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Oral history interview with Henry Pearson,
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Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Henry Pearson on March 9, 1965. The interview was conducted by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

Dorothy Seckler: This is Dorothy Seckler testing the machine in preparation for an interview on March 9th, 1965 with Henry Pearson, an artist whose work has been shown in a number of recent exhibitions. Henry Pearson's paintings are composed of a fluid field of somewhat parallel lines that resemble the lines on topographical maps and as the interview progresses it becomes clear that they were also partly inspired by Mr. Pearson's experience as a map maker. Since these fields in his painting, these fields of continuous lines create a sensation of vibrancy, his work has been categorized as Op art and has been exhibited in some of the most outstanding exhibitions of Op art. However, this vibrating effect is a product rather than a reason for his present style. I asked him if one of the motivations for the development of this linear style had perhaps been the wish to sidestep the traditional problem of relating a form to a background. The sequence of lines completely gets rid of the figure in ground relationship so that there is a complete continuity in this case one moving off and out of the frame and I wondered if that had been an important factor in your adopting this way of working?

Henry Pearson: Actually, I had to question myself before I adapted this way of working toward my own development or using it in my development mainly because up until this particular point, you know, I had been a geometric painter and all the while I was working in geometry I had a very strong awareness of the entire surface of the canvas and I had almost a phobia, you might say, toward making everything fit on the surface. The kind of moving around that the various objects did geometrically on the surface were all very carefully conceived.

Dorothy Seckler: Yes.

Henry Pearson: People have said "intellectual painting" and I agree. As a matter of fact, I enjoy the idea of being an intellectual painter, of pushing something consciously this way and expanding it that particular way and knowing that I want it to be this way and not some other, you know, not letting it happen by accident. At the same time, curiously enough, I find myself somewhat at odds because I feel that I am something of a romantic too because—well, I think you can see by the painting behind you that there is a very strong sense of the romantic in the colors involved and almost in the hint of a figure involved in this. You don't really know it's a figure but it sort of suggests the idea of there being one. Well, having been so involved with operating over an entire surface when it occurred to me to use the system I use now—well, I suppose I should go back to that moment, shouldn't I?

Dorothy Seckler: Yes. When was it?

Henry Pearson: It was early in 1959 and I was plotting a geometric painting and was not particularly happy with the outcome. If you look at this painting you will see that there are these—in the geometric there are these narrowing and broadening spaces so that I create, I hope, a kind of slow movement that happens between the forms—I call it breathing; it exhales and inhales, exhales and inhales as it moves around and you eventually find some parts shrugging against others very slowly as if trying to move. Not being successful in the particular one that I was planning, I doodled a bit and out of curiosity wondered to myself how it would be if I were to round the corners. Until this point I was strictly horizontal and vertical. And I rounded the corners and I said to myself, now this is too much like a collar button. However, in keeping with the doodling I drew another line around the curving line that I had just created at varying distances from the first one just as I would do if I were to do a geometric painting. And seeing what happened, quite suddenly I remembered my own background of about—well, 1944 and '45. I can show you some examples later—how much I had enjoyed making topographical drawings; and I proceeded immediately to draw a third line and didn't stop at that but immediately went to a drawing pad and took out some colored crayons—even though I was on a job at this particular point, by the way, listening to phonograph records—I proceeded to make several drawings using this repeated motif, I don't know how else to call it, with varying spaces between the lines just as I had done in topography.

Dorothy Seckler: And the breathing quality came into the spaces now in different lengths?

Henry Pearson: The breathing came into the linear work just as it did in the geometric. But the reason I questioned it was because—am I getting too long-winded here?

Dorothy Seckler: Not at all!

Henry Pearson: The reason I questioned it was because, as I say, in the geometric I had been accustomed to dealing with the whole surface. How could I deal with the whole surface in this method which had so suddenly come on me? And for some time I said, to hell with the background; go ahead. And I proceeded to turn out in the next few days several imaginary landscapes in topography. This is one here behind me; you can see it ...

Dorothy Seckler: Yes. Yes.

Henry Pearson: And it really is a landscape but it's made up—I mean, it's my own evolvment of the lines. I cause it to close together at certain areas, I cause it to expand very large in certain areas.

Dorothy Seckler: It's like a topographical map.

Henry Pearson: The earliest ones were topographical maps of my own invention. Quite rapidly though I became aware of something that had—well, occurred to me much earlier when I first started becoming abstract, and that was a kind of discomfiture with realism. There was something too pat about being able to paint realism, that is, I had something in front of me, let's say, this was a landscape or this was an automobile, or what have you, and all I was doing was just copying that and putting it down on a surface and that wasn't enough for me. I had to go, I felt, beyond this and create something of my own. Maybe they're images; maybe they're not images; I don't know. To me they have a kind of meaning; to somebody else they might have no meaning. But that's not important to me. Anyway, in order to jolt myself out of what I considered the realism in a landscape—that is, a topographical landscape—I proceeded to make all the lines closely parallel, as in the one below.

Dorothy Seckler: Oh, yes.

Henry Pearson: And in so doing I lost the feeling of landscape, which was what I was intending to do, that is, lose the landscape; and proceeded to create my own images by using very fine lines just as close together as I could make them. Why I had to make them so fine I don't know because since then I've realized that the fineness of the line was only something to aggravate me. It took me that much longer to get an effect that later on I discovered I could get with a lot less lines and much more effectively, as a matter of fact. Once I had done a number of the evenly-space line drawings then I was able to go back to the varied-spaced ones because by this time I had lost the feeling of landscape and I was able to start creating images on my own. And then I began to realize that with this I could still handle a canvas surface very much as I had with the geometric, that is I could use the surface, I wasn't throwing anything away, which always made me feel uncomfortable—that if I had a hole in the canvas I felt I couldn't live with myself until it came out.

Dorothy Seckler: Were the lines extending all the way to the frame in every one that you did at this time?

Henry Pearson: Well, as you can see in the drawing here, no. I made myself a circle and filled in the disk. I also made rectangles. As a matter of fact, for almost the entire first year I did nothing but drawings, just pen and paper; and I must have done at least a hundred inside that year. And each one, of course, as you can see, was a very tedious project.

Dorothy Seckler: Taking this one, for instance, how long would this one have taken?

Henry Pearson: That probably would have taken me three days of very concentrated effort.

Dorothy Seckler: In beginning one like this little one, which is a circular format, would you have a complete picture of the total configuration in your mind when you began it?

Henry Pearson: At the beginning, no, of course, because it was all experimental. I was finding out what I could do.

Dorothy Seckler: This one is like a doodle, a very elaborate doodle.

Henry Pearson: Not a doodle. An experimentation. No, this was, again, intellectualizing. I was consciously setting out to put down a particular thing, or see if I could. You have to remember that at the same time I was turning out geometric painting.

Dorothy Seckler: Yes, I remember the first show with the two of them ...

Henry Pearson: So I was thinking of this ...

Dorothy Seckler: ... you had geometric paintings and drawings like this.

Henry Pearson: That's right. That's right. I had some drawings, a small wall of them and the rest of the show was the geometric paintings that I had done in that same period.

Dorothy Seckler: That was at the Radich Gallery.

Henry Pearson: That's right.

Dorothy Seckler: What year was that?

Henry Pearson: That was in 1960. That was my first show with him. I believe that show was in 1960; I'll have to check on it, as a matter of fact. All this was something I know I was quite aware of. Having done as many drawings as I did, it occurred to me that sooner or later I was going to be wanting to try this in oil so I did and I turned out two fair-sized, shall I say, painted drawings? I don't know how else to call them. I did at first call them linear paintings and I guess I still call them linear paintings when you come right down to it. They were simply black oil on white oil and they were done with a fine-bristle brush and I was trying to make them as fine line as I was making the drawings. Well, certainly somewhat larger; naturally, I couldn't do a crow-quill line with a brush there. The first two that I did as paintings were using a kind of image that I never did again but which was an image that fascinated me and which I used in many drawings. It involved what appeared to be, what I think of as fingers of lines that probe various directions and that's the case in the small drawing that you saw here. You see fingers coming in from all sides pushing toward the center. I have never known why I didn't do any more than those first two and it's always been in the back of my mind to do more and I'm intending to do more this year. I mean, I'm just determined to, I've got to see how they're going to look.

Dorothy Seckler: I remember that that quality fascinated me in the first drawings that I saw there.

Henry Pearson: Those were some of the best drawings I did.

Dorothy Seckler: That's probably why I respond to this one too.

Henry Pearson: Very shortly after doing those first two drawings, however, I did as my third painting, I meant, of course, as my third painting one that was what might be called the "bull's-eye" which was used as the announcement for my second show. It was in '62, and at first when I had turned out this particular painting my dealer wasn't too happy about it. He liked the geometric paintings. So did I, of course. But he was a bit dubious. I had shown them to him, that is, what paintings I had done, linear paintings, and he said, well, I don't know. And I said to myself, well, he's going to have to find out. I brought two of the paintings to his gallery willy-nilly and left them there for him to look at over the summer. By the end of the summer after he had looked at them enough, I guess, I came to visit him again at the gallery and he was sitting pensively on those little steps that go up into the upper gallery and he said, you know about those paintings, the linear ones, I think you have something there. And I said to myself he had to think that; if he didn't, what were we going to do. I was just going to go ahead and do them anyway, you know, and it would just mean that he wouldn't have any paintings to show. He could show my drawings all he liked, of course. But I, of course, had in the meantime already started turning out many, many more of the linear paintings.

Dorothy Seckler: What happened? This was the "bull's-eye" one?

Henry Pearson: The "bull's-eye" created a departure for me so that I never got back to the finger ones, the ones that had the finger shapes.

Dorothy Seckler: Yes.

Henry Pearson: The "bull's-eye" led into one that I called "segment," which was part of a bull's-eye, and that led into groups or clusters of lines that began to move together. And then I began to discover something that was fairly important in my more recent development, that is that I could create compositions of clusters and I at the same time began to discover that I could make these breathe the same way I was making the geometric breathe by bringing lines close together and far apart. And I began to create, shall I say, clusters of breathings? I don't know how else to say it. I myself when I look across one of my paintings find myself breathing in a certain way. I breathe out and breathe in according to whether there are strong tensions or weaker tensions. The one that you see high on the wall, for example, I see as a kind of a held breath in the upper left hand corner and while that is being held a relaxation begins and you are picked up again at the lower part of the painting and you begin to have a combination of holding and loosening and holding and loosening as it goes across and even when you're almost stifled on the right hand side there is that little opening where it's almost as if it were a last gasp. Do you see what I mean?

Dorothy Seckler: Yes.

Henry Pearson: And it's a combination of the uses of the breathing that I think of and the tensions that apparently I like to get into my paintings. I mean if you look here at the geometric you can see the variations in tensions. You see how they go close and far apart. This one doesn't show it very strongly but it's still there. I mean, for example, the way the dark figure here is separated from the vermilion figure below but is fastened to

the vermilion figure as it passes around and goes up to the top. It creates almost a hanging image that doesn't know whether it's going to remain on that or whether it's going to be drawn toward the lower one and at the same time feeling almost a realistic tilting because it's resting on the other side. It's a kind of a combination of things but at the same time it created a kind of breathing too.

Dorothy Seckler: Now you used the word tension between lines. I think we both know what you meant but I wonder if it would help for the record if you could express how the tension between the lines seems to you to exist. I know this is probably almost a metaphysical thing to try to define and perhaps I shouldn't be putting you on the spot like that.

Henry Pearson: Not at all. As a matter of fact, I have a very specific feeling about tensions. I don't know that I can express it any further than that. It's very much as in, say, the action of a magnet or, to think in larger terms, the action between planets and between solar systems that remain in a kind of suspension because of their being drawn to one another at a kind of balance of pullings. It's quite possible that I have a complete misunderstanding of it as a science but I know that inside myself I have a kind of, let's say, a romantic understanding of what's supposed to be taking place there and I do feel that there is a certain magnetism that happens between the earth and the moon, for example, and a balance of pullings between the moon and other things that keep, say, constant relationship here. But there is to me this constant feeling of drawing together or pulling apart and that magnetism to me creates a kind of tension, tenseness between the objects. And in the case of my lines, again, we can look out in space and say that here you have this group of bodies that move far apart and although they have a kind of tension between them, it's a widespread, very loosely-held kind of tension, but it's there nevertheless.

Dorothy Seckler: Yes.

Henry Pearson: And then when you come to objects that are more closely associated such as, speaking in terms of the universe, of course, between the moon and the earth there's a great deal more tension that keeps the moon in a particular path around the earth in spite of other things happening. The tension is evidenced, I think, by the fact that we have the tides that get pulled towards the moon, every time the moon passes the earth wants to go toward—or tries to go toward the moon. Next question.

Dorothy Seckler: On a canvas, of course, the minute you put down two points, in a sense, there is a tension between them and also—

Henry Pearson: Of course.

Dorothy Seckler: --no doubt, between them and the periphery, the edge of the space, whether it's a square or whatever, to some extent; and your lines in many cases—well, in some of your figurations there were peripheries to the figurative, the linear figure, and the space between that and the edge of the canvas, as I recall. Isn't that true?

Henry Pearson: Yes. And those are my least successful. As a matter of fact, I don't intend to do any more of those because I had too much a feeling of those particular images floating in space and just floating there rather than really being truly associated with the entirety of the canvas.

Dorothy Seckler: I think you're right. I noticed all your late ones, of course, move right through to the edge.

Henry Pearson: All the way across. All the way across. And the whole surface becomes involved.

Dorothy Seckler: Yes.

Henry Pearson: And that will be true, of course, of the finger forms as well, naturally.

Dorothy Seckler: Yes. Marvelous. Well, that was beautifully expressed and very precisely expressed. I think that's wonderful to have on the record. Then to follow this development through a little bit, we have already in what we said just now implied that you did reject everything except the ones that extended out through the end of the canvas. As you began to work with variations in the paintings you were then heading for a show in which they were all linear paintings, your next one. Did the topographical thing ever enter into your imaging at all anymore? Or what sort of concept would start you on one variation—well, after another? What determined the kinds of figurations? Just a free experimentation?

Henry Pearson: Absolutely! I made no limitations on myself except that at one point in 1961—because I realized I was getting myself into something that was quite possibly larger than I could handle—I did look at this quite early and say, I've got something here that is absolutely going to require the rest of my life and I'll probably never finish it then. Because it was wide open. To me it was like starting a whole new painting method. Prior to this people had filled in areas, you know, as in geometric painting, or had used large brush strokes to express

areas and painted rather to create the illusions of depth or roundness or the effect of leaves clustering on a surface. But all of a sudden there was something here that at least in my knowledge had never been tried as an abstraction before. Certainly a person can say that—well, wood engraving had done this, and certainly etchers and engravers had done this kind of thing but not with the same intent, not with the idea of making a painting, not with the idea of creating an abstraction. And early in 1961 I made a series of ten disks, each of them measuring five and five-eighths inches in diameter, and in those ten I sought out various ultimate expressions using these means; and there were no two alike.

Dorothy Seckler: You're speaking now not of spheres but of disks?

Henry Pearson: Disks, yes. Flat disks. The spheres came much later. In fact I'm not so sure that I could even remember exactly how the sphere happened. Oh, yes, I do! Yes, I do. We'll get to that another time. On these disks, as I say, there were no two alike. I allowed myself quite consciously to hunt out various expressions and the fingers were involved with that as well, and the floating, breathing forms were involved with that and there were forms that moved outward that were encroached on by forms that moved inward. There were some that had very wild movement in them; and those I haven't tackled yet either, as a matter of fact.

Dorothy Seckler: There were some that also seemed to—as you said, they encroached on each other—as they encroached on each other they would sometimes form a ridge ...

Henry Pearson: Yes.

Dorothy Seckler: ... and this—was this a new stage when you came to ridges and actually accepted the formation of the ridge? For really, of course, there is ridge even in this early one.

Henry Pearson: There are ridges in the second, yes. But in this particular case if you look very closely the ridge is not formed ...

Dorothy Seckler: It's not closed.

Henry Pearson: ... by the meeting. That's right. In later ones I actually allowed the ridges to close in and make real lines. I still like this earlier method and it's quite possible that another time I'll go back to that.

Dorothy Seckler: This is a more ambiguous space in a sense.

Henry Pearson: Yes. It makes one think and you don't know whether it is made by this—that is, you don't know whether the result was intentional, that is, this line—did you mean it to be a line? Well, of course, it would have to be because certainly there was a series of events that go together to create the line. But at the same time that line is created of openings that, under ordinary circumstances—that is, if you were to look at them closely under a magnifying glass—which incidentally I have used only once.

Dorothy Seckler: Really?

Henry Pearson: Yes.

Dorothy Seckler: That's interesting.

Henry Pearson: I did it as a matter of curiosity and I realized to myself that it was just going a little bit too far, I mean this was making a dollar bill, and there was no real purpose for it except just to see how close I could make the lines. I did say "once;" there were at least three times that I used it; and one of those, as a matter of fact, is owned by the Museum. It was the first thing of mine they got, and that is one of those with the finger forms. But you see even though they bought it from me years ago—from Radich years ago—it never occurred to me even then that I should get at that. It's only this year when finally I turned out that little sun image in the Tamarind book that I finally realized that I've got to get at it, I mean this is something that I really have to start putting down on canvas. That's one reason why that canvas right there in front of you has been waiting. It was going to be one thing, now it's going to be another, and I'm having to change my mind midstream.

Dorothy Seckler: Seeing that square red reminds me that we haven't talked much about the extent to which color entered into your concepts in these first paintings. They were very quiet colors at first, it seems to me.

Henry Pearson: Well, it was very logical because my first four were black and white and that was done only because of the neutrality of the idea; that is, when you do topography ordinarily you do it in black and white. But it wasn't just that. It was the fact that I had been drawing in black and white—black on white—and that was lifted from the paper and put onto canvas. Quite early I discovered that if I didn't do something about this it could drive people crazy because I found the big bull's-eye that I mentioned earlier disturbing; but then one day a woman I know came up and looked to see what I was doing these days; she took one look at it and she says, "Turn it to the wall. I'm getting sick!" She apologized; she said, "I like your work ordinarily, but what goes on

here!”

Dorothy Seckler: You had blundered into Op art.

Henry Pearson: Yes.

Dorothy Seckler: And we’re all insane ever since.

Henry Pearson: I had no intention of turning out something that was going to make people ill. I was only interested in making these things happen that I mentioned before.

Dorothy Seckler: Now as you worked on it, it had not affected you that way? The bull’s-eye?

Henry Pearson: Of course not! No.

Dorothy Seckler: Are you ever now—have ever subsequently been disturbed by this effect?

Henry Pearson: No. As a matter of fact—oh, just one. Just once. On a very simple one, a very small sphere that I turned out, only about five inches in diameter. I had used a—well, by this time I was using brighter colors. I had used a vermillion ground and I was putting a blue-green line on the vermillion ground and I couldn’t bring myself to look at the surface; I had to hold it way off at a distance in order to draw it, or else I wasn’t able to tolerate the vibration that happened.

Dorothy Seckler: Yes.

Henry Pearson: But that’s the only time that’s ever happened to me actually.

Dorothy Seckler: I often wondered how the Op artists who are using complementaries at full intensity can bear it for long periods of time.

Henry Pearson: Well, to go back to the origins here, I myself, of course, became aware of too much strength in the black and white, so in my fourth one, I believe it was, I gave it an ochre ground with black lines and that softened it somewhat. It was still pretty wild but then little by little they got darker and darker because I became more and more aware of this excessive vibration that was going on; and I didn’t really want it.

Dorothy Seckler: And you still don’t want it?

Henry Pearson: I was interested in breathing and intentions and I wasn’t interested in something going wild. I was really astonished after my second show to have one of the reviewers state—what was the line?—something about “you’d better not look at this if you’re ...” Or something to that effect. I mean, they were too much as far as he was concerned, as far as the movement was concerned, the vibration was concerned. And here I had done my best to quiet them down. Well, when he did that, when the reviewer said that, then I realized that I was trying to do something here that wasn’t honest to the painting. I had been trying to keep it from doing something that it wanted to do naturally. So I began to relax on this darkness and I no longer tried to make the brown as dark as I could so that it wouldn’t vibrate much against the black. Instead I started going into subtle colors, what I felt were subtle colors, for example, what I still consider a very beautiful dark red one, and other shades of ochre and I discovered for my own uses a color called Pozzuoli red, which has become one of my favorites, which is ...

Dorothy Seckler: Is that it?

Henry Pearson: No, that’s vermillion over there; I don’t have a Pozzuoli here.

Dorothy Seckler: A dark red?

Henry Pearson: No. It’s an earth red. I’ve had some people call it rust; it’s a rather strong terra rosa really. It has a lot of the elements of terra rosa. But in contrast with the black lines it’s quite beautiful. And I began to aim toward what is my natural tendency anyway—the romantic again. And when it finally occurred to me that I could make the lines in color too maybe, then I started going all out. I first did experimentally a brown one, to go back to my brown again, but with red lines. And I enjoyed that so much that I determined from then on I was going to relax on the black lines. Well, what you promise yourself you don’t always follow through with because at that particular moment I discovered yellow and, for no good reason at all except for the kicks, I guess, I began to use black lines on yellow. Well, how much more vibrating can you get? But I wasn’t doing it in order to—well, I guess I was creating something optical certainly, but I wasn’t calling it that. I wasn’t allowing the vibrations to be as strong as I could make them, you know; I was throwing caution to the winds.

Dorothy Seckler: Were you still thinking of breathing? You apparently were, since you—

Henry Pearson: Oh, absolutely!

Dorothy Seckler: --are today, yes.

Henry Pearson: Oh, certainly! I still do that.

Dorothy Seckler: We know now, of course, that dozens, if not scores of artists have been pursuing somewhat parallel directions and they have now just exploded into the show at the Museum of Modern Art—were you becoming aware at this point that others were doing things which were deliberately aimed at this effect of dazzle or vibrations?

Henry Pearson: Not with that definition. I had become aware that there were people around the world who were using lines, but I hadn't thought of it as an optical device. A woman I know by the name of Lucy Lippard, who occasionally writes for magazines and has done a number of books, was discussing this with me one day and I pointed out to her the fact that something must be going on here. And this was about two years ago. I said, "Here you are writing articles; why don't you get ahead of the scene a little bit and write an article about all the artists around the world who are doing lines?" And she said, "It sounds like an idea. Name off some for me." And I proceeded to name a few and realized even from the fact that I could name a few that there must have been others, and I wondered just how far this would go. Well, she never did get to write the article that I can remember; I don't think she did.

Dorothy Seckler: Probably kicking herself ever since.

Henry Pearson: But no, it would have been from the wrong angle anyway, see. It would have been from a viewpoint of line, see.

Dorothy Seckler: Lines, yes. The point is you led her into it in any case. What artists' names occurred to you at that time, do you recall who they were?

Henry Pearson: Oh, yes. Vasarely from time to time.

Dorothy Seckler: Yes. Are you a great admirer of Vasarely?

Henry Pearson: Oh, yes!

Dorothy Seckler: I am too.

Henry Pearson: And there is a man in Europe by the name of Hunter Wasser who although he doesn't really work with lines has a linear feeling in what he was doing. Offhand now, I can't remember the ones that I answered to her. I believe Bridget Riley had just begun at that point too.

Dorothy Seckler: Really? I never knew her before.

Henry Pearson: I'm not sure. But there were others around who were dealing with lines. Anyway, Lucy never did it.

Dorothy Seckler: We had talked just before about your having gotten into the color and this was in—how many shows have talked about as far as Radich is concerned? There was a show in 1960 and one in '61. In '61 the paintings were all linear in generally deeper colors? Right?

Henry Pearson: Yes ...

Dorothy Seckler: And then by '62 ...

Henry Pearson: ... although there was one, I believe—yes, there was that first one that was the black and white that I mentioned before ... I was just looking in here to see if I had a form that should be able to tell me with some—yes, my first show with him was in '61. Actually I had shown in his place in 1960 in a group show. And it was the 1962 show that introduced the linear work.

Dorothy Seckler: Yes.

Henry Pearson: Then there was another show in '64 and, of course, there was the recent one in '65. Prior to that, however, I think it should be brought in I had had a one-man show at something called "The Workshop Gallery." It was operated—that was in 1958—it was operated by two women who were very interested in the arts, one of whom particularly has retained her interest. That was Connie Levine. Do you know her?

Dorothy Seckler: No. I've heard of her but I don't know her.

Henry Pearson: She knows a great number of people in the arts and I found her an admirable person and I wish she would open another gallery because I think she's got excellent taste and has vision too. I have—well, been fond of her from almost the beginning because when I first showed her my color slides of my geometric work she hated them—I had shown them to her only because her companion in the gallery had seen and liked them—had seen my work, actually. That was Anita Jarnoff. Anyway, in a few months Connie moved across the street from me—this was when I was living on 79th Street—and she took the occasion to come across the street and pay me a visit and she saw the geometric things hanging on the wall and she went head over heels for them. In other words, here was a person who had made up her mind one way, hadn't liked them at all, and then was free enough in her own mind to be able to make a complete about-face, and she became one of my biggest fans and introduced me to a lot of people and that kind of thing, you know. I was actually just beginning as far as getting into the industry was concerned, if you can use that word.

Dorothy Seckler: Yes. Had you been studying just before this first show? Or just working independently?

Henry Pearson: I was working independently even then. I had stopped studying at the League in '56. So I was two years out at that time, having this very peculiar job that I mentioned before, that is, listening to phonograph records for flaws.

Dorothy Seckler: Really?

Henry Pearson: Yes.

Dorothy Seckler: I didn't know that. I thought you were involved in the theater in some way.

Henry Pearson: Oh, that was before the war. And somewhat during the war. Do you want to go into that at all?

Dorothy Seckler: Well, not necessarily right now. I think we ought to get to the war backwards in time. That gallery is no longer in existence, the one where you had this first show?

Henry Pearson: That's right. Unfortunately. I thought it was a nice little gallery and I still think—as a matter of fact Connie had a number of artists showing there who have since become quite prominent.

Dorothy Seckler: Was it this kind of work or was it more like ...

Henry Pearson: No. She showed the geometric work. That was what I was doing in 1958; I didn't start the linear till 1959.

Dorothy Seckler: No, I mean like this. I mean—wouldn't you call this geometric?

Henry Pearson: Yes.

Dorothy Seckler: This wasn't—you weren't up to this kind of geometric at that point then?

Henry Pearson: I was in midair; I was just turning from my very complex geometric such as the little one there ...

Dorothy Seckler: Like those, yes; that's a beautiful one.

Henry Pearson: ... to the simplified. Yes.

Dorothy Seckler: That's an interesting change itself from that one to this one, I think. It's to the more hieratic. I would think of this as being a much more formal one.

[Dorothy Seckler flips the cassette tape]

Dorothy Seckler: Well, I think it is interesting that you admire Rubens and, as I was saying, the fact that you responded so immediately to the small painting by James Rosenquist. I would have thought it would have seemed almost the opposite extreme of range of your own interest and a very impure thing since it is an image with an evocation of—well, rather an ambiguous three-dimensionality and so on.

Henry Pearson: Well, I don't let the fact that I paint one particular way keep me from enjoying a lot of other different ways of painting. As I was just saying before, I enjoy Rubens too.

Dorothy Seckler: Your own painting is relatively intellectual against the background of the painting of, let's say, the last fifteen years of abstract expressionism and so on. However, not extremely so in relationship to the younger generation that we're now seeing coming to the fore in Op art.

Henry Pearson: Well, certainly I'm not even a hard edge painter any more.

Dorothy Seckler: You mean you're equating hard edge with intellectual.

Henry Pearson: I'm afraid so, yes. And that is very interesting when you come right down to it.

Dorothy Seckler: Did you ever go through a phase when you were working with a more—well, with brush strokes and with a more romantic field of paint and touch and so on?

Henry Pearson: Well, when I first went to the League I started studying under Reginald Marsh. I'm just wondering whether we shouldn't go back some from here to when I started at the League?

Dorothy Seckler: Well ...

Henry Pearson: Do you want to go farther back?

Dorothy Seckler: ... whatever you feel like getting into.

Henry Pearson: Well, some months ago, as a matter of fact about two years ago, a little gentleman from some college out in Brooklyn came here to interview me in connection with a thesis he was writing called Creativity. Everybody seems to be doing it these days. And in connection with this he said, "How long do you think you've been painting?" And I couldn't think of when I started. I don't mean that I've always been involved with this sort of painting, I certainly haven't; but I do remember my first art work at the age of seven quite clearly because I was so flattered by the teacher who taught me in the second grade, a Miss Kinzie, who had decided that I was the student she was to pick out of the class to help her decorate the room from time to time when there were various holidays. And I would always happily stay after class with her and help her cut out things and decorate the blackboard and this kind of thing. And I think this was my first doing of something consciously that might be called artful or art, I don't know.

Dorothy Seckler: Where was this? What place?

Henry Pearson: Oh, yes, I guess we should get into that. Kinston, North Carolina, no "g." And this would have been around 1921 I guess and it just happens too that this same teacher taught my father when he was in the same grade so she was quite elderly at this point. No art in the family that I knew of.

Dorothy Seckler: What background was there?

Henry Pearson: As a matter of fact, they all were rather puzzled by the fact that there was somebody here that was interested in painting. Anyway, going on from there, the next thing I remember specifically was a woman by the name of Mrs. John Hood who in high school took me on as a student in painting. And this was all something I had nothing to do with. Oh, there were other little art incidents in between, I mean I remember others—decorating a blackboard and that kind of thing, maybe making a sketch here and there, but nothing that was really sitting down to try to do anything as far as developing painting was concerned, until my mother discovered that there was a possibility that I had a certain talent along these lines and she proceeded to buy me a paint box and paints and brushes and turned me over to this Mrs. Hood. She was to teach me.

Dorothy Seckler: Was this outside of school then?

Henry Pearson: No, this was in school but in off hours; high school. And I was very bad and I created too much of a challenge for myself. I put down something realistic, I wanted to do exactly what I saw right there in front of me and because of this I became quite desperate at times. That is, I would see that a certain thing existed in front of me and I would so want to put it down exactly like that, that I suppose I might as well have been a sculptor who painted the forms. But I couldn't think of how to put it down in paint.

Dorothy Seckler: And your teacher hadn't introduced you to any means of ...

Henry Pearson: She would just let us go ahead and paint. She would demonstrate a little bit here and there. But one day I had been working on some painting, I forget what now, fortunately, and she came up in a teacherly sort of way and finding various things wrong with the painting, as certainly there was bound to be, she took a brush with white paint and made Xs on the canvas all over the canvas wherever she saw a wrong spot. For some reason I've never been able to analyze, I wasn't able to stand that and I left paint and brushes and everything right where they were and stalked out of the room and never came back. But for some reason or other some things stayed with me and when I went off to college, University of North Carolina, in 1931 I brought along some watercolors and some paper and even though I was studying other things—I was taking a general liberal arts course at the time—I continued to do little watercolors and occasionally an oil. I remember one time borrowing a pitcher of tulips from the librarian at Chapel Hill. They were there on her desk decorating it, you know, somebody brings them to make the office pretty for a change, and to me there were so beautiful I wanted to paint them. So I asked her if I might borrow them to make a painting from, naïve as I was, and she said, "Well,

certainly, just bring them back.” I took them that afternoon, went back to my quarters in Old West Building, they called it; and I remember it was a nice, bright, sunny day and the way the light came through the tulips was again too much of a challenge but I said to myself, well, what is, is, and that’s the way they have to be; I can’t make them more luminous than they are. At least I didn’t know how to. And I left them at that. But in order to prove to the woman that I did what I told her I was intending to do, I brought the painting with me when I brought the flowers back and she wanted to buy it. And I wouldn’t sell it. I said, “Thanks anyway, but I made it for me.” And that happened a great deal in my life—incidents of people wanting to buy and my not wanting to sell. I never did sell anything until I came to New York to paint. I mean all through those years it was strictly for the enjoyment of painting and of getting things down on a surface, not that I did very much of it, there wasn’t that much. Anyway, to get back to the stream, while at Chapel Hill I became involved with what is known as The Playmakers. I began to do stage designs and in the course of doing a stage design—well, for a play called R.U.R., one I remember particularly—

Dorothy Seckler: I remember it. By Capek.

Henry Pearson: It required, according to my own designs, the making of a couple of paintings, paintings that might be done in the future—if you know the plot.

Dorothy Seckler: Robot-like.

Henry Pearson: Yes. And I found this a very interesting challenge, but of course I found the whole set a challenge because it was trying to ferret out what might be the future. And because of my enjoyment of this I decided to become a stage scene designer. I ultimately discovered that I got myself off the track completely. I mean I was letting this substitute for what should have been painting. I’ve realized that all the time now, that is, at least for the past ten years; but I sincerely enough went to Yale to study stage scene design under Donald Oenslager, graduated as such, and enjoyed myself greatly doing as a thesis a rather gigantic thing based on a ballet called The Devil on Sticks, based on some ancient Spanish tale as motifs. Getting out of there I decided instead of going straight to New York I would first give myself some experience outside in a stock company and went to Charleston, South Carolina where I did scene design for a year and a half, and then on to Washington Civic Theatre in D.C. While I was doing one of my most delightful sets for Troilus and Cressida the war came and that closed down the theatre immediately. No gas. I was drafted, turned into a medic and within two weeks of my having become a medic my commanding officer called me in and said, “What are you doing in an outfit like this?” He had read my background on a form. And I said, “I wish you’d tell me, Sir.” And he said, “Well, can you make a diagram for us?” And I said, “Just give me the materials.” And from that time on, at least for the next six or seven months I was doing signs, lettering, and something that was educational to me, anatomical diagrams because after all this was the medics. I’d never really done this before and here I was thrown into the midst of a flock of doctors and naturally they were all going to be able to tell me exactly what was supposed to be there in this drawing, and I learned a great deal from them, not knowing that I was going to be making some use of it in the future, but nevertheless I found it quite enjoyable.

Dorothy Seckler: What kinds of drawings were they exactly?

Henry Pearson: They were diagrammatic.

Dorothy Seckler: Drawings of parts of the body?

Henry Pearson: Yes, nerve systems, muscular systems. Some were in color. There was the whole stomach laid open to full view. One of the things that cause some turmoil among doctors was trying to decide the color of the pancreas. They couldn’t decide.

Dorothy Seckler: Were you working from cadavers or ...

Henry Pearson: Oh, no, no. Charts, diagrams; they had books around.

Dorothy Seckler: I see.

Henry Pearson: And sometimes for some purposes I had various people around the organization pose, particularly the first sergeant. Anyway, the medics lasted for about a year, when a friend of mine who had been the business manager at the Roadside Theatre when I had been the designer there in Washington—that was at a time I hadn’t mentioned because it was in summers primarily while I was still at Yale—although it was afterward too, of course. A fellow by the name of Richard P. Crake, their business manager, had become a captain, a writer of movies at Dayton. He wrote me a very friendly letter asking whether I would like to go into the movies, design scenery for them.

Dorothy Seckler: But weren’t you still in the Army?

Henry Pearson: I was in the medics. And this was the Air Force, you see, or Army Air Force, so I would still be in the service.

Dorothy Seckler: Oh, I see.

Henry Pearson: You see, I would just be transferred from one outfit to another. I said to myself, well, that's what I really know how to do, so I guess I should, instead of being a medic and just doing signs and diagrams and hardly doing what I can do—you know, you get patriotic during war time and want to do what you can do best—so I quite sincerely said yes. I asked one of the officers, naturally I had to, it had to be approved in the organization, whether he would go along with this. He said, are you sure you want to go? And I said, yes, sir. It took about six months for that to go through but eventually I ended up in Dayton where I worked on sets, did some designs, some architectural layouts for scenery, and helped build parts of them and even acted in some of them, small roles, you know. I was the kind of person who played the part of an Indian who came on stage and said, "Ugh," or "How." The organization broke up about four months after I arrived. And as fate would have it, I was sent with the lucky bunch out to Culver City, California where I entered Hal Roach Studios and worked for the basic unit, motion picture unit, I think that's what it was called—we called it "bunt" at any rate. I was there for two years. That was in—well, from the middle of '43 to the middle of '45 when the war was over.

Dorothy Seckler: How are we going to get you to Japan?

Henry Pearson: You'll find out. You'll find out. But this leads directly to it, I mean to what comes down to what we have here.

Dorothy Seckler: Yes.

Henry Pearson: And I suppose that for the record I should haul out some of the things that I did at this point because they tie in with what I'm doing now. Do you want to tape this, or do you want to just talk about it afterward? Do you want to make notes?

Dorothy Seckler: You mean you actually have some things that I can see right now?

Henry Pearson: I have things that you can see of my Army period, yes.

Dorothy Seckler: Suppose we turn off the machine and look at them first and then we can ...
[Machine turned off, then resumes]

Henry Pearson: Well, I worked on stage sets, things that were being used for movies because they were making educational films there.

Dorothy Seckler: For the war? For the war effort?

Henry Pearson: That's right, for the war. And among the things that I had to do, some of the more intriguing were miniatures of airplanes. I had never done this kind of thing before but they, for example, turned over to me a photograph, simply a three-quarter view photograph of a Mitsubishi Double Zero and I was to make the plans for a miniature of this plane so they could use it in an educational film. It was a real challenge. Fortunately it had one man standing beside the plane and I guessed at his height and the rest of it fell into place. I was able to draw off perspective lines, you know, and create the dimensions just from this photograph. I had never done this kind of thing before but I found it an invigorating challenge. I like that kind of thing. Later on I did others, not of that particular plane but B24s and things that we know about, of course. The Mustang was another. Another time we drew up the interior of a plane. That created a certain challenge too. The matter of perspective was involved. After being there for about a year, a secret project came up. It's not secret any more so I can talk about it, but at that particular point it was the best-kept secret of the war, at least so we were told; and we were told afterward too because it came as quite a shock to a lot of people to discover that was what we had been doing. I'm not so sure I want to put it on record even at that.

Dorothy Seckler: Well, that's up to you.

Henry Pearson: Well, I have to because it's part of my development; at least I'll tell part of it here. Someone had an idea. They had these B29s out on Guam and they were bombing Japan and apparently they were having difficulty in briefing the personnel sufficiently and they felt that if they were to make movies in the realm of Japan in the route showing the navigator, the bombardier, the pilot, naturally, just what they were going to be seeing, that it would help the bombardment. They brought a gentleman in from somewhere here in New York who was a topographical expert, a professor of some sort from one of the universities, to put the whole project together. And they selected about seventy of the personnel to work on this, and I was one of them. My job from the very beginning was to take the Japanese Imperial survey maps, which I was surprised to discover we had in toto, and reinterpret the topographical elements into the proportionate depths of a piece of fiberboard in relation

to a six-foot dimension, which became our basic measurement. We made maps of Japan in three dimensions at the enormous scale of one foot to the mile. You could see everything. You saw every little wall, you saw every chimney, and we put them there. And when we didn't know exactly what was supposed to be in a particular area we told the authorities. Of course I knew nothing about really how it went on back stage—but this was done. I know because at one particular point I required for my purposes a clearer view of what a certain area of Japan looked like and they sent airplanes, reconnaissance planes, over that area just for me so that I would be able to make a more accurate terrain.

Dorothy Seckler: They photographed it, of course?

Henry Pearson: Yes. We discovered that quite definitely due to our work our bombardments were being much more effective. Anyway, through this, and through the working on topography I became entranced with this business of the relationship of lines. I actually was enjoying myself.

Dorothy Seckler: The three-dimensional things, would they have involved the lines too? Or weren't they just facsimiles of mountains and hills and so on?

Henry Pearson: Oh! I had to make these lines before they could make the three-dimensional things.

Dorothy Seckler: They were flat drawings, however?

Henry Pearson: My drawings were flat and I appreciated them as flat things because I began to see such things as these lines moving together and moving apart and in some way following and yet not following one another. However, using something called a Balopticon high over the stage floor they would cut out according to my drawing the bottom layer of earth, and then they would cut out the next layer of earth, and then the next layer of earth, and pile these on one another since they could see my aggregate through the Balopticon and they were able to place everything in exact order, because all they had to do was place things according to the image that was thrown onto this six foot by six foot table top.

Dorothy Seckler: Fascinating.

Henry Pearson: Then they nailed them all together, then they plastered them and made smooth mountain sides or plains or indicated where rivers were or where forests were by using little bits of sponge, you know, the usual sorts of things, in full color. And then they would seal the various six-by-sixes together where they belonged. That's why you'll discover a number on them—

Dorothy Seckler: I noticed it, yes.

Henry Pearson: --that 31x indicates that it is next to, let's say, number 30x or on the other side of 32x or what have you, and maybe the ones that were in front of it or behind it were "y" and "z"—you get the idea. They would seal those together and at one particular point I remember we had something like ten thousand square miles of Japan on the stage at one time—which really isn't a great deal—a hundred miles long—but that's a lot when you come right down to it.

Dorothy Seckler: Amazing. Astonishing. But I can't understand how it was possible—I mean, this must have been a very time-consuming labor—how could bombing military objectives be held up until you had completed this vast project?

Henry Pearson: That was why this is one of the best kept secrets of the war. We knew long before they did what they were going to be having as their missions.

Dorothy Seckler: It wasn't before Japan was in the war though? Japan was certainly in the war at this point?

Henry Pearson: Oh, this was right at the end but we were turning them out nevertheless.

Dorothy Seckler: Yes. It's amazing.

Henry Pearson: That was one of the things that helped things to be effective right there toward the end.

Dorothy Seckler: Well, that's a fascinating story. As far as the topographical lines themselves are concerned, is there a science in how one maps the planes of a mountain, for instance? Is this an established technique, something that can be taught precisely to everyone?

Henry Pearson: Oh, yes. People do go to school to learn how to be a surveyor, for example.

Dorothy Seckler: How did you know it? How did you know how to put those lines down to indicate the various elevations?

Henry Pearson: I didn't. I guess I'm just a very adaptable person. I understood the problem so I was able to take off from that point, that is, the point that the Imperial surveys permitted. I've never been a topographer myself. I've never done any surveying.

Dorothy Seckler: Didn't they have someone around that had done it to help you imagine it?

Henry Pearson: Well, it just happened one day in the course of our turning out these drawings we were visited by General Hap Arnold and he stopped at my table and looked to see what I was doing and we explained how it was used in association with the rest of the project. In a friendly enough manner he said, "And how are you finding the Imperial survey maps to work with?" I said, "Very good, Sir. As a matter of fact, I'm particularly appreciating these little in-between lines that help to describe the terrain even better—the ones that don't continue on but only fill in in certain little areas." He said, "I'm glad to hear it because I helped to make them."

Dorothy Seckler: Good heavens!

Henry Pearson: I had no idea how many Americans were involved in helping Japan make their own maps, but he was one.

Dorothy Seckler: Well! Absolutely astonishing. That's a fascinating story. So these lines must have become sort of engraved in your mind and made a deep impression on your sensibility.

Henry Pearson: Oh, yes. I really loved it.

Dorothy Seckler: Beyond what you were perhaps aware of. Or you were aware of loving it at the time?

Henry Pearson: Oh, yes! But I was also aware of the fact that I was a bottleneck. They couldn't find anybody else to help me and they had to wait sometimes for me to turn out this particular table top and they could be champing at the bit. They did try to send other people to me to work and help but within two or three days in every case they all gave up. They said, "Please assign me to something else." Finally, they came across the name of a man, Harry Horner, who was a famous stage designer whose work I had idolized even when I was studying to be a stage designer; and they said, "Do you think he might be able to do the work?" I said, "Well, since we both have similar backgrounds it's quite possible that he could." So they demanded his transferal. Apparently they could get just about anybody they wanted. And I said to myself, of course, here I am a lowly corporal and here he is coming in a tech sergeant, he's going to start lording it over me. I don't know why I felt that, there was no reason to feel it one way or another; nevertheless I did. But when he arrived, here was the warmest handshake and the warmest smile I'd had in a long time and it was all quite friendly. He moved his wife into Culver City and she took a job in some motion picture outfit and it was a very pleasant relationship. We were no bottleneck any more, of course. Between the two of us we turned out the work.

Dorothy Seckler: But how did you get to Japan from here?

Henry Pearson: Well, the war was over and they were circulating little happy notices saying, "Get to see the world," and "Stay in and enjoy the benefits." Of course, I would have none of that. But I had developed a morbid curiosity, I'm afraid, about the place that I had been drawing. I couldn't specify Japan but I asked that I be sent to the Pacific and hoped that I'd end up in Japan.

Dorothy Seckler: In the service—continuing in the service?

Henry Pearson: Oh, yes, continuing in the service. I ended up on Okinawa, which was pretty close, and which was very interesting anyway, so I was happy to have gone there. In order to be of some use over there I decided that I would have to leave the motion picture industry, of course, and I reenlisted as a medic giving my M.O.S [military occupational specialty] 286, which it was. When I arrived in Okinawa—this has nothing to do with art but I might as well tell it anyway—someone obviously intentionally misread the number because they probably never heard of a "286" and said oh, he must mean "826," which they wrote down and they called me to be a supply sergeant. They brought me in for the interview and I as firmly as possible told them that I would probably make the worst supply sergeant they had ever had, that my mind just didn't run that way and actually I was a medic and that was where my talents lay and they really should use me as a medic. They were a bit distraught because apparently they needed supply sergeants and there was just no help for it. Finally the lieutenant who was interviewing me introduced me to his colonel and the colonel said, are you sure? And I said, yes, sir. And he phoned his friend the colonel who was in charge of the medics and he said, could you use another medic? And I could hear the voice on the other end of the phone saying God! No! I've got fifty-six already and that's too many. And a pause, and I could still hear the voice, "But can he file?" And Colonel Davidson turned to me and said, "Can you file?" I said, "Yes, Sir," never having filed anything in my life but my own nails. And Lieutenant Gateway politely drove me over to the medics in a friendly sort of way and dropped me there and the colonel in charge of medics pointed to the files and said, "Well, here it is. It was made a mess six months ago by the recent typhoon. It's been a mess ever since, so put it in order." I took one look at it and realized I was going to have to

have help from somewhere when I thought of digging through the mess, because it really was a muddy pile of papers. I cam across something called the Dewey Decimal System written out in book form. That sounded familiar and I began to analyze the situation. I realized that the Dewey Decimal System was not enough so instead of using that I made up my own system and took the system, without actually doing the work yet, to the air inspector who, of course, from time to time would come around to find out whether everything was in order. I asked his master sergeant, who really was in charge there too, whether this would be all right with them if I were to lay it out that way. He looked at it, and said, "Fine." I went back, and arranged it that way and from that time on they could glance at it, they knew what I was supposed to be having there, or at least was trying to have there, because it was difficult to keep up with it, I'll admit; and they would always okay it. Little by little the personnel there got less and less. Strangely enough, the number of personnel on that part of Okinawa seemed to remain as large as ever but we had less and less medics until finally we came to an absolute period of drought when there were, I think, seven officers and five enlisted men to take care of something like four thousand personnel. Well, fortunately, before the pharmacist took off, about two months before—I knew he was going to be gone, because after all I was doing the paperwork—I had asked him whether they had a pharmacist to take his place and he said not that he knew of and he didn't care. So I went to the commanding officer and asked him whether a pharmacist was coming in. And he said, they would get one. I asked him whether it would be all right with him if I were to take lessons as long as the pharmacist was there. He said, "Fine, go ahead." And for two months I learned pharmacy, still doing my files. This was, of course, before we were down to five personnel; at this point I guess we were down to about twenty but I could see the vanishing taking place. When he left I became pharmacist and file clerk. Then the lab technician left and I became lab technician, and then the X-ray technician left and I became X-ray technician. Lab was a lot of fun. I enjoyed that aspect of it. It was, again, an unknown field to me and I enjoyed making slides and looking through microscopes and that kind of thing. After a certain period of time there one of the officers came up to me and—oh, incidentally, all this while that I was doing this multiple work we were down to five personnel, but naturally little by little we started coming back up again—but eventually one of the officers came over to me and said, "You really don't belong here. You belong in a hospital, you know, where you can handle more people at one time, not just take care of an occasional sick call." I really did want to do this business, I mean, I don't think that at any time in my life I have ever felt as if I were doing more good. I felt almost sentimentally sick about it because I could see the good that I was doing. That sounds a bit cloying but it's so.

Dorothy Seckler: No, it's interesting.

Henry Pearson: The fact that I could operate in a small way on cysts or bad infections and clean them up or was able to nurse somebody through a bad burn right there in our dispensary, you take naturally as a serious responsibility. You don't sit back and enjoy all this while you're at it, but somehow or other you do get a feeling nevertheless, and I don't know just what it is. Anyway, the doctor said I should be in a hospital. I said, fine, if you can find me a place. And they wrote around to various hospitals in the Pacific and one who needed somebody who could do paperwork—again, apparently there was a shortage of people to do paperwork—was the hospital down at Techakawa, the 376 station hospital. So I was immediately transferred. After being there for a certain length of time and doing papers and graphs and charts and what have you, back to my original medical work, I met a girl by the name of Norika Yamamoto. She was the telephone operator at the hospital, switchboard operator. She had discovered that I had had a background in theatre and she wanted to know if I would enjoy meeting her father who was the chairman of the Kokoside Boon Ka Shinkaki, which was a Japanese intellectual society, a cultural society really. I said, "Certainly!" She invited me to have dinner at their home, which was charming and sometime I'll tell you about it. And at the dinner he asked whether I would like to see a noh play. And I said, "Well, of course." He said, "Of course, I have to tell you that it's off limits," and he said, "It's off limits for a very good reason. We don't know how a GI will act there. After all, they could come around with flash guns and go talking loudly and, after all, these things are semi-religious. So you do have to behave yourself here." I said, "Fine. Lead me to it." The following Saturday I met him at the Komogono Station and it was bitter cold. We went to the Novaku Noh Theater and I took my shoes off and he led me to a blue cushion beside one of the columns, and I saw my first noh play. It was very dull and I figured that it was my own fault. I asked if I could come again next Saturday. So the second Saturday I went back to the same blue cushion and I started intentionally to slow my heartbeat. I sat there for about half an hour—incidentally, I knew what these plays were going to be about because I had gone to the library in advance and found out the general plot of the play so that I wasn't going to have to disturb Mr. Yamamoto to find out what was going on. I slowed down my heartbeat and when the curtain rose on Kon Ton, the first play of that evening, I got one of the most wonderful shocks of my life because that curtain, which had actually raised slowly, raised almost like a lightning bolt to my slowed-down heartbeat. And although it probably took the performer from three to five minutes I went along with that three to five minutes as if I were in a kind of state of suspension. And I knew that there was something here that, again, I can say it like the lab technician did, I mean it was just expanding me just this much more. And you feel the growing sometimes. And here I was feeling it again. Mr. Yamamoto didn't say anything to me. He came and sat down. Apparently he knew what was going on. And a Japanese I had met the previous time also who was a photographer there, official photographer, also didn't say anything until after it began and Mr. Yamamoto would whisper into my ear, not expecting a response; and from that time on I went for many months every Saturday,

or almost every Saturday to see no plays; finally to the point where they began to keep my cushion for me every week.

Dorothy Seckler: What had first suggested the idea of slowing your heartbeat and how could one do it? I mean is this something that is—well, what is it based on? I'm completely ignorant.

Henry Pearson: What suggested it was the fact that the movement of the play was so slow that I realized that I was getting unduly nervous. I was getting impatient for that next footstep because when they moved it was [Pearson speaks here very, very slowly] footstep by footstep by footstep—and you become impatient. I said to myself perhaps—I was only trying—if I slow down my heartbeat, if I get into a very comfortable state, I won't be nervous, I won't be waiting impatiently because my whole system would be slowed down also.

Dorothy Seckler: Could this be done through breathing or how ... ?

Henry Pearson: I don't quite know just how I did do it.

Dorothy Seckler: Have you been able to do it since?

Henry Pearson: Oh, yes, I can do it any time. And I think anybody can. The thing I discovered rather rapidly was that I had to keep my eyes open because it would be too easy to put myself to sleep doing it.

Dorothy Seckler: I should think so.

Henry Pearson: But keeping my eyes open I became receptive.

Dorothy Seckler: Could it have—is there an element of hypnosis possibly involved?

Henry Pearson: Oh, I don't think so, because ...

Dorothy Seckler: I was thinking of you following his footstep after footstep.

Henry Pearson: I was able to respond very easily. I could come out of it very easily at the end of the play if I wanted to talk to Mr. Yamamoto or to the photographer.
[Dorothy Seckler inserts new tape into machine]

Dorothy Seckler: This is Dorothy Seckler continuing an interview with Henry Pearson on March 9, 1965. You had been discussing the fact that some people question the optical type of art, or linear art, because they feel that it develops only from design.

Henry Pearson: They feel there is no other motivation.

Dorothy Seckler: Yes.

Henry Pearson: And in my particular case, at any rate, certainly I can't speak for others, I do know that when I do come across these images—shall I call them that? Or symbols? Associations? That's a better word. I think of what I feel are even larger things, that is, how can you think grander thoughts than, say, the storm, the windstorm over the ocean, or the whirling of things like the Milky Way in the sky, or the grandeur of the sunset, or the beauty of nature in, say, how the vines move up the sides of trees. They say, well, you have to have more significance. What is significance? I mean, it seems to me that some of the greatest art in the world has been simply still-lives. If you can draw on a lemon and a bowl as motivation for painting and not be questioned, I don't see why you can't draw on your own associations as motivation.

Dorothy Seckler: Is it possible that Bridget Riley in making her polka dots folding into a crevice is thinking of great thoughts and evocative images?

Henry Pearson: I don't know. I can't speak for her.

Dorothy Seckler: I know you can't. This is sheer speculation.

Henry Pearson: That's all right. I do feel that it's quite possible that my own development has caused me to think of things this way, naturally. I don't know enough of the background of the others to be able to feel that they do. However, I am leaving myself open to this extent: I feel that a person should be able to look at one of my paintings and feel what I feel. Maybe not right away. But I do feel that if a person goes sailing past and just sees lines on a color ground, isn't stopping to look at the painting and isn't stopping to feel the proper things that the painting really has to give him [sic]. I have had at least one person look at one of these linear paintings after a certain length of time and burst into tears because, as she said, it was just too beautiful. And I wasn't going to go any farther into the subject. Lord knows what she saw that she thought was so beautiful. But I myself

do feel a great beauty. I'll admit that I don't necessarily go for great tragedies. I don't know that there's any Hamlet involved here, but there is more than meets the casual eye, and I do feel that if I'm not seeing this in some of the other, not certainly all, of the optical painters, of course, we're going to get as many bad optical painters as we had abstract expressionists, aren't we? If not more. Certainly in some of these there are going to be these things too. And I'm not going to go sailing past and I'm going to stop to look and see how my heart beats in relation to theirs.

Dorothy Seckler: Well, certainly one feels—I have always felt it in terms of Vasarely, for instance, and yet, you know that there were great concepts and thoughts there much more than would seem to be in any of the others and I suppose it's a matter of learning in some ways to look ...

Henry Pearson: And respond, allow yourself to respond.

Dorothy Seckler: And not be looking at what your expectations have led you—to find something else ...

Henry Pearson: Yes. It seems so strange to me that the abstract expressionists—now don't forget I do admire them too—a great deal. They look at these and find them wanting. They have gone through the same thing themselves and it seems so strange they can't understand. I guess we'll find narrowness wherever we move. I guess that better be it for today; I am hoarse.

Dorothy Seckler: I can imagine. One thing just in the last moment that occurred to me is that we hadn't discussed your illustrations for the book. And there was an example of where the sense of—I mean, that is Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner* and it was astonishing to me that extent to which with the linear method alone you were able to evoke a sense of vast space or of burning or of stillness or of menacingness—a gamut of mood—and yet not with any obvious romanticism. It was as if this were romanticism and classicism where they nullify each other.

Henry Pearson: I don't know that I can explain it. I only know that when I first decided that the *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* was the book for me to do, it seemed almost too right, and I mentioned it to my dealer and he seemed to indicate by his answer that he felt it was an interesting idea. At first I was going to reject it because I said it's too pat, you know, I see all these things and all I have to do is put them down. And within a week I realized that that's why I should put it down. And even though I didn't know lithography at all—I didn't know whether I could do this—still I was already beginning to think the reactions to these various lines. I do mean poetically. The fact that it turned out, again, opened up a whole new development for me. I mean the fact that I was quite capable of going to many different sources and letting them take over. And sometimes almost consciously now I can allow myself to react even, say, to a news event. I can let it be the motivating force. I don't mean that I search through the newspaper for something that is going to move me; certainly not. But I'll, say, hear an announcement over the radio or on the TV and that will start a stirring and I will have to go out and do that one. If nothing else it will be a simple little drawing rather than a large painting because sometimes the immediacy of the drawing is more desirable.

Dorothy Seckler: But still it's—when you speak of a drawing I'm saying for the record that it is a linear drawing you're speaking of ...

Henry Pearson: Oh, yes.

Dorothy Seckler: ... not to depart from your ...?

Henry Pearson: No, it's done the same way I do the painting. And vice versa.

Dorothy Seckler: That's fascinating. Well, I think I've quite worn you out and I'm most grateful for the time you've given, really.

END OF INTERVIEW

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