

BY WARREN FEENEY

Masks off

Alan Pearson is the oldest and angriest young man alive, eternally seeking answers to the big questions of existence.



Alan Pearson's portraits and self-portraits span more than 60 years and have been favourably compared to European masters such as Max Beckmann, Emil Nolde, Rembrandt and Rubens. Yet Pearson has rarely felt supported in New Zealand, maintaining the country's art remains essentially provincial. In 1987, the Liverpoolian's frustration spilled over into a painting titled *Self-portrait in an alien land pre-lobotomy*. Pearson recalled, "I was ... marginalised for being English by an art community focused on nationalism."

In *Alan Pearson: Expressionist Portraits*, art historian and wife of the artist Alison Pearson details this uneasy relationship and the artist's belief that narrow and politically correct art-world agendas have always been preferred to content and talent. Encompassing nearly 400 pages with full-colour illustrations of 230

works, this is a comprehensive discussion of Pearson's life, connecting his art with the best of European painting, from the Renaissance to Picasso. His portraits skillfully reveal, as he puts it, "the moment beneath the public mask", for himself and his subjects. A recent self-portrait, *I claim this country for Liverpool*, depicts the now Queensland-based Pearson as a convict running wide-eyed through the Australian bush, desperately seeking safety and belonging in a hostile landscape. It's a brutally honest and unapologetic admission from an individual who remains the oldest and angriest young man alive, eternally seeking answers to the big questions of existence.

Which provides a clue to why his work is absent from all major surveys of New Zealand art. As Alison Pearson notes, he has "never backed away from a controversial statement". This biography, similar to earlier publications on the artist,

reiterates a number of familiar incidents, including his assault in a Christchurch hotel in 1975 by Caxton Press founder Leo Bensemann. Pearson responded with the unsettling *Black Dog Leo Bensemann*. It seems as much a self-portrait as an image of Bensemann. It is also a decidedly uncomfortable representation of one of the country's most respected artists.

Pearson also confronted and challenged the New Zealand art community in 1986 when critic John Hurrell reviewed an exhibition of his work and declared expressionist painting should be consigned to history. Hurrell proclaimed, "Today the reign of the white male prophet, heroically brandishing his paintbrush at the world, is all but over." Pearson answered with *Post Modernist Nude with the head of the last white hero of the western world at Taylor's Mistake* (1987), a sumptuous work and eulogy to the artist's pleasure in the female nude, even one that holds his decapitated head firmly in her hand.



From top left, *Self-portrait, second breath at 75* (2005-06); *Herne Bay Couple* (1978); *Portrait of Tony Fomison* (1977).

As magnificent as this gesture appeared at the time, Pearson had good reason to believe his principles were under threat as the local art world embraced the irony and detachment of postmodern art practice. It was no coincidence collectors Jim and Mary Barr's exhibition of expressionist painter Philip Clairmont at Whanganui's Sarjeant Gallery opened that same year, deconstructing and demolishing the myth of the artist as a tortured outsider and genius. This marginalisation of expressionism as the indulgent preoccupation of the archetypal white male attacked the core of Pearson's art.

Unfortunately, Pearson doesn't do irony and Hurrell's critique missed the emotional and intellectual generosity of his vision. In *Alan Pearson: Expressionist Portraits*, the artist is revealed as a fiercely intelligent individual who couldn't help but create some of the country's most memorable paintings. His portrait of Tony Fomison (1977) has defined New Zealand's perceptions of this artist, while his painting of Ann and John Oliver in *Herne Bay Couple* (1978) chillingly penetrates the psychology of a relationship falling apart, inviting comparison with the best of Picasso's figurative works from the 1930s.

In fairness to his detractors, Pearson has often been his own worst enemy, dwelling on his critics' comments, possibly unaware that the romantic opera and performance of his painting remains far grander than the rebuttals it has been dealt. Neither is he entirely alone as a portrait painter ignored by the local art world. This particular genre has only received serious attention from curators and art historians since the late 1990s.

In his defence, Pearson's art merits better treatment from a community adept at celebrating its successes and silently marginalising those perceived to be out of step with its tastes and trends. He may be difficult and confrontational, but Pearson's paintings give a generous vision of a "life lived intensely", art that poet Denys Trussell has maintained reveals the human condition as "nature conscious of itself". Pearson's is a rare achievement of a universal and spiritual impulse that few New Zealand artists have, or will ever, come close to. ■

ALAN PEARSON: EXPRESSIONIST PORTRAITS, by Alison Pearson (Alexandra Stewart Press, \$125).



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