

# PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST

He remains at 80 one of the distinctive voices in modern New Zealand art; a man committed to his style and perspectives.  
**CHRISTOPHER MOORE**  
 talks to Alan Pearson.

**I**t's all a question of time," Alan Pearson observes. "Time and evolution. I'm sure of this. I've developed more spontaneity in the way I handle paint. My relationship with the sitter is still important. I'm looking into the inner person, talking with the individual and discovering a collection of inner thoughts which come together in their face."

Pearson returned to Christchurch last week to launch a new book of his portraits. Its production has involved a close collaboration between the artist and his wife, Alison, herself an art historian and art critic.

In good times and bad, calm and storm this has been an enduring team. Today the couple live in a rural area of Queensland in a house and studio Pearson designed. Australia has been home since 1999 when they moved across the Tasman following major cardiac surgery.

"Today I've got six stents in me," he mentions. Asked what he couldn't do with 12, he bursts into laughter. It's clear that the 80-year-old lion has absolutely no intention of disappearing quietly. He may have mellowed – slightly – but he can still roar.

Born in Liverpool in 1929, he entered an extended family filled with conversation, debate and personalities. As an adolescent Pearson was already drawing heads and faces – George Bernard Shaw, El Greco and Albert Einstein.

"I was interested in their strengths. Wartime cartoons of personalities fascinated me too. I drew people in bars and at work throughout Australia during the early 50s, mostly linear representations. I was interested in psyches," he explains.

Arriving in Christchurch in the mid-50s, he discovered a feisty group of young art students and artists based in and around an Armagh St house. Pearson's formal painting career even began with a work *Saturn in conjunction with Mars and myself at 22, Armagh St*. Memories of his childhood in northern England, the loss of his twin sister meshed with his experiences at Canterbury University's School Of Fine Arts from 1957 to 1959 (returning in 1961 to complete his honours year.) A rigorous engagement with his

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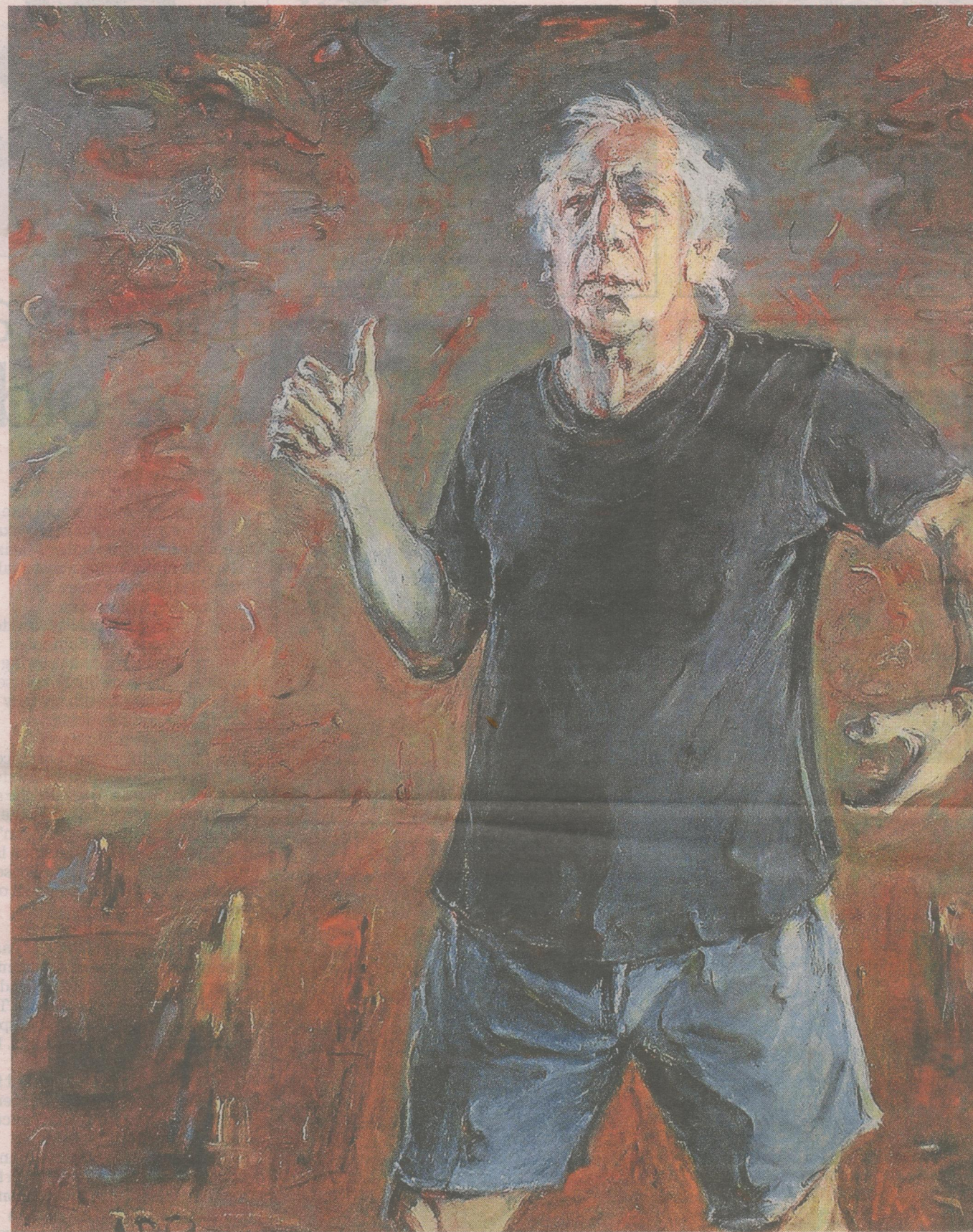
painting and equally strongly held views on life, art and politics often saw him distanced from his contemporaries. He earned a reputation for being prickly and combative. There were those who felt threatened by Pearson's individual artistic voice but those who know him admire and love this fierce, opinionated stubborn and intellectually restless Scouse; a contemporary painter who has stood defiantly outside schools and trends.

"I came to New Zealand and thought that I could be part of something while pursuing my individual voice. I found it difficult – I know of one academic who told his students that I'd never be a contemporary New Zealand painter. I let these things go but to be told that I didn't belong here frustrated, and occasionally angered me. But they never stopped me. I'd been given this chance. Why shouldn't I use it?"

He moved to Auckland in the late 60s, returning to Christchurch in the 70s. By the 80s Pearson was on the move again, this time to England and Italy fuelled by a commitment to painting, poetry and the theatre. He returned to New Zealand in 1985, working in Dunedin and Christchurch. By the end of the century, Alan Pearson, now 70, physically and mentally spent by continuing battles with the art establishment and curators and suffering from cardiac disease, moved to Australia where he continued to paint with increasing strength, producing a flow of self portraits in a blunt and unvarnished depiction of old age.

"These paintings disturb some people but as my Dad used to say 'He's a bit of a weirdo, Our Al,'" he says.

"Alan is a lively, very funny man who touches peoples' lives wherever he goes. He talks to



everybody. Love him or hate him, things happen when Alan is around," Alison Pearson adds.

One of the last portraits in the book was painted in late September 2009. It shows Pearson at 80 standing defiantly in shorts and T-shirt, recovering from knee surgery but gazing the viewer firmly in the eye, thumbs up as if to say "Here I am. Take me or leave me but never dismiss me." The swirling colours in the background reflect the dust storm which was sweeping along the Queensland coast at the time. It's bravura stuff, reflecting the Sturm und Drang which has swirled around much of Pearson's life.

"It speaks of stoicism and acknowledges the passing of time," Alison Pearson writes.

"Yet it signals thumbs up to survival and on with the motley."

□ Alan Pearson. *Expressionist portraits*, Alexandra Stewart Press, 391 pages (illustrated), \$125.

## Acknowledging the passing of time:

Alan Pearson in Self-portrait at 80 years: red dust storm. Oil on canvas.