

Steven Giese on Ian Pearson at The Silver Cloud studio in South Lismore

A gifted colourist and generous educator, Pearson has been painting for over 50 years. Since winning the Fine Arts Prize at Sydney University in 1970, he has enjoyed a career teaching and exhibiting. Pearson taught at the National Art School in Sydney as well as Lismore TAFE and Southern Cross University. He has enjoyed a long term relationship with the Robin Gibson Gallery in Sydney exhibiting there regularly. His work is included in many state and corporate collections including the National Gallery of Australia.

The Silver Cloud exhibition affords local art lovers the chance to see Pearson's recent output; a range of paintings that sit comfortably on the nexus between abstraction and figuration. While some of the Abstract Expressionists like Rothko and De Kooning started painting objectively before going to abstraction, many have moved in the other direction too. In Australia, the figurative expressionist Peter Booth began his career participating in the famous "Field" exhibition in 1968. He would evolve into a fiercely narrative figurative artist the likes of which has not been seen in Australia since Albert Tucker. Brett Whiteley learned many of his considerable formal and technical capacity with paint during a period of non objective creation in the early 1960's but he would also leave pure abstraction behind citing its limited capacity to carry metaphor as his reason for change.

Ian Pearson has no such urgency to tell a story or pursue a political objective in his images. He is frequently heard quoting David Hockney who says, "I just like to paint". It is this Epicurean delight in materials, colour and the intriguing "game" of composition that enthrall this artist and it shows in the work.

Pearson's painting are most frequently done on square canvases, a stable geometry that affords dynamic violation by a range of regularly appearing forms; ellipses, arches and other biomorphic shapes that conjure a range of

references from stone axe to yoni. Abstract painting is overwhelmingly an engagement with the “flat”. Pearson enjoys shapes such as the ellipse because they function to suggest the perspective of real space as well as the flattened mark.

While mark making predominates in his work, realistic images of local birds appear regularly too. Yellow Robins and Willy wagtails are frequent visitors to his canvases as they are to his home garden. Naturalistic familiars such as these affirm Pearson’s affinity with both ecology and the heritage of landscape painting.

One of the artist’s favoured genres is to “riff” on the work of great painters, many of them from the Australian Impressionist movement; Roberts, Streeton, Conder and McCubbin. Using computer graphics to decipher and identify the palette of a well-known painter, Pearson reanimates those colours in a vibrant, more percussive way than in the original.

Artists responding to other artists is not a unique phenomenon. Picasso responded to Velasquez, Leon Kossof did many versions of Poussin. It’s something that senior artists do when they have supreme confidence in their medium and want to shift their context and dance with the formal properties of great artists. It’s a highly intelligent exercise that could look insincere in technically less able hands. These homages are mostly small, distilled and clever. They have the percussive echo of jazz improvisation as well as a deep sense of humour.

For many years, Ian Pearson taught colour theory in a range of educational environments. His awareness of colour mixing is deep and unique. Kandinsky was interested in the colour of sound. Pearson seems to be interested in the sound of colour. Colour in these paintings has a distinctly musical quality. It’s a music that visualises a place for contemplation, a place to relax away from the

bombardment of imagery from mass media. The paint in these works is controlled and vigorous. The oil surfaces are quite physical, a knifed impasto. These are robust pictures yet all paintings surrounded by a clean white edge making them visually crisp like a print.

Pearson's paintings are musical, clever and delightful. Many of them are private conversations between the artist and art history, conversations that are respectful but also light and humorous. Pearson has always had a fondness for the art of David Hockney and his post-pop style that is clean and kinetic. Hockney said in relation to the older artist..."When you are older, you realise that everything else is just nothing compared to painting and drawing.