

TIME AWAY

Alan Pearson
ITALIAN AND BRITISH WORKS
1980-85



EXIT FROM A COLD THEATRE 1984



Robert McDougall Art Gallery
Christchurch City Council
New Zealand

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TIME AWAY

Robert McDougall Art Gallery

Exhibition June 5 — July 20, 1986

FOREWORD

Alan Pearson is a natural force, like the weather, changeable, restless, always on the move, warm or cool, occasionally clear and bright with periods of murkiness, sometimes thunderous, often unleashing unexpected bolts of energy.

The comparison stops here for Pearson, in the course of his activity, accumulates experience, memories, impressions and responds to a world, the stimuli of which he appears to feel personally, intimately connected.

When he returned to Christchurch early in 1985 after five years absence, he brought with him a large number of paintings and drawings made in Italy and London. Seen together they revealed that his journeyings had not only been made in the physical sense but that he had been involved in explorations of the spirit which were even more interesting.

While abroad he has painted with gripping intensity images of himself, a few companions, places, and the theatre, the theme that underlies much of his work and which is a metaphor for his relationship with the world.

For Pearson, theatres are vibrant, warm, full of colour, life, people, drama, talk, excitement, music, change, a source of pleasure. The question that gives the tension and metaphysical dimension to his paintings is what happens when the lights are dimmed, the stage is silent and dark, the seats empty, and the audience, actors and actresses gone? Pearson's paintings like those of few other New Zealand artists, are always defiant proclamations of the artist's right to existence in the face of mortality's inexorable advance. There is now a darker aspect to his painting and in his absence Pearson's work has grown even more personal, assured and decisive.

This exhibition provides an opportunity to observe the development which has taken place in his imagery during Alan Pearson's 'Time Away' and to welcome his return to Christchurch.



John Coley
Director

BAROQUE EXIT No 1 LONDON 1983

INTRODUCTION

As a painter Alan Pearson had his stylistic beginnings in Canterbury and can claim to be an heir to the bravura technique that links back through Canterbury painting to Van der Velden. However, over the years he has emerged as a painter of singular vision shunning directions that have often ensnared other artists of his generation. Pearson's vision partly influenced by his origins, partly by his travel beyond these shores, but largely through his experience of life has contributed to the advance of his painting.

As a New Zealand artist his figurative painting and portraits have become more and more individual prophetic statements of concern for man

in the world. Man as centre of the twentieth century universe holding his destiny in his hands. Much of the agony of existence Pearson has wrought in his own self image, his self portraits in particular are more than portraits, they are rather symbols of man's universal struggle.

During his time away from New Zealand between 1980 and 1985 Pearson's perception of this struggle was sharpened, summoning up an outpouring of metaphysical imagery unique in New Zealand painting today.

Neil Roberts
Curator

ALAN PEARSON

Born in Liverpool England. At age 21 moved to Australia. In 1954 he spent a year in Canada before coming to New Zealand. Between 1957 and 1959 he studied at Canterbury University School of Fine Arts where he graduated with Honours in Painting. Post Graduate study at the Royal College of Art followed during 1964 and 1965.

From 1967 until 1969 he worked as a Television designer in Auckland. In 1976 he was awarded a four month study grant by the QEII Arts Council and toured Britain, France, Germany and Italy.

In 1980 he returned to Italy with his wife Alison for a short time before moving on to England where he lived and painted for much of the time away, until 1985 when he returned to New Zealand. It is works from this period that comprise the present exhibition.

The recipient of many awards, Alan Pearson has exhibited his work both in New Zealand and internationally for many years.

He is currently (1986) artist in residence at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

1980-1985 Chronology

1980

- May Left New Zealand with his wife and travelled to London, then to Bari in Southern Italy before going to Matera, a small town situated between Bari and Potenza. Paints Self Portrait 1980 (Cat 2).
- June Living in Matera but crosses the Alps to Europe visits Munich. Paints portrait of Alison. (Cat 3).
- July Back in Matera. Paints portrait of Gregorio. (Cat 6).
- August Paints portraits of Alison. (Cat 4 & 5).
- September
- October
- November Earthquakes, paints self portrait Terror of Terra Moto. (Cat 8).
- December Alison leaves for England. Alan remains for a few weeks. Paints Flight from the Theatre of Time after the earthquake (Cat 20) and Terra Moto (Cat 21) Requiem of Dark and Light. (Cat 24).

1981

- January Leaves Italy to join Alison at Middlesbrough in England. Paints Alison Italian Reflections. (Cat 9).
- February Exhibits New Zealand and Italian works at Middlesbrough Public Art Gallery Cleveland
- April Moves to Kensington London and takes up a studio at Fulham
- December Moves to Hammersmith London. Paints the Bedsitter (Cat 26).

1982

- June Moves to Shepherd's Bush, paints 'Covent Garden from the Gods' (Cat 27) and other works.
- November Travels to Northern Italy, Paints Self Portrait (Cat 10), Italian Street Opera (Cat 28).

1983

January

February

December

Travels to Potenza Southern Italy before returning to London.

Paints over the next few months Exit 1 & 11 (Cat 29 & 30) and begins several works in the series Teatro del Baroque (Cat 31).

London Paints Covent Garden Opera House (Cat 33) and Self Portrait at the Easel (Cat 10) Paints Portrait of art critic Edward Lucie Smith. Invited to exhibit in the 50th Group Exhibition for art critic Edward Lucie Smith at the Leinster Gallery London.

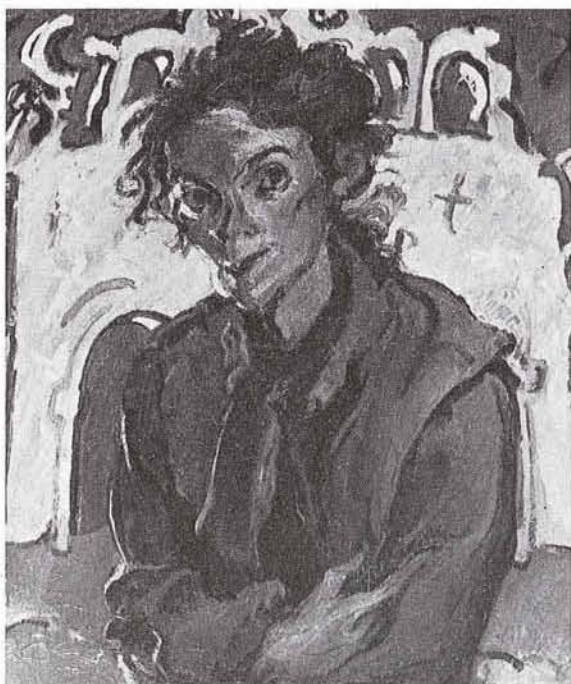
1984

June

Exhibits at the Royal Academy London. Paints Self Portraits Exit from a Cold Theatre (Cat 13), Man Chased by Shadows (Cat 14), Tomb of Western Civilisation (Cat 34) and Portrait of Justin (Cat 15). Exhibits English and New Zealand painting at New Zealand House London.

1985

Paints Self Portrait Aotearoa (Cat 16). Die Walkure (Cat 36) and Covent Garden from the Balcony. Returns to New Zealand.



ALISON ITALIAN REFLECTIONS 1981

PORTRAITS 1980-1985 ITALY/ENGLAND

Alan Pearson has painted portraits almost as long as he has been working as an artist, each has revealed an approach to the essentials of humanity that has been no more penetrating than in his own self analysis. His portraits are not just records of facial types but personalities interacting in time and space. Like all masterful portraitists his imagery extends the identity of the sitter as part of the family of man, laying bare the skeleton of being in humanity. It has been written that Pearson's record of the human condition is 'disquieting and often contemptuous'. The reality of the human condition in the twentieth century is disquieting and often contemptible. But Pearson's reaction is not one of contempt for humanity, he is not anti-man but it is rather a concern for the path that human civilisation has taken. Fundamental to all Pearson's work is man, and in a real sense his self image is a symbol of man's place in the world today.

This can explain why his self portraits are often harsher than those of his other sitters. Also fundamental to his portraiture is locale.

In their environment his subjects are not fixed, they move in time and space often haunted by the past, uneasy in the present and fearful of mortality in the future.

Flesh and spirit are scored out on the canvas almost in a state of flux, which is the state of man's identity.

During his time away Pearson's portraits revealed a heightening of his awareness. His portrait imagery is more volatile almost seismic.

His portraits in Italy began in June 1980 with a sense of hope and ended a few months later with a sense of doom.

One of the earliest portraits he painted on arriving at Matera, perhaps his most lyrical, was Alison 1980 Cat 2. In this work he has put his wife against the blue field of clear Southern Italian Sky, the subject stands free in air and light presenting joy of the spirit. There is nothing of the brooding almost claustrophobic presence current in London portraits a year or so later. In Italy he experienced the weight of ancient civilisation the roar and power of a millenium haunted by ghosts of the past. An heroic and noble past. His Italian portraits have a sense of this spiritual nobility and calm evident in such works as Roco Fontana Cat 7 and Portrait of Gregorio Cat 6 and Self Portrait Cat 10.

This calm was shattered in November 1980 with the Italian Earthquakes. The Self Portrait Terror of Terra Moto Cat 8 reveals the intensity of Pearson's self analysis in the shadow of disaster and shows an essential truth, truth that is unsettling for the viewer and difficult to take once the masks have fallen away.

In Terror of Terra Moto he paints himself as a symbol of man in the crucible of Western civilisation shocked directly by the forces of nature — physically and mentally.

The move to England at the beginning of 1981 had the effect of an aftershock, the artist saw the move as one to *"the grey mists of a socially disintegrating Anglo Saxon world"*.

The Portrait of Alison Italian Reflections Cat 9 was painted in Middlesbrough early in 1981 and is a contemplative work that echoes the yearning for Italy, already there is a sense of atmosphere closing in, the subject is more confined and fixed in time and space no longer with assurance and freedom in her environment that was present in Italy.

Many of the portraits both of Pearson himself and others reveal the artist's disquiet with his surroundings particularly London where he mostly lived between 1981 and 1985 harrowed by dampness, isolation, and constant threat of society at every turn, assailed by the rawness and death of a culture that summons up only one human reaction, that of escape, but perhaps a way out is not easy.

The most masterly of the London portraits is 'Exit from a Cold Theatre' Cat 13. The artist's escape is foiled by the confrontation with the prospect of the present and future. In the past, the echo of the Baroque, symbol of a pinnacle of culture. The drama in the theatre of life presents no real way out, no escape.



FLIGHT FROM THE THEATRE OF TIME AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE 1980

PAINTING ITALY/ENGLAND 1980-1985

The other works Alan Pearson painted during his time away are motivated by the same reaction as that of his portraiture, in fact one category of painting cannot be reasonably divorced from the other. All are in a real way portraits of man's rise and fall.

The imagery of these works as in portraiture are prophetic statements of man's human condition and continues and extends some themes worked in New Zealand during the late 1970's. The introduction of the Theatre and Opera were new vehicles for the drama of man's state in the world haunted by the spirits of the past and fearful of the terror that could be the future.

The Baroque theatre imagery shines as a symbol, also of man's hope. The Baroque period in Western art grew into an age of enlightenment a high point of Western culture in this millenium. Pearson's sense of the Baroque and its Rhythms is meaningful and he uses it as a backdrop to the devastating cavalcade of performances played out on the surface of his canvases.

Many of the local houses and the Cathedral being in the Baroque style presented to the artist — *"a feeling of AD AD stamped on everything and JC.JC. Jesus Christ who had been instrumental in keeping these people together for such a long time. My compositions started to use these symbols and the myths they perpetuated, started to give a somewhat musical and time oriented certainty, a sort of requiem for the erosion of time past, the dying of that physical body and also to its spiritual soul"*.

Pearson has written that in 1980 he went to Southern Italy to "try and touch the core of Western Civilisation". At Matera in the province of Basilicata, in the landscape dominated by a huge ravine he was able to read the history of a community spanning back over 2000 years, from dwellers of caves to the Palazzo to ferro-concrete apartments laid down like geological strata. Time writ large. The haunting magic and dominance of spirits from the past close in on a people already fearful of the future.

Matera is in a way a symbol also for the artist's time away. Pearson has described Matera as *"a place of no escape, a series of parched monumental headstones shrinking gradually from the glare of each day's sun"*.

At Matera Pearson also read the ravages of the modern age where the church, once a core of hope, has become merely ornamental to the needs of society, so profoundly expressed in Requiem of Dark and Light 1980 Cat 24.

The shock of the 1980 earthquakes were like warning signals from which Pearson has been able to externalise, the forces of nature that can consume man. Human dominance is transitory as is witnessed in Flight from the Theatre of Time after the Earthquake Cat 20.

The London works painted between 1981 and 1985 like the portraits are almost claustrophobic in their tense atmosphere, they reflect Pearson's reaction to the reality of a cold cruel and corrupt world, a gray world of shadows.

The Work from the series Teatro del Baroque Cat 31 are prophetic statements that measure man's destiny in the twentieth century and expressed perhaps even more profoundly in Tomb of Western Civilisation, Cat 34. These and others may seem loaded with pessimism but there is hope. In London theatres and Opera Houses he found a symbol for some hope for life's drama. Works such as Covent Garden Cat 33 and Covent Garden from the Balcony Cat 35 are imbued with the musicality of life but it must be remembered that hopes can be shattered with the Press of a button. Ever present is the shadow of a future that almost blocks out the light of the past.

Of his relationship with the Baroque Pearson says; *"I am baroque in nature, a lot of this was incorporated in the drama of the Opera and a lot of my new work is derived from the Opera. The past entered on to the stage of life where it was acted out by the present looked on by the audience which is the future. In this way I incorporate an explanation of time — facets past and future and enclosed the present"*.



CATALOGUE

PORTRAITS

ITALY/ENGLAND 1980-1985

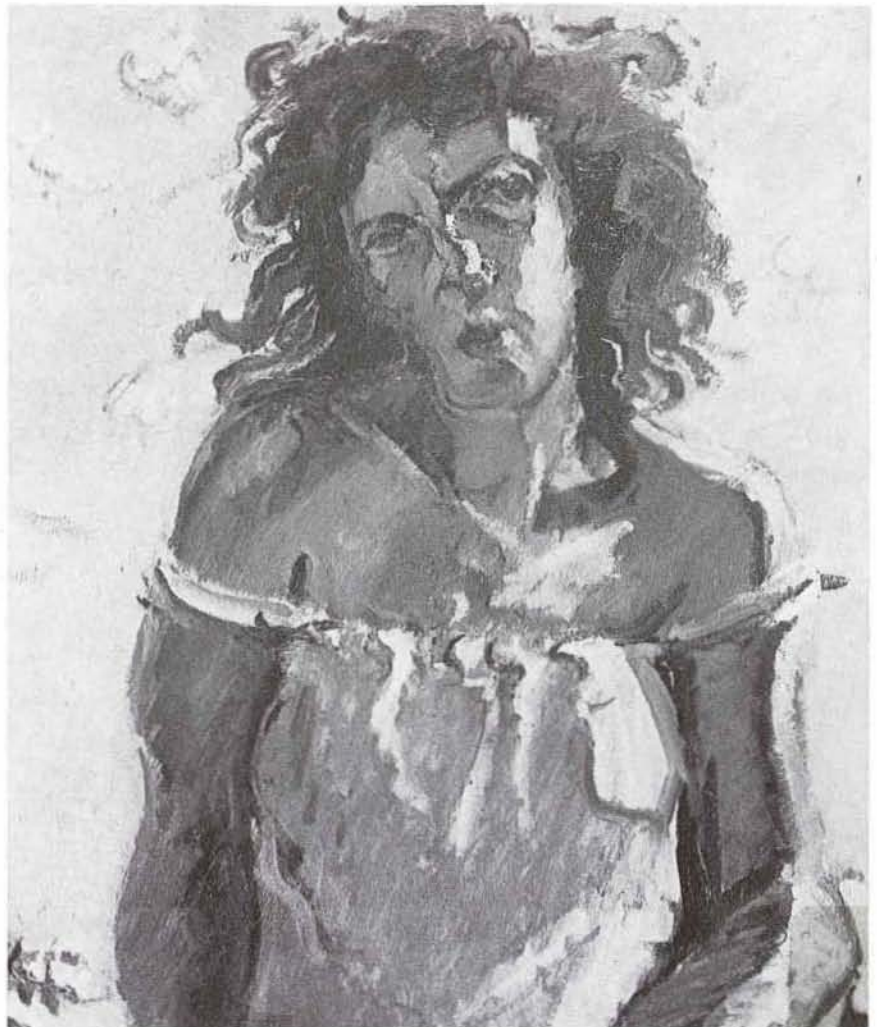
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|---|--|
| <p>1 SELF PORTRAIT NEW ZEALAND 1979/80
oil on canvas 570 × 470mm</p> <p>2 SELF PORTRAIT 1980
oil on board 300 × 300mm</p> <p>3 ALISON SOUTHERN ITALY I 1980
oil on board 610 × 510mm</p> <p>4 ALISON MATERA SOUTHERN ITALY 1980
oil on fabric 800 × 690mm</p> <p>5 ALISON II SOUTHERN ITALY 1980
oil on board 520 × 470mm</p> <p>6 PORTRAIT OF GREGORIO 1980
oil on canvas 510 × 500mm</p> <p>7 PORTRAIT OF ROCO FONTANA 1980
oil on canvas 800 × 650mm</p> <p>8 TERROR OF TERRA MOTO 1980
oil on board 405 × 450mm</p> <p>9 ALISON ITALIAN REFLECTIONS 1981
oil on board 600 × 540mm</p> <p>10 SELF PORTRAIT TUSCANY NORTHERN
ITALY 1981
oil on canvas 450 × 450mm</p> <p>11 PORTRAIT OF EDWARD LUCIE-SMITH
1983
oil on canvas 650 × 700mm</p> <p>12 SELF PORTRAIT AT THE EASEL LONDON
1983
oil on board 600 × 600mm</p> <p>13 EXIT FROM A COLD THEATRE 1984
pastel 750 × 570mm</p> <p>14 MAN CHASED BY SHADOWS LONDON
1984
oil on board 950 × 700mm</p> <p>15 PORTRAIT OF JUSTIN PEARSON 1984
oil on canvas 840 × 730mm</p> <p>16 AOTEAROA LONDON 1985
oil on board 510 × 610mm</p> | <p>18 LA VITA (Life) 1980
oil on canvas 500 × 500mm</p> <p>19 MATERA SOUTHERN ITALY 1980
oil on board 540 × 490mm</p> <p>20 FLIGHT FROM THE THEATRE OF TIME
AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE 1980
oil on board 710 × 101mm</p> <p>21 PORTRAIT OF CASA del UOMO I (Family
of Man) 1980
oil on canvas 520 × 530mm</p> <p>22 PORTRAIT OF CASA del UOMO II (Family
of Man) 1980
oil on canvas 500 × 510mm</p> <p>23 TERRA MOTO 1980/81
oil on canvas 113 × 113mm</p> <p>24 REQUIEM OF DARK AND LIGHT 1980
oil on canvas 765 × 935mm</p> <p>25 CATHEDRAL NAVE ITALY 1981
oil on canvas 565 × 565mm</p> <p>26 THE BEDSITTER LONDON 1981/1982
oil on canvas 500 × 460mm</p> <p>27 COVENT GARDEN FROM THE GODS
oil on canvas 945 × 870mm</p> <p>28 ITALIAN STREET OPERA 1982
oil on canvas 113 × 114mm</p> <p>29 BAROQUE EXIT No 1 LONDON 1983
oil on canvas 610 × 122mm</p> <p>30 EXIT No II LONDON 1983
oil on canvas 710 × 660mm</p> <p>31 TEATRO del BAROQUE (THEATRE OF
THE BAROQUE)
oil on canvas 1510 × 1330mm</p> <p>32 CONVENT GARDEN No 1
oil on board 510 × 545mm</p> <p>33 COVENT GARDEN OPERA HOUSE
LONDON 1983/84
oil on board 840 × 620mm</p> <p>34 TOMB OF WESTERN CIVILISATION 1984
LONDON
oil on paper 760 × 570mm</p> <p>35 COVENT GARDEN BALCONY 1985
oil on board 610 × 1180mm</p> <p>36 DIE WALKURE
oil on canvas 1230 × 770mm</p> |
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PAINTINGS

ITALY/LONDON 1980-1985



TERROR OF TERRA MOTO 1980



ALISON SOUTHERN ITALY 1980