



Bruce Pearson: A New Visual Language

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

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Artists, critics and philosophers have repeatedly proclaimed the end of painting since the invention of photography in 1848. Upon first witnessing Daguerre's new invention, French academic painter Paul Delaroche feared the eventual fate of his profession and bemoaned that, "From today, painting is dead." But only after painting reached its apogee in modern abstraction did artists rebel against its dominance. By 1969, conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth saw painting as the corpse of Modernism and published its obituary in his essay *Art After Philosophy*.

The past three decades have witnessed the proliferation of conceptual, photographic and media-based art. Painting had become perceived as an artifact of a bygone era. Yet, to quote the humorist Samuel Clemens, "The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated."¹ In the hands of a growing number of artists, painting has reinvented itself in the 1990s as a vital medium of artistic expression.

Critic Dave Hickey predicted that "The issue of the nineties will be beauty."²

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, 1970s and 1980s. 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.³ Drawing upon 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. A pioneer of the Williamsburg artist community in Brooklyn, Pearson has worked professionally for 20 years, breaking into the mainstream New York art community in a *Projects* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1996.⁴ 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."⁵ Pearson recognizes this. He engages us in the visual appeal of his picture surfaces and, once he has our attention, gradually



A Simple Answer, 1999, oil and acrylic on Styrofoam, 96" x 96" x 6", collection Frayda and Ronald Feldman, NY

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 imagery and content.

The title of the earliest piece in this exhibition, *Violence, Profanity, Supernatural Strangeness and Graphically Rendered Sexual Situations* (1997), was a parental warning published as part of a *New York Times* film review. Drawing the text in extruded letters, he then flipped the image and overlaid the reversed texts to create an intricate pattern. He constructed the 6-inch deep relief by carving the pattern into Styrofoam, one layer of text into the positive and the other into the negative space. The painting's dark, brooding surface suggests that Pearson offers the parental warning of the subversive subjects prevalent in American movies and television as a cynical indictment of our current cultural landscape.

Working in series as well as individual pieces, Pearson conceives of the themes for his paintings as commentaries on contemporary society. The artist gathers quotes from newspapers, books, magazines and television, pinning them to the

wall of his studio. He contemplates the quotes for weeks, even months, before identifying particular ones for their insights. For each series he selects a compositional structure that suits the subject, like overlaying grids, mirrored patterns or mandorlas. Sometimes working on several series simultaneously, the artist mines them until he feels that he has fully explored the possibilities of text, color and composition.

In the series *Spirituality Today*, Pearson reflects on the search for spiritual fulfillment in contemporary society through alternative religions, cults and natural spirituality. The works in this series are usually painted in monochrome — often white — the color associated with spiritual enlightenment. Pearson appropriated the title of *Crystal Energy Grid Systems and Remote Healing* (1997) from an advertisement in a New Age catalog. The artist created a serene image of transcendental beauty that, upon closer examination, is an intense topographical landscape, constructed in an intricate, overlapping grid pattern and painted in a tantalizing array

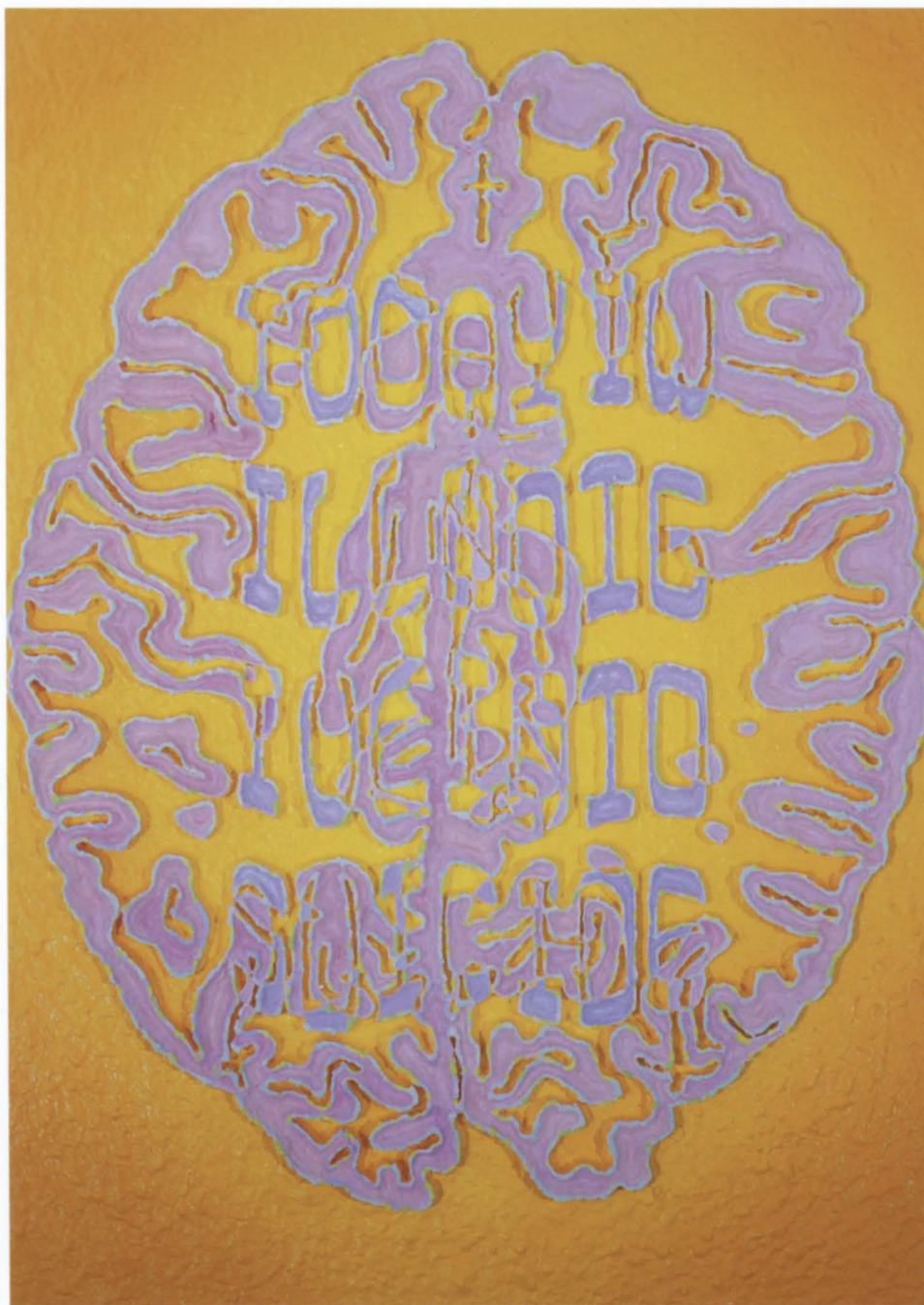
of more than 120 shades of white. The vibrancy of tone and texture contradicts the initial transcendental appearance and suggests the artist's doubts about mineral crystals as a source of spiritual healing, yet he also recognizes in the New Age search for spirituality a metaphor for art as a transcendent, almost religious, experience.

In his series *Post-Feminist Masculinity*, Pearson asks, "How do men act and define themselves in post-feminist culture?" In these works he parodies such popular authors as Robert Bly

and his sensitivity training for men. Pearson facetiously questions, *Why Can't Love Come in a Six Pack?*, the title of an article he found in an online magazine for men. Unlike the intense hues or tones of his other paintings, the colors of this painting seem relatively calm and tame. Pearson co-opted his color scheme from a Ralph Lauren guide to fashionable interior colors for the home. As we enjoy the soothing color

and busy pattern of the painting, letters begin to emerge, gradually combining into words and phrases. Eventually, a third level of images appears, shadowy outlines of figures dancing across the picture surface. Pearson's parody is inherent in the contrast between the sarcastic text and the fashionable colors, athletes and models parading what he views as the synthetic modern conception of love and beauty.

Pearson is intrigued by the popular craze for self-help guides and created his own *12 Steps* series as a parody of such programs. Quoting guests from an episode of the Oprah Winfrey television program, Pearson inscribed across the surface of his reliefs, "Today I will not give in to



Step 2, 1999, acrylic on Styrofoam, 60" x 48" x 6", collection Brett Shaheen, Cleveland, Ohio

suicide," and "You deserve to be with someone who doesn't hit you." The artist contrasts these troubled expressions against lush lavenders, blues and golds inspired by the Impressionists' "pretty" palette. Pearson draws these disturbing quotes onto a cross section of the human brain, his playful interpretation of the mandorla, an emblem of spiritual ascension.

The recent and visually intense Pearson painting, *A Simple Answer* (1999) overwhelms us with a hedonistic splurge of



Die of Pleasure, 1998, acrylic on Styrofoam, 82" x 72" x 6", collection Mark Zager, Coconut Grove, Fla.

rich colors, dynamic pattern and tactile surface. The painting's style recalls the 1960s and the interest in psychedelic design and middle-Eastern textiles. The composition is a single design that is mirrored into the four quadrants, like a Rorschach test pattern. Part of his *Philosophical Series* the title lacks the irony of Pearson's other work and echoes the artist's personal philosophy to seek *A Simple Answer*, to life's questions.

Pearson's paintings thrust themselves upon us with the immediacy of their visual and tactile impact and only gradually reveal their meaning in the complicated layers of images and texts. At once, he flirts with the high culture of contemporary art and the pop culture of sexy, psychedelic design, color and trash TV. The artist teases us with his pithy titles and challenges us to discover the hidden texts that present his perspectives on the ironies of contemporary society. His distortion of the text is not to obfuscate the communicative function of language, but to encourage a lengthy visual encounter that slows the hectic pace of modern life. The artist's ambition is to produce a rich, meaningful visual experience that engages us in a process of discovery. Pearson's bold painted reliefs integrate idea, image and text, creating *A New Visual Language*.

— Joseph D. Ketner, Henry and Lois Foster Director
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Mass.



Die of Pleasure, 1998, acrylic on Styrofoam, 82" x 72" x 6", collection Bruk/Sacher, Highland Beach, Fla.

Notes

All quotes from the artist, unless otherwise noted, are from a series of interviews conducted between February and July 1999.

- 1 Friis-Hansen, Dana. *Abstract Painting Once Removed*. Exhibition catalog. (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 1998): p. 14, quoting "Painting in Photography," in *International Center of Photography's Encyclopedia of Photography* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1984, p. 375; Kosuth, Joseph "Art and Philosophy," *Studio International* 178 (1969): 134-7, 160-1, 212-13; Cable note from Mark Twain, 1897.
- 2 Hickey, Dave. *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*. (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993): 11, 64.
- 3 Moos, David. "According to What: Abstract Painting circa 1999," *Art Papers* 23, no. 3 (May-June 1999): 16, 18; Ball Martin. *Reconditioned Abstraction*. Exhibition, Nov. 16, 1996-Jan. 4, 1997 (St. Louis: Forum for Contemporary Art, 1996): 3.
- 4 *Projects 63: Karin Davie, Udomsak Krisanamis, Bruce Pearson, Fred Tomaselli*. Exhibition May 14-June 30, 1998 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998).
- 5 Hickey, op cit: 12, 64.

Cover: *Why Can't Love Come in a Six Pack?*, 1999, oil and acrylic on Styrofoam, 96" x 72" x 6", courtesy the artist