

Excerpt from a book review titled: Striking visions of places and people

By Peter Simpson, **New Zealand Herald**, Auckland, 22 January 2011

Alan Pearson: Expressionist Portraits by Alison Pearson

Alexandra Stewart Press \$125

This huge book, running to almost 400 pages, reproduces nearly 300 images of Alan Pearson's portraits ranging from 1961 to 2010. Although one of the largest books on a New Zealand painter ever published, it covers only a portion of Pearson's work (the portraits) - he also paints landscapes and abstracts.

Pearson was born in England in 1929 and emigrated to New Zealand (after a spell in Australia) in 1954. He trained at the Canterbury School of Art and spent much of his career in Canterbury, interspersed with periods in Auckland, the West Coast, England, Italy and (most recently) Australia. He was strongly supported, through directors such as TL Rodney Wilson and curator Neil Roberts, and by Christchurch's McDougall Gallery, which gave him a retrospective exhibition in 1999.

Christchurch Art Gallery holds much the largest collection of his work (some 50 items). He also exhibits often in Auckland and became well-known when his *Huia Couple* and *Portrait of Mrs Oliver* won National Bank Portrait Prizes in 1978 and 1979.

Pearson once told an interviewer: "The aim, and the art, of the portraitist is not merely to produce a likeness but to reveal the mind and the being behind the human face ... I look for the moment below the public mask ... that conceals their innermost selves from view." This psychological emphasis governs his freely expressive and gestural use of paint, his intense and often non-naturalistic colour, and his placement of figures within settings, abstract and figurative, which help define their inner being.

His subjects include his wives, children, close friends, fellow artists, and, above all, himself. Self-portraits at every age include some of his finest works, such as a 1972 example in which the blue-faced subject in yellow singlet is depicted against a violent red and yellow background - colours conveying emotional states such as anxiety and insecurity - or *Huia Self-Portrait* (1978) - the jacket image - where there is complex interplay between the figure and its lush bush setting.

There are many tender portraits of women and his children. *Four portraits of Deidre* (1972-74) describe movingly the parabola of a relationship. Depictions of his wife, Alison - who also provides an informative text - are also notable for their range and empathy.