

"Restless spirit"

Painter Alan Pearson's health problems have not stopped him chasing new visions. He talks to Rosa Shiels. (Published in "The Press" Christchurch, New Zealand 18 May 2005)

Painter Alan Pearson decamped to the Sunshine Coast of Queensland. He will be 76 in August, and, living with a serious heart condition, has sought the Australian warmth for his health. Pearson lives and works in the house he designed and built in the hinterland behind Noosa, a trendy beach resort where scores of holidaying Sydneysiders tan their bikini lines into submission on the fine blond sand.

"The Sunshine Coast, the sea and its rhythms and its people, took my notice at first in 2000 and my observations turned away from the philosophical, political angst of my last works in New Zealand to space and time and the spirit of this place." Not that Pearson can see the beach from the particular patch of bush where he lives now, but he did complete some paintings of the beach and the coastline when he first arrived. Pearson's patch, where he has built his house and studio, is a tree-filled bush section and "quite bland" he says. This doesn't stop him from seeing beyond the dappled trunks to the answers he seeks to perennial questions he poses in his work. Nor do his surroundings or his poor health stop him working up new "spatial spiritual scapes" and fresh ideas. But with three stents in his heart and irregular pulses dogging him daily, his own mortality is staring him down.

"I've got bloody bedunk-bedunks in the heart half the day. When it doesn't miss a beat, it races and I think I'm going every minute of the day. So I walk along with a slight morbidity - you know what I mean?" Pearson talks quickly, skimming across phrases so rapidly that his words trip themselves up. Perhaps he's always talked like this, or perhaps he is speeding up to fit in everything before the inevitable. "I think it's a matter of your drive and where your psyche is. I've done some major work here. I've got big three-metre works," he says.

Known for the power of his portraits as well as his vigorous abstracts, Alan Pearson, a figurative expressionist, is one of New Zealand's most notable artists. A frequent prize winner in his early art career, Pearson graduated from the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts with honours in 1961 and used that degree and his teaching credentials from Auckland Teachers' College to teach art at Cashmere High School and Kingslea Girls' School. As a QEII grant recipient he studied at the Royal Academy Schools in London and travelled twice to the Continent. In between trips, he twice won the National Bank Portrait Prize.

Of a searching, inquiring mind, he continued travelling, stopping from time to time to base himself in such places as Middlesbrough and London before returning to New Zealand in 1985 to take up an arts residency at Dunedin Public Art Gallery and Otago Polytechnic. In the '80s and '90s he lived in Christchurch and Lyttelton, travelling to Europe periodically to study and paint. In 1993 he was artist-in-residence at Tai Poutini Polytechnic in Greymouth. "I've always been able to paint anywhere, I'm a man of the world".

In 1998, the troubles with his heart surfaced and he was facing major surgery. Pearson was the focus of a major retrospective called "Heaven and Blood" curated by Neil Roberts (manager of the collections at Christchurch Art Gallery) with Pearson for the Robert McDougall Art Gallery in 1999. The exhibition featured paintings and drawings done over four decades, and revealed his deep interest in the physical and the spiritual. "I had a sense of saying goodbye to the world at the time," he says. "Anybody with a bit of imagination realises that you don't last forever."

Pearson maintains strong connections to New Zealand and says he plans on returning from time to time to exhibit. He is also attached deeply to the land. "The one thing about Australia is that you can't really be anti it. It doesn't really attack you to any degree," he says. "But I think there's a primal thing in New Zealand. It's really got a deep nature, the land has, and the land is new. I notice always the movement of energy, especially within nature. When you go to the West Coast, you come up against sap green and you come up against black. High precipices down to the beaches. Waves which I haven't seen the likes of in the world coming through. The terror of it all sort of comes in, and the isolation."

True to form, Pearson's itchy feet are still itchy. Already. After only a few years in Noosa, he's keen to get back into the push and pull of city life. "It's a very bland place, is the Sunshine Coast. I don't think I'll stay here in Noosa. It's also quite isolated, so I'm not part of the heartbeat, you

know what I mean? I think I'll go down to Sydney where it's a bit more of an urbanised existence," he says, in the same breath talking about going up to the northern rainforest in his caravan to do some plein air painting. "I always find after seven years I want to get up and go. I've got that bloody wanderer thing."

It was that wandering gene that brought him down from England originally, first to Australia where he worked as a fireman on the railway, then on the Snowy Mountains scheme ("I built this country") before settling in New Zealand. He reckons he spent all his years in the South Pacific proclaiming he belonged, despite being picked on for being a "Pommie bastard" with a Yorkshire accent.

Strongly opinionated, forthright, and profoundly connected to the art he makes, Pearson continues to look for his next painterly challenge. "I don't think the impetus to do the work is as great, but sometimes when I get something in my head I can go forward from there."

If you were to paint Alan Pearson's life you would need an oversize canvas and a truckload of paint. There would be bold sweeping passes of darkening fury and shimmering swatches of fiery reds and oranges, swaggers of vigorous cerulean and stabs of yellow; musters of figures proclaiming their visceral corporeality and blithe spirits leaping through sweeps of calm, sunny blues and greens.

This painted life would be full of sound and fury as well as surprising delicacy.

"I'm a song and dance man, really", he says. "I've sung for the New Zealand Opera. I'm a bass baritone."

Lately in his work he's been "going for spontaneity; aiming for the apex of feeling. You gotta make things live! The state of life is a state of grace," he says. "The knowledge of light. The chasing of new visions. I'm still on the joy of life and I've got to keep going."

Alan Pearson, Recent Australian Paintings, The Arthouse, 292 Montreal Street, Christchurch.
Rosa Shiels, The Press, Christchurch.