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Exhibition highlights friendship, art of Pearlstein, Warhol, Cantor

by Toby Tabachnick, Senior Staff Writer

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Andy Warhol (front) poses for this 1948 photo with fellow Carnegie Institute of Technology students Philip Pearlstein and Dorothy Cantor. (Photo provided by the Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution)

Philip Pearlstein remembers first being approached by a young Andy Warhol, a classmate at Carnegie Tech (now Carnegie Mellon University) where they were both studying art in the 1940s.

It was five years after Pearlstein had won first prize for his painting "Merry-Go-Round" in the national Scholastic magazine high school competition. His winning painting had been published in the June 16, 1941 edition of Life magazine.

"Andy said to me, 'How does it feel to be famous?'" recalled Pearlstein, now 91, speaking from his home in New York City.

"I said, 'It only lasted five minutes.'"

That response obviously struck a chord with Warhol, who positioned his easel next to Pearlstein, commencing a close friendship that lasted throughout their undergraduate days and into their time as roommates in New York City working as commercial artists in the 1950s.

Their respective work is being shown side by side for the first time, along with the work of Dorothy Cantor, in an expansive exhibit at The Andy Warhol Museum. "Pearlstein, Warhol, Cantor: From Pittsburgh to New York" opened May 30 and runs through Sept. 6.

Cantor, who was one year behind them in school, became a close friend of Warhol and Pearlstein. An accomplished artist in her own right, she gave up painting after she married Pearlstein and started a family in the early 1950s.

The exhibition features the artists' assignments from Carnegie Tech as well as Pearlstein's and Warhol's early design work in New York. Old photographs of the three friends together add context and insight into their formative days as artists.

Cantor and Pearlstein, who are both Jewish, were each born and raised in Pittsburgh. Cantor, whose father owned Cantor and Smolar's smoked fish business in the Hill district, attended Wightman Elementary School and Taylor Alderdice High School. Pearlstein, whose father was in the poultry business in the Strip District, lived in the Hill District, then Squirrel Hill.

"I grew up during the height of the Depression, with everything that implies," Pearlstein said. "Everything was pretty bleak back then."

Pearlstein began "doing artwork seriously sometime in kindergarten," he said. "At Roosevelt grade school there was a teacher who was very encouraging."

He continued developing his talents at Taylor Alderdice, where he was encouraged by teacher Joseph Kirkpatrick. Kirkpatrick nurtured a cohort of students during his tenure at Alderdice, many of whom went on to have successful careers as artists, curators and art historians, according to Pearlstein.

Coincidentally, Warhol, who was several years younger than Pearlstein, also studied with Fitzpatrick while he was a student at Schenley High School.

"Pearlstein, Warhol, Cantor" is arranged chronologically, beginning with Pearlstein's deft high school work and includes his winning Scholastic entrees — he won the contest two years in a

row.

Pearlstein enrolled at Carnegie Tech after high school, but his education was interrupted for his service in World War II, during which he produced military maps and diagrams, several of which are displayed in the exhibit.

When Pearlstein returned to Carnegie Tech in 1946, Warhol was there as well, and the work by both artists during that time tells the story of their evolution toward very different creative ends: While Warhol developed as one of the leading artists of the pop art movement, Pearlstein became known for his work in modern realism.

Of particular interest are works by the two artists resulting from the same class assignment, where the viewer can see divergent interpretations of the same subject, but from the same vantage point.

"There are early differences," noted Jessica Beck, assistant curator of art at the Warhol. "Pearlstein's are so exact and precise. He's coming from the military, and you can see that progress. Andy's, though, are full of whimsy, which then carries on to his commercial work in New York, which had a lyrical nature to it. Pearlstein was concerned with loftier ideas."

After graduating from Carnegie Tech, a mutual friend who worked as a magazine art director, encouraged Pearlstein and Warhol to move to New York, saying there was no future in Pittsburgh for "ambitious young artists."

"He thought Andy was a terrific illustrator," Pearlstein said. "And he was right. Andy got a job that first week."

The two shared a one-room studio apartment for almost a year. Cantor soon followed them to New York, and she and Pearlstein were married.

The commercial work of both Pearlstein and Warhol is showcased in the exhibit as well as later artistic work following arrival on the New York gallery scene.

He and Cantor remained close with Warhol for about 10 years, Pearlstein said, until they became immersed in parenting their three children, and Warhol became busy "becoming very famous as Andy Warhol."

"The three of us were very close during those years at Carnegie," Pearlstein recalled, adding that the current joint exhibit feels like "a reunion."

More than 50 drawings and paintings by Pearlstein and Cantor make their museum debut, supported by paintings and period photographs on loan and from The Warhol Collection.

This is Cantor's first museum showing as a featured artist, and this exhibit shows off her skill at urban landscapes — bridges and subways.

The exhibition includes several of Pearlstein's recent paintings, notably a series of three large canvases of nude females wearing quirky animal masks completed earlier this year.

"I think it's remarkable this exhibit took place," said Pearlstein, who still spends several hours a day on most days painting. "It's something I never anticipated, that the three of us are exhibited together. It's a very happy event."

While the three friends did not keep in close touch in later years, they did run into each other from time to time at various exhibits.

"Andy was like a member of the family," Pearlstein said. "Like a cousin you rarely see."

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