

*Far away, in order to paint a dream
- An interview with Kevin Pearsh -*



I always wanted to become a painter. My father was a painter, a house painter, that is, and so there was always paints. Originally my father had studied at Art College. At the weekend we were always outside together, sketching. He talked about drawings and I learnt a lot from him. At that time I was around 8 or 9 years old. My father thought it would be just a hobby for me, he did not believe that later I would take it so seriously. Still I started early at art school. That was still in Australia. In 1969 I came to Switzerland,

But this still was not Professional painting?

No. Not at that time, all I wanted was to paint. As a foreigner in Switzerland I had to search for employment. In my free time I continued to paint. Then I got to know some painters and collaborated with them. Mainly printing, etching, and so forth. I was able to work in an atelier near Zurich. But after three years in Switzerland I found it a little too restricted, I did not feel truly free. The only country I could go to was England. So in 1972 I went to England and then lived for more than ten years in London. It was there that I then began to work as a freelance painter

As a self-taught painter?

I studied for just about 3 years at the art school in Australia, but after that preferred to work alone. At this time I had the opportunity of going to America. Indeed at that time it was hard to earn money as a freelance artist in London. Fortunately I had saved some money in Switzerland and could live in London until I started to sell my paintings.

When did you discover your own style?

That came later; not in the early years in England, I think it started around the beginning of the 80s that is after 7 or 8 years in England. It did not happen immediately, but from then on one can see a style which has remained since then.

How did you paint at that time?

In 1972 I visited my friends in Switzerland. It was right at the time of Mardi Gras in Basie. For the first time I experienced a carnival with masks and costumes, and I was so fascinated by it that I painted an entire series with costumes and masks. In 1975 I had my first exhibition in New York, incidentally with these mask-and-costume paintings. In New York I worked for six months in an atelier. At this time I made a trip to Puerto Rico. Here I was so fascinated by the plants. So this mixture of plants and costumes and colours came about. All the elements were there. In 1978 I had my first opportunity to travel to India. Suddenly it was all there -- colour, people, costumes. All at once I had found everything which I had previously possibly been looking for.

Thematically or purely technically, did this mean you produced more realistic, less abstract paintings?



The abstract work came with reflection, with water. That was in southern India, in Kerala.

I was there for a few weeks, just to paint the water reflections, as there are many canals there, so-called backwaters. I was interested in everything that was reflected in the water. Again this gave rise to an entire series. Four to five years after that was the first opportunity of going to Tasmania. There I was particularly interested in the theme of waterfalls. In this series

my interest was primarily technical, as water is extremely difficult to paint. As has been said, water exerts a strong influence on me.

...as a symbol for fervour?

Precisely. And this is once again repeated in the new Indian paintings.

And what of India?

This relationship with India has lasted for twenty years now. I believe in the people, their humanity. Clearly, the country is very complex, from north to south. But, of course, that is something that I am particularly interested in. I first arrived in Madras, then I travelled via Kerala and Tamil Nadu as far as Bombay. That was the beginning. Later there were also Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Calcutta. The interesting thing for me is that the people in the various regions are not at all alike, and are just different. Above all, the colours. In the desert of Rajasthan the colours are simply warmer than in Kerala or Tamil Nadu.

Could you imagine living in India?

No, I think it must remain a dream. Of course, when one is fascinated by a country, one thinks one would like to live there. Acquaintances of mine have bought houses there and live there for 6 to 8 months of the year. I would not do that, for then one is too near to the people. If you are only there for a visit, everything is more spontaneous. I find that better. Although one has the contact. I need the distance, I always have to be able to come away again. That is perhaps also the reason why I paint so little of my surroundings here in Burgundy. I like this landscape so much, but I live in it and I believe one must retain the distance.

Your paintings are characterised by costumes and architecture. Are these the two major areas of emphasis?

I think so, that's right.

On my first visit I was particularly interested in the architecture, the Hindu temples. And on my next journeys too I will visit more temples which I have not yet seen. Naturally there are many more architectural structures worth seeing, for example, the palaces dating from the 16th and 17th centuries.

How is it you produce paintings which refer to these things if you do not paint when in India? Do you make sketches over there?

I do two things. I always do sketches, that is important. I work rather like a Computer, I have to make drawings while in the country so that it stays in my head. The other thing is taking photographs. That is something else I have done since the beginning. An interesting thing, on the subject of photos, I have some from maybe 15 to 18 years ago, so if I want to go back to particular picture of that time, of buildings or landscapes, say, then I can recollect them, and do not need to return to visits these regions in India again.

If I look at the clothing in the paintings, then they are not ethnic. What is it that appeals to you in them?

I see everyday working folk. These are quite simple people. I would never pick out a specific family. My paintings show the most simple people. I am fascinated by brightly coloured clothes, particularly the women's, and their graceful gait. I try to represent that in painting.

What value do you put upon reality in your paintings?

Bringing together so-called reality and water reflections is absolutely thrilling for me. But then the question arises of what is reality and what is reflected. Occasionally I have the feeling that for me what is reflected in the water is more real than what can be seen outside. Earlier I used to work just with reflection, and now I am combining the two. It remains to be seen what the future development will be.

Let's talk about the stone slabs. You say that they can be assembled bit by bit. Actually, you must have a great affinity with the theatre.

That is a very, very interesting question. Because it is in fact a wish of mine to do

something for the theatre one day. I have a thousand ideas, but have to wait for the opportunity, it is not on the cards right away. But it is something that would interest me a great deal.

How do you paint?

With me it is very spontaneous. I like to have a completely empty canvas, freshly prepared. And then I have to begin immediately. It comes straight out of my head. Everything is inside. I do not need to do any preparation, just the new canvas, and away we go!

And how do you get the ideas for the colours?

The photos are very important for that, I can use them to remind me. But whether or not I have the photos now, the colours are something that I create, depending on how I mix them and how I use them.

All your paintings are inspired by a journey, by your travelling away to somewhere else.

You absorb everything in a very definitive fashion, go home and paint.

Although I have drawings and photos of India, when I am away from India all I really have left is what I have actually kept in my head. I would never just paint in India, that would be virtually impossible. I must be completely away from it, seeing it then more as a dream.

Certainly quite different associations come into the paintings in this way.

Fourteen years ago you decided to move into a castle. This is a sudden have of peace and quiet.

That is correct. Finally I have a place to work, where I can work all through the year, and that makes a big difference.

Has it changed your character, living in a castle?

Probably. If you live and work in a castle like this, you see everything in a different way. It's not some little cottage, there is so much to take care of. We have, for example, hundreds of square metres of roofing, and there are always many surprises. You have to understand a lot about how things work correctly. That's something I have learned over the years, And being able to live in Burgundy, not far from the best vineyards, is also something special.

Are you perfectly content or do you sense changes in the offing?

How I am working, or what I am working on, still needs much more time. I have to do some more work on a large painting, for instance. I always say that if something new comes along which interests me, then I am immediately ready to take it up. I still have many plans and would like to develop myself further

If people buy paintings from you, do you know what their motives are? Is it more for the decorative or oriental aspect, or is it rather the knowledge of India.

Most of them have never been to India, but that is not so important as if the interest is so great, then I feel that something is emanating from the paintings. It is not exclusively an interest in India, but in my paintings, what they are expressing and how they are painted.

Which painters have had a real influence on you?

If I have to name a painter then I would say it is Gauguin who has most fascinated me.