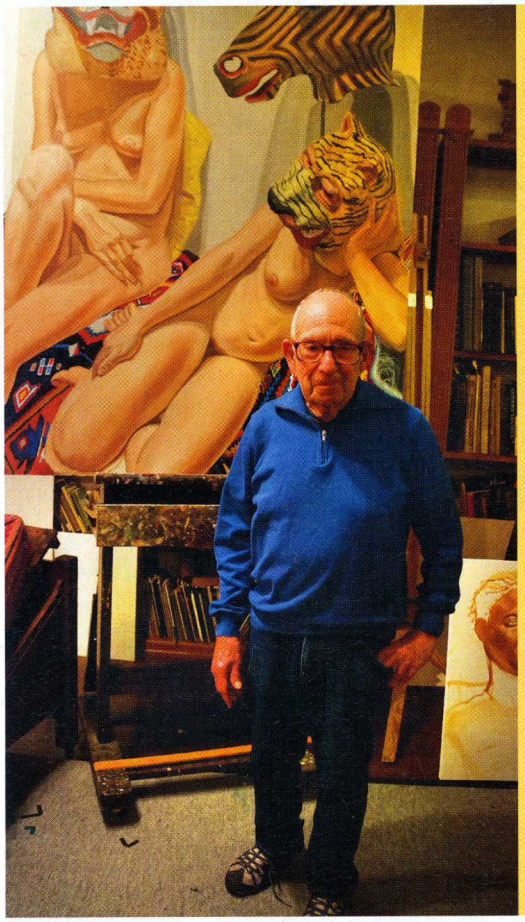


At 90 years of age, the renowned realist is just getting started.

Philip Pearlstein: The Late Work

BY JOHN A. PARKS

PHILIP PEARLSTEIN HAS MADE a dramatic and lasting contribution to American art, beginning in the early 1960s when the golden years of Abstract Expressionism were coming to an end and Pop Art was in its infancy. Pearlstein followed neither path and opted instead to work directly from life, producing images of nudes painted with relentless exactitude. Posed under bright studio lights and often harshly cropped, the figures were stripped of any kind of idealized trappings or aesthetic adjustments and literally laid bare under the gaze of a cool and clinical eye.

The artist achieved this jarring vision by adhering to a particular working method. On beginning a painting, he would start drawing his subject with great concentration in the middle of the canvas and then simply allow the drawing to continue until it reached the edge. He determined to accept that edge regardless of how it cropped the image. He would then work to render the forms, building the paint in layers as he proceeded from one section to the next, trying to record as accurately as possible whatever he was seeing. Because he looked hard at each section, more or less everything was shown in focus—resulting in generally hard edges throughout the painting. This feature contributed to the severe and coolly detached quality of the finished painting.

A Cool Eye In His Time

Pearlstein's insistence on allowing his working process to dictate the look of the final image was closely related to many current ideas in abstract and conceptual art of the period in which artists like Robert Morris made pieces whose appearance and form were simply the result of predetermined procedures. By painting the nude in this way, Pearlstein avoided the baggage of historical forms and stereotypes, removed much of any personal response to the subject matter, and presented the human figure in a way that was fresh and challenging. No small achievement.

In his later work, Pearlstein has continued to paint the nude but has augmented his compositions by introducing props that are often powerful entities in themselves. Large model airplanes, carved figures, brilliantly colored masks and decorative fabrics share close quarters with naked models. Often the

ABOVE: Philip Pearlstein in his studio. November 20, 2014.
Photo by John A. Parks

OPPOSITE: ***Two Female Models Sitting with Legs Crossed and Kazak Rug*** (2013; oil on canvas, 84x60)

ABOVE: ***Model on Air Mattress with Mickey Mouse Blanket*** (2012; oil on canvas, 60x48)

views of human flesh are obscured by parts of the props. The resulting clash of imagery can be disorienting. At first sight the paintings seem to suggest a narrative or an abundance of symbolic meaning. On closer examination it appears that the artist has simply been raising the stakes in his painterly game. Loading his pictures with ever more powerful and beguiling imagery, he continues to paint in a deliberately neutral and cool way. Compositions that initially seem full of meaning and intriguing stories become just one object after another. It is this tension between imagery that is potentially emotive and a painting approach that is emotionally cool that gives the pictures a lasting fascination.

The Artist at Work and at Ease

At the age of 90 Pearlstein is still hard at work. His studio and home for the last 30 years or so has been a large loft in an old industrial building in Manhattan's west Thirties. The studio is

reached by a slow-moving freight elevator, and the artist unlocks the inner door himself.

Bright of eye and sure on his feet, Pearlstein seems much younger than his years, and after a day's work is happy to settle down and talk about art, painting and life for as many hours as it takes. The working part of the loft is divided into two immense spaces. The first is dominated by hundreds of antiques and pieces of memorabilia the artist and his wife have acquired over many years. American folk art, tiny classical figures, South American carvings, Asian masks and much more festoon surfaces and walls. It was from an early interest in collecting that the props in Pearlstein's later paintings first came.

"Like most artists, we used to go to museums a lot," he recalls. "And then we discovered that you could buy some of this stuff yourself. It was surprising to us. Not that we ever spent huge sums of money, but gradually we amassed a lot of things. We were living in a brownstone at the time, and all this stuff was on an upper floor. When I moved into this loft, I rented a van and got some students to help. Everything arrived and was just standing in piles. And I liked the way the piles looked." It was the accidental, serendipitous placement and juxtaposition of the objects that intrigued the artist. He was also happy to accept the laws of chance in some other ways. "One of the big model airplanes was damaged in the move," he recalls. "I liked it much better after that." Soon he began to incorporate the objects into his paintings of people.

Consulting the Models

The next challenge was to bring about compositions without imposing an obvious narrative or a heavily symbolic organization. Pearlstein achieved this by allowing the composition to grow out of a collaborative discussion with his models. "Sometimes I let them choose the props," he says. "And since they are going to be sitting for a long time, they have to be comfortable, so I work with them in getting them into poses." He has also been careful not to use props that might have too great a symbolic meaning. "I avoid things that have Catholic imagery," he says. "In some of the early paintings, I was using American Indian prayer blankets until I realized that some people might be offended. I changed to Turkish rugs. I suppose they might have symbolism in them, too, but at least it's something I don't know about."

> "I still start by drawing in the middle and letting the image happen, but now I make sure that faces or masks—or at least part of them—are in the picture."

Painting in an Organized Way

As for composing the painting, the artist has modified his procedure slightly. "I still start by drawing in the middle and letting the image happen," he says, "but now I make sure that the faces or masks—or at least part of them— are in the picture." He laughs and observes, "I'm paying a lot to have the models here so I have to make sure I get my money's worth."

The rest of the working procedure hasn't changed. "The composition all happens in the first half hour of work," says the artist. "It's very exciting. Once it is laid out, I am committed to it. The rest is all organization."

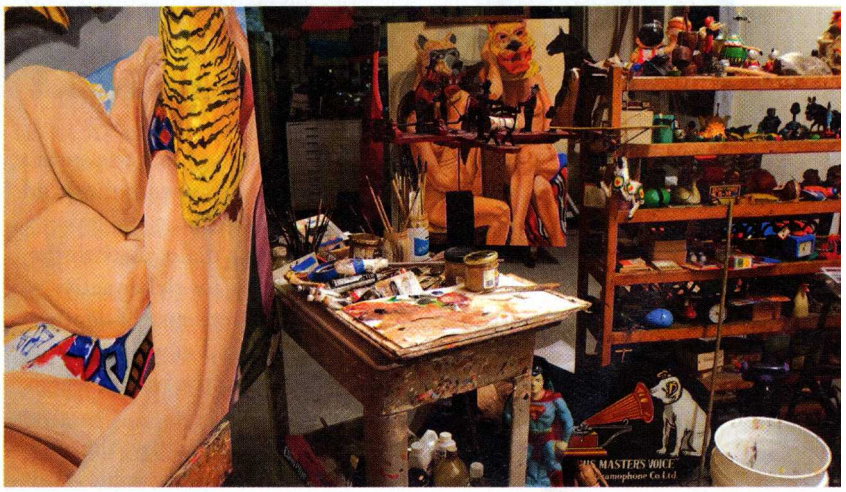
Pearlstein works up his painting in layers, working section to section. The underpainting is a rough blocking while subsequent layers refine the image as the artist looks ever more closely at tone and color. The artist mixes from a modest group of colors (see Basic & Brilliant Colors, page 57).

Pearlstein's somewhat lean use of paint seems a world away from Pollock or de Kooning, but he came of age as a painter in their era and his own early work was thickly painted. "They developed their own vocabulary of marks and brushstrokes; I learned a lot from them."

In Thin Layers and From Life

Pearlstein layers his paint fairly thinly, occasionally using a small amount of medium, a mixture of linseed oil, turpentine and damar

BELOW: Philip Pearlstein's studio with palette and brushes. November 20, 2014.
Photo by John A. Parks



ABOVE: ***Two Models with Peruvian Medicine Man***, (2011; oil on canvas, 60x48)

varnish. The paint is feathered into the surface quite carefully, although some scumbling and dragging can be seen. By keeping the layers thin, the artist allows a dialogue with the layers underneath, making for richer activity in the color and a greater sense of depth. "Sometimes I feel as though I'm working in pastel," he says, referring to the way in which his layers are assembled.

As he works through the figure, the artist is primarily interested in securing values and following the light. He is particularly interested in the formation of shadows and the way in which light is reflected back into shadows. If there are colored props around, often that color is thrown into a shadow on the models. "Things are always changing when you're painting the model," he says. "The models actually change color during the day. If they're warm or cold the color is different. They are different after lunch when the belly is a different shape and then they move slightly. I have to keep

Basic & Brilliant Colors

The artist mixes from a modest group of colors. On the evening I visited, he had laid out burnt umber, raw sienna, Naples yellow, ultramarine blue, cadmium red and alizarin crimson, along with white and black. He explains that he doesn't use cadmium yellow in flesh tones but will use it when he needs a brilliant yellow in the local color. Similarly, he'll bring in other brilliant pigments if he needs them for local color. He uses high quality, artist grade-paints from Schmincke and Winsor & Newton.

chasing it (the shadows and light)."

Sometimes Pearlstein will continue to work on the props when the models are not present. In recent paintings, where he has models wearing antique animal masks, he sets up the mask in position on a cardboard roll and forges ahead. "But I do need the model back," he says, "because sometimes the reflected light changes everything."

Rather than work on one painting at a time, the artist has three or four pictures on the go. The grouping of props, couches, divans or chairs needed for each picture takes up a separate area of the studio space. Fixed sets of floodlights on the ceiling keep the lighting stable. Pearlstein has never used the single directional light favored by adherents of the classical atelier. Instead he uses multiple floods that create a flatter light and generate complex groups of overlapping shadows.

An Orderly Machine

Working on multiple paintings allows for a certain flexibility when work becomes stalled for one reason or another. It's also part of Pearlstein's organizational strategy, where the studio workflow is structured to allow the creative cooperation of a number of people.

"One of the things I learned early on is how to organize myself to do work," says the artist. "When I was in the army I was put to work with a number of professional graphic designers working on pamphlets and signage. I learned from them the basics of design and the use of drafting tools." Later, in the 1950s, Pearlstein worked for many years in a graphic design studio where he saw how a group of people could be efficiently organized to produce creative work. He observes that this experience also influenced his friend Andy Warhol. "Warhol is credited with setting up the Factory and figuring out how to get a group of people working together," he says. "But Andy learned that from his work as an illustrator in New York. He was in a lot of design studios and saw how art directors gave out work all the time. He just transferred that approach to fine art." Pearlstein himself did not follow Warhol's example and limits his own assistants to strictly supportive tasks.

ABOVE: ***Model with Two Whirligigs*** (2010; oil on canvas, 44x36)

Cropping as Composition

Pearlstein's stint in the design world also got him interested in the power of cropping. "I worked for *Life* for a while and they would specify many alternate croppings of single photographs," he says. "They would want to look at maybe eight or nine variations of a layout with differently sized images. If I'd been really smart I would have taken a greater interest in the parts of the image they thought weren't important enough to keep."

Pearlstein also learned of the uneasy relationship between fine art and commercial art.

BRISTLE BRUSHES

Painting in thin layers, Pearlstein is afraid of getting "too smooth," so he uses bristle filberts rather than sables.

HOUR BY HOUR

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"I was sitting next to de Kooning one night in a bar after an opening," Pearlstein says. "He asked me what I'd been doing and I told him I was working at *Life*. He immediately told me to keep it quiet. Nobody would help you as an artist if he knew that you did things like that, he said. De Kooning himself did a lot of commercial illustration, even airbrush rendering, but he never told anyone about it."

"Benign Absence of Taboo"

Pearlstein is thoughtful in discussing the reception of his work. In spite of his fame and the presence of his paintings in many major collections, there are challenges because the broader culture continues to be wary of pictures featuring nudity. "My paintings are a tough sell," he says. "Collectors' wives don't like them. Nine-tenths of the people think they're porn. And then they can't be shown in nine-tenths of the country."

In part, the resistance to Pearlstein's work may come from the sheer neutrality of his viewpoint. The figures in his work seem relaxed, comfortable with themselves. "I always use professional models," he says, "people who are used to doing this for a living. I also choose models who have a normal appearance. They have ordinary bodies." In the paintings the figures are not sexualized but neither are they demure. Perhaps it is that very sense of nonchalance and acceptance that makes certain viewers uncomfortable, the benign absence of taboo.

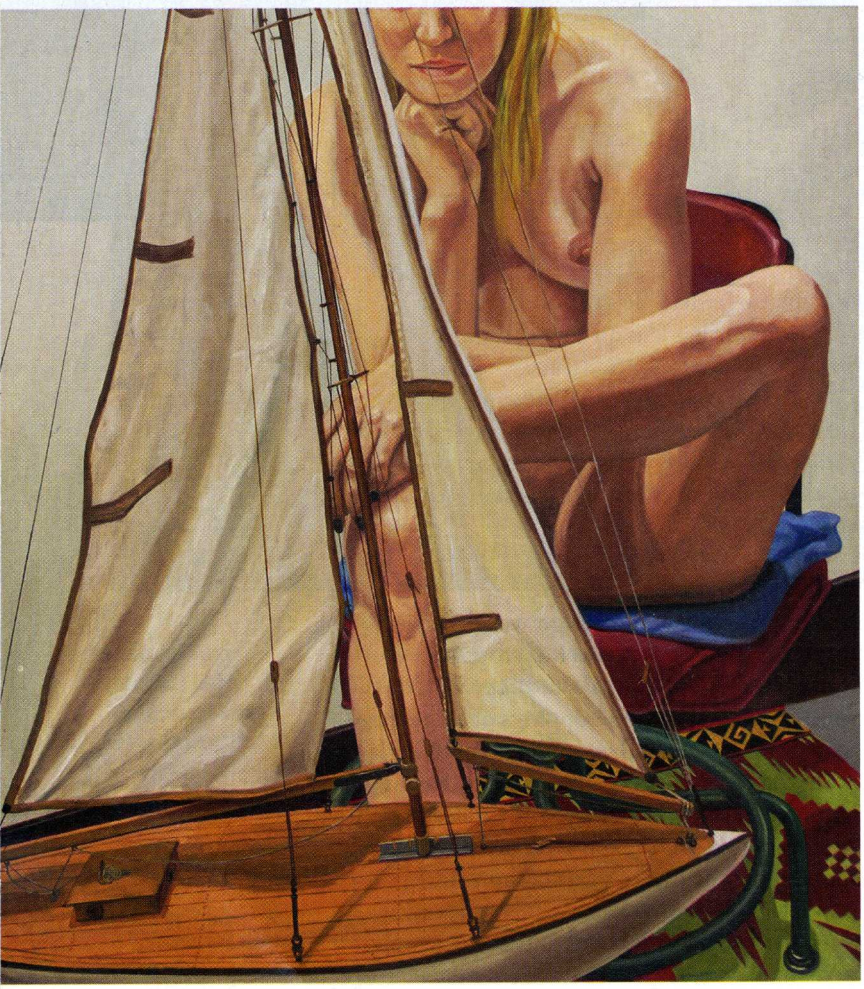
Pearlstein's experience with what is or isn't acceptable as imagery began early when he found himself in Naples with the U.S. Army at the end of World War II. "The Red Cross was organizing trips to Pompeii and I went along," he recalls. "The first thing they showed you were the images of sexual activity in the brothels. They even sold you little books of the images. In fact, I don't think they were interested in showing much else."

Not About Ideas

The artist's interest in the history of art was furthered in the late 1950s when he undertook a degree in art history at New York University. He focused on the work of Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia and their Dada roots. "The Dadaists were nihilists who were actually determined to bring down the whole of Western culture," he says. "They were highly committed politically. They wanted to break down the establishment control of art and make art available to everybody. Many of the poets left Zurich for their home countries after World War I and were eventually killed in political demonstrations. When I decided to make art myself I determined that I would not make art about ideas. I would just paint."

Rather than a political platform, Pearlstein seems more inclined to see his work as a place of escape. "I look at what's going on in the world and you can't do anything about

BELOW: ***Model with Pond Boat***, (2014; oil on canvas, 40x36)



For Further Reading

Philip Pearlstein: Drawings and Watercolors by John Perreault (Harry N. Abrams, 1988)

Philip Pearlstein by Edward Lucie-Smith (il Polittico, 2004)

Philip Pearlstein: Since 1983 by Robert Storr (Harry N. Abrams, 2002)

it except say "Oy Vey!" he says. "So I go back to my painting." He enjoys the company of his models. "They are my newspapers," he says. "They bring me news of the city and talk about their lives."

Having reached a grand age, both Pearlstein and his wife face health challenges and deal with rounds of doctor visits. For Pearlstein, making art is now also a consolation, a place of calm and joy that he can continue to develop even when the going gets difficult in the rest of life. In his latest paintings he has placed playfully grotesque animal masks on the heads of two female models. The effect is bizarre although, of course, the artist would insist that there is no real narrative. The color is richer than that of many of his paintings, and some of the edges have softened. You have the impression that the artist is really enjoying himself. ■

ABOVE: ***Model with Japanese Lantern and Folk Art Horse*** (2014; oil on canvas, 40x36)

JOHN A. PARKS is an artist as well as a writer. Visit his website at www.johnaparks.com.