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ABOUT OPP

[OtherPeoplesPixels](#) is a portfolio website service designed especially for artists by artists. Getting an OPP website is easy, stress-free, and our clean & simple designs let your artwork take the foreground.

OtherPeoplesPixels Interviews Steven Pearson



Attempts to Contain are Futile

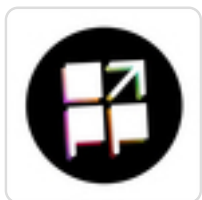
2009

Acrylic, Spray Paint, Paint Pen on Canvas

54.5" x 72"

STEVEN PEARSON combines numerous painting techniques and media to create dynamic, colorful abstractions of digital information and everyday experiences. His

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compositions are orchestrations of chaos and balance that reveal a myriad of influences from fine art and pop culture. Steven has been an Associate Professor in the Art & Art History Department at McDaniel College since 2004. He is also the Director of the college's [Rice Gallery](#) and lives in Westminster, MD.

OtherPeoplesPixels: I see a lot of different aesthetics and references in your work: graffiti, graphic design, comic books, and the history of abstraction in painting. Tell us about some of your influences.

Steven Pearson: My influences are extremely varied, from Baroque painters like [Rubens](#) and [Rembrandt](#), to comic books and graphic novels. I started out as a narrative figurative painter and was influenced by the Baroque. I love the use of composition and movement in many of Rubens' paintings and the way he carries the eye through every inch of a painting. I've tried to bring that kind of movement and use of space into my own work. In comic books, I'm interested in the use of the page and the panels. The panels are used to control the information, organize the story, and convey a sense of time, but within the panels themselves, there can be these moments of intense drama. It's amazing how much can actually be conveyed in one page without overwhelming the viewer. There is a definite connection between those dynamic compositions of Rubens and the compositions found in a comic book. Good graffiti contains that dynamic movement and drama as well, but what interests me more in looking at graffiti is

the layering of different murals and tags upon each other. It conveys a sense of history and time.

As for influences from the history of abstraction I'd have to say I am interested in the space and design of [Al Held](#), [Frank Stella](#), [Franz Ackerman](#) and [Julie Mehretu](#); the rawness and brushwork of [DeKooning](#) and [Terrence La Noue](#); the push/pull of [Hans Hoffman](#); the openness to gain information and ideas from varied visual resources of [Grace Hartigan](#); the use of color of the members of the [Washington color school](#); and the potpourri of marks, images, information, and politics found in [Basquiat](#). I've probably taken a little from each of them, plus many more over the years, and found ways to blend it together with my own sensibilities to create my own voice, which we all do. At least I hope I have, but it's always a work in progress.



Mesmer

2011

Acrylic and Paint Pen on Birch Panel 48" X 48"

OPP: You use a lot of different types of paint, including acrylic, oil, spray paint and paint pens, and this leads to a lot of very different kinds of brush strokes within the same painting. How did you develop this way of painting? Can you talk about the conceptual underpinning of this convergence of styles developing out of the medium itself?

SP: I enjoy contrasts. They add balance. Balance is an important part of life. We are constantly looking for it, and sometimes we even find it. Spray paint gives me a misty, speckled treatment of an area to balance the flat, opaqueness of acrylic. Loose, active brushstrokes balance the hard, taped edge. The paint pen gives me a clean outline that makes drips and splashes appear very controlled, balancing the chaos of chance that actually created them. Both as a figurative painter and an abstract painter, I was more conscious about trying to achieve variety of paint applications when I painted in oils. But when I switched to acrylics, I was doing the *Heroes and Villains* series and needed the paint to just sit flat, opaque, and have mostly a hard edge, so it wasn't as important.

At the end of that series, I wanted to explore the nuances of painting a little more. But I also felt like I needed to be willing to bring in any medium necessary— and that made sense to the paintings—to add contrast and variation to the surface. As an undergraduate student in the

early 1990s, I had silk screened into paintings, sewed collaged paintings together, and worked on various surfaces. Not all of these experiments were successful, or even good, but it's that process of experimentation and discovery that is fresh and invigorating and keeps me coming back to the studio. I also believe that those areas of contrasting brushstrokes, or little introductions of a different medium draw a viewer in and keep them engaged.



Gaining Momentum (Corner Installation)

Photo by Alan Skees

2010

Acrylic, Spray Paint, Paint Pen on Panel

96" x 192"

OPP: I love that you acknowledge that not all experiments are successful. And I often find that I learn as much from my failures as from my successes. Will you tell me about a failure that taught you a lot about your own work?

SP: I will try to answer that with a general lesson I have learned, which is that all of the failures have taught me not to approach each painting

like it will be a masterpiece and to not be too set on an initial idea, but be open to change and revision and let the work tell me where it needs to go. A specific example is the painting *Gaining Momentum*. I did that painting at the [Vermont Studio Center](#), and I had a set idea and a small sketch I was working from in the first week or so of the painting. I wanted these two opposing forces (in my head, I was thinking of two [Hokusai](#) waves) coming at each other. After a week, I stepped back and looked at the painting and realized I had two colorful phallic-looking shapes opposing each other instead of two wave-like forces. Not the result I was looking for. After some commiseration, I took the the 16 panels off of the left wall, laid them on the floor and just loosened up. I poured paint, spray painted, and drew in charcoal until I had a ground that I could build on that wasn't overly planned out. Another interesting thing about that painting is I had intended it to be a 16' wide flat painting, but when I got into the studio provided for me at the residency, I found that there wasn't a 16' wide wall. So I mounted the panels in the corner, just to start working. After working on it for 2-3 weeks, I realized that the corner installation allowed you to get more physically immersed in the painting and be enveloped by the color.

[*Don Quixote's Folly*](#) was very similar. It took four months, several very ugly stages, and multiple configurations of the panels and overall shape to finally resolve it. If I wasn't prepared to push through several revisions and to be self critical, I

would have either abandoned it in one of its incredibly ugly stages or tried to convince myself that it wasn't a bad painting. There are several paintings—that fortunately have never seen the light of day—that didn't get re-worked and resolved. I was convinced at the time that they worked. Luckily for me, I didn't have shows they were destined for, so I had time to think about them and either scrap them or paint over them. So to sum it up, I've learned from my failures to be open, count on revision, and to always know the location of a big dumpster.



Against Overwhelming Odds

2009

Acrylic, Spray Paint, Paint Pen on Paper
Mounted on Panel

OPP: The paintings from *Dualities and Amalgamations* (2009-2010) are a reflection of "our ability to receive and assimilate" the "flood of information on a daily, if not hourly, basis via a variety of technological means: emails, text messages, Facebook, Twitter, online newspapers, countless websites, as well as television and radio. In this sense, they are not pure abstractions. They are actually representations of information. But the viewer doesn't have access to what is being represented, because all the information is coded. In terms of contemporary painting, is pure abstraction even possible anymore? Is it interesting or relevant to your work?

SP: That's a good question. Bob Nickas touches on that slightly in "[Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting](#)." He questions why artists who paint non-representationally reject the notion that their work is abstract. He suggests that the term *abstraction* should be used to cover artists who create representational abstractions, as well as artists who work from more formal, non-objective modes. Using *abstraction* as an umbrella word that covers a wide variety of abstract or non-objective painting makes complete sense to me as a painter in the 21st century. It is difficult and probably nearly impossible to remove yourself from the visual bombardment that we undergo daily, so how can someone paint pure abstraction? The questions will always be there: Where did you get that color? Why that shape?... and so on. I do think about it when I

am creating painting, and I do like it when the sources of my visuals become so obscure that they are indecipherable, but I think my paintings would lose interest to me if I tried to actually divorce them from outside resources.



Too Good, Too Evil

2008

Acrylic on Panel

79.5" X 94"

OPP: I'd love to hear more about your series *Heroes and Villains* (2007-2008), which uses 1980s comic book covers as the source for your color palette and responds to the wood grain of your birch wood substrate as the source for the patterning. Why did you decide to put these 2 disparate sources together?

SP: I fell into that series on accident. I was about to build a new stretcher for a painting when I noticed a shape in the wood-grain of the birch plywood I was going to cut up for corner braces. The shape looked very similar to shapes

that I would make when painting quick abstract studies on paper. I decided to do a couple of small paintings that just used the grain of the wood for the composition, with no additions brought in. After painting two of them I saw that I was using a contrasting combination of Liquitex Brilliant Blue and Cadmium Red Light. I like that combination together because of its intensity, but at the time I was painting them, I was watching *Superman Returns*. It made me think about the colors always used to depict heroes in comics, and conversely, the colors often used to portray villains. I decided to use the colors of heroes and of their arch nemeses as the palettes for my paintings, but I was afraid that if I tried to draw my own compositions, I would be too heavy handed in creating "hero shapes" and their villainous counterparts. I thought I could avoid that by using the wood grain as the "drawing" and letting the color represent those opposites. I also felt the use of the wood grain and the use of color as an addition was another way of introducing opposites. The wood grain was "truth." It was the natural pattern of the readymade substrate. The color was a fallacy added to that surface. It was another way for me to continue my focus on opposites and balance.



Continuation

2005

Oil on Canvas

72" x 96"

OPP: You have 2 upcoming solo shows in the fall/winter of 2012: *Information Breakdown* at Exhibit A Gallery at the [Hamilton Street Club](#) in Baltimore and *Information Overload* at the [Visual Arts Gallery](#) in Queensbury, NY. Was the work in these shows developed simultaneously? I'm assuming some connection based on the titles of the shows, but what will be distinctly different about the exhibitions?

SP: The work in *Information Overload* was developed first. In that series, I was focusing on a more intuitive process. These paintings are composed of shapes, forms, and colors of things I may have seen driving, or surfing the web, or walking, or driving. The paintings are built up and layered with these memories. In the process some get buried or fragmented, and some remain prominent and sit on the surface, much like the way we store and process information.

In this series, I also started tracing parts of the composition, or even parts of previous paintings, and would then repeat them and reconfigure them within a composition, cannibalizing one part to activate another. The painting *Amalgamation* is created from three previous paintings traced and recombined to create a new composition. This altered the memory and changed the story of those things. Some parts get enhanced and become more of a focus, and others become background. I think it is interesting composing a painting this way. It makes me think roughly of Jean Piaget's adaptation process: assimilation and accommodation. We take in new information and incorporate it into our existing ideas (assimilation), or our ideas are changed based on new information (accommodation).

The paintings that will be in *Information Breakdown* are derived directly from the paintings in *Information Overload*, and from the process used to create *Amalgamation*. I started the first painting in the group that will be in the show, *Over/Under*, from traced portions of *Amalgamation* and *Don Quixote's Folly*. When I finished *Over/Under*, I traced it in 10" squares placed randomly over the composition and then transferred them to a new panel in random order to create a new composition. When that painting *[Mesmer]* was completed, I traced it in 10" squares and reconfigured it into a new composition *[Intermittent Lucidity]*. I am currently working on the fourth in that series that was traced from *Intermittent Lucidity*. All the information in the paintings can be traced back

to *Amalgamation* and *Don Quixote's Folly*, but it gets so broken down and re-ordered that it becomes nearly unrecognizable, altered, and new. I plan on repeating this process for 7 to 10 paintings, by which time I think the information will be so broken down, it will be like painting white noise.



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