozily dazzling. A recklessly careening pattern in *Why Can't Love Come in a Six Pack?* nearly obliterates the widely spaced capital letters spelling out the title. The colored lines woven together on the diagonal in *A Simple Answer* (presumably not directed to *that* question) evoke textile motifs.

Hues are unexpected, pushy, even garish—the *Six Pack* piece is salmon pink over spring green, with a bit of lavender added, while *Answer's* brilliant blue is

spotted with orange, gold and red. An exception is the all-white *Crystal Energy Grids System and Remote Healing*, which has only faint recollections of blue, pink, green and yellow in warped and wavy horizontal lines of illegible handwriting.

The paintings have a busy, dancing sweep from a distance, but up close the carved Styrofoam with its brittle contours and thin edges looks stiff and plotted. Likewise, graphic drama and color are stronger from afar, or in reproduction; intimacy does not become these works.

The compositions of three sunburst paintings—in black, white, and blue/green over red/orange—are as rigid as the carving. They lack the other works' metamorphic sense of play. These three, all titled *Die of Pleasure*, look somewhat like Jay DeFeo's *The Rose* without the obsessiveness.

The gouaches repeat the configurations and titles of some larger reliefs; Pearson must have used them to work out color schemes, since that's what differs. These flat renderings make clear why Pearson's patterns aren't Op art: they have an irregularity that's part organic, part hallucinatory. Who would have thought that lines of roman letters would have such interesting shapes? However, the gouaches lack the glints of reflected light that in the reliefs add to the happy feeling of hysteria.

—Janet Koplos

Bruce Pearson: *No No No . . .*, 1998, oil and acrylic on Styrofoam, 48 inches square; at Ronald Feldman.



ART

Op 'til you drop

Two new shows put a whole new spin on Op Art

By Carol Kino



"Op at Up," installation view.

As movements go, Op Art has had a sadly checkered history. During its heyday in the early '60s, it was revered as a species of pure abstraction devoted to optical illusion. But by the end of the decade, Op Art had been so frequently employed as a faddy fashion motif that it had lost all credibility as serious art. And when such artists as Ross Bleckner and Philip Taaffe began appropriating elements of Op for their own ironies about 20 years later, they certainly didn't help its reputation. Now, however, a pair of terrific shows—one at MoMA, the other at Up & Co.—suggests that Op Art may be making a comeback.

The splashier of the two shows is the latest "Projects" offering at the Museum of Modern Art—an institution that played an important part in Op Art's history when, in 1965, it mounted "The Responsive Eye," the definitive Op survey. This time around, MoMA's curators have picked four young artists whose work, as cocurator Lillian Tone puts it, lifts "content into a contentless realm." Basically, this means that while everything here comes loaded with visual stimuli, the work also has—surprise, surprise—a conceptual

edge, which offers viewers an extra mind-bending dimension.

The show opens with Karin Davie's canvases, in which brightly colored stripes morph into vaguely humanoid shapes. Smudged with smears and drips, the overall result looks like a weird hybrid of Op Art and underground comix by way of Morris Louis. The next gallery holds Bruce Pearson's appealing relief paintings which resemble psychedelic posters. Covered with phrases like "ANOTHER NAIL IN THE COFFIN OF OBJECTIVITY," Pearson's pieces are carved from Styrofoam and painted in Day-Glo

colors. The words are almost indecipherable, but they seem to pulsate with subliminal meaning anyway.

Pearson's paintings make the perfect foil for Udomsak Krisanamis's more muted work, which hangs in the same room. Viewed from afar, these arrangements of ivory dots and lozenges on blue and black backgrounds resemble starry skies or Agnes Martin-like abstractions.

Upon closer inspection, however, each piece turns out to have been obsessively collaged. Like Pearson, Krisanamis incorporates words in his work; he starts out each piece by layering strips of newspaper onto canvas, then uses a Magic Marker to black out everything but the spaces within letters.

The final room is devoted to the excellent Fred Tomaselli, who continues here his trademark practice of embedding pills and other controlled substances within thick layers of resin, so that they seem to vibrate and glow. Incredibly, even though Tomaselli uses pretty much the same craftsmanship and materials throughout, each piece has a completely different look and feel. In the phantasmagoric *Bird Blast*, for example, a colorful eruption of leaves and bird illustrations explodes from the work's center. In *9000 Beats Per Second*, which recalls the work of original Op Art master Bridget Riley, wavy stripes made of aspirin tablets

throb against an austere black void.

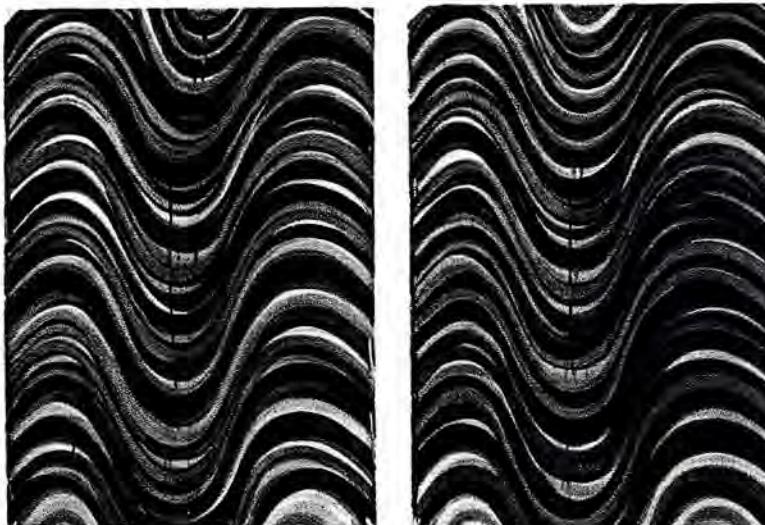
"Op at Up," meanwhile, is being held in a scruffy Tribeca space that couldn't be more different from MoMA's pristine environs. Most of the pieces use fairly minimal materials and are thumbtacked to the walls; as a result the whole show has the air of an elementary-school science fair. In contrast to the trippy sensibility on view at MoMA, the works here simply play with perception. But the longer you look at this stuff, the dizzier it makes you feel.

For work of sheer nausea-inducing potential, top prize has to go to Tom Moody, who also organized the show. Starting with a single basic component—a computer-generated stripe, minutely shaded with black Ben Day dots and photocopied at slightly different sizes—Moody pieces together a quilt that's crazy enough to make your head spin. Mark Dagley turns in another vertiginous performance with his painting of primary-colored dots in an out-of-sync spiral. And in Ray Rapp's two-monitor video installation, animated spheres advance and recede in a peculiarly jerky fashion.

The show's real standout, however, is Alicia Wirt, whose pieces made me think in new ways about painting. In her *7-Layered Light Shelf*, for instance, several triangular shelves cast ordinary shadows below, while reflecting colors above. Since they're installed above eye level, it's impossible to see how these objects were made. I was also fascinated by David Clarkson's mixed-media construction, in which blue dots, red lightbulbs and a blue mobile are suspended against a crimson background. Staring at it affords some very interesting afterimages once you finally look away.

In this day and age, reenvisioning a '60s movement minus irony or nostalgia—as the work in both of these shows so ably does—seems an unusually refreshing achievement. Still, we should all perhaps think twice before asking for more. Our eyes might not be able to take it.

"Projects 63" is at the Museum of Modern Art through June 30 (see Museums). "Op at Up" is at Up & Co. through July 18 (see Soho).



At MoMA: Karin Davie, *In Out*, In Out 24 and 25, 1994.

WHEN WORDS

fail

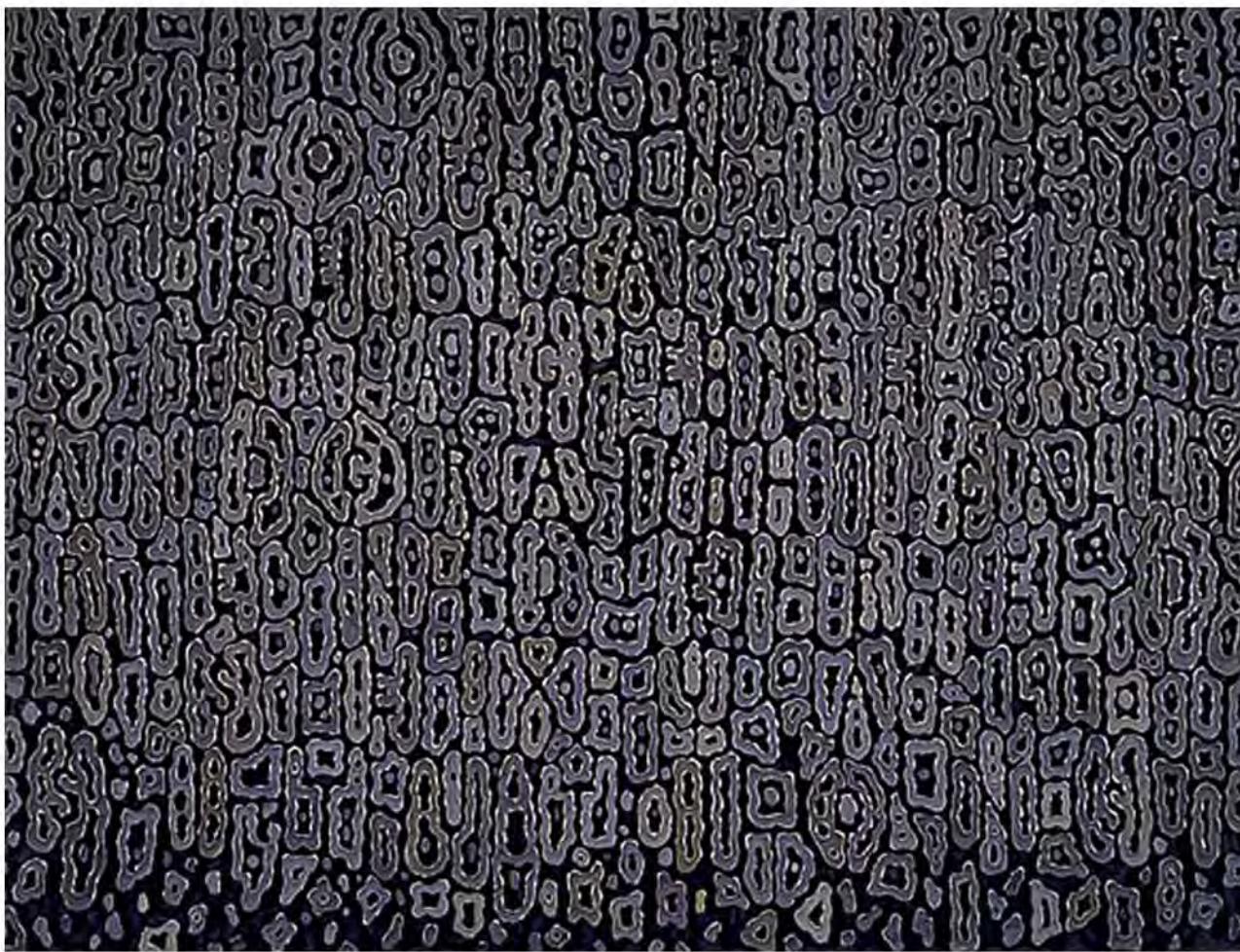
THE PSYCHEDELIC SOLUTION OF BRUCE PEARSON

Though he has lived in New York for over a decade, Bruce Pearson's recent paintings are still marked by the psychedelic aesthetic that he absorbed while growing up in San Francisco. Those trippy sixties album covers and infamously illegible posters have impressed his work with a similarly intricate *horror vacui*, riotous abundance of color and tendency toward optical overload.

Like the artists of those classic Haight-Ashbury handbills, Pearson elaborates the given forms of an initial text into a strangely elusive graphic image. He starts with a sampled phrase clipped from the babble of a daytime talk-show ("It didn't seem to matter") or a fractured bit of overheated tabloid copy, "Kurt Cobain's damaged self-image." These phrases have developed from the laconic *Oblivion*, a painting from 1994, to the more complex promise provided by the recent *Violence, Profanity, Supernatural Strangeness and Graphically Rendered Sexual Situation*. Virtually impossible to read, this last text has been doubled, reversed and laid echoing lines and chiseled Styrofoam textures so intricate that legibility is overwhelmed. And to a large degree, that is the point.

As we search quite literally for words we can not find, we are offered instead a surprising demonstration of the difference between reading and looking. Precisely when words fail, Pearson helps us experience the hallucinatory power of painting.

DAVID CLARKSON



Bruce Pearson, *Violence Profanity Supernatural Strangeness and Graphic Rendered Sexual Situations*, 1997, 6 x 8', Acrylic on Styrofoam.
Images courtesy Ronald Feldman and the artist.