

William Pearlstein
Eulogy for Philip Pearlstein
Plaza Jewish Community Chapel, New York, New York
Tuesday, December 20, 2022

Good afternoon. My name is William Pearlstein. On behalf of myself and my sisters, Ellen and Julia, I'd like to thank you for coming. At the Century Club, where my father had been a member for decades, I sometime refer to myself as "Pearlstein The Younger." But unlike Hans Holbein and Pieter Breughel The Younger, I did not become an artist, which is fortunate for all concerned and if nothing else indicates a prudent degree of self-awareness. As you know from spending time with my father, he loved to tell stories and anecdotes, mostly about himself and his life, which was unusual and unusually interesting. These stories came out in no particular order and they changed each time. But if I can have about 15 to 20 /minutes of your time, I've managed to string these together in what amounts to a thumbnail biography. You can think of them as Philip's greatest hits. I make no pretense to strict accuracy or insight, and apologize in advance for any inaccuracies or misstatements. The art historians are already cringing.

As a visual artist, my father was supremely self-aware and conscious of his place in art history. As an accomplished art historian and writer he was well qualified to make that evaluation. He knew exactly what he was doing and why he was doing it. He told me that his goal was to paint subject matter that no one else painted, in a style that no one else painted, better than anyone else could do. I'd say he succeeded and I think that's the art historical consensus. So when people ask me how I'm feeling, I say pretty good. He led a long life, well-lived and fully-realized. We all mourn his passing, because he was a devoted, loving, and beloved husband, father, grandfather, friend, teacher and mentor. But he was an artist who made his mark on art history during his lifetime--which is what he set out to do--and he is only now beginning his second life as an artist in the art historical canon. And that is something to celebrate. My role is to do what I can, together with my daughter, who is also in the field, to ensure that his artistic legacy is preserved and promoted.

The obituaries in The New York Times and The Washington Post are good. They make the central point that my father chose to paint the figure from direct observation at a time when that was out and other things were in. The Post writes that "Together the figures and objects create complex compositions that seem to defy spatial logic. This effect is achieved partly by the abrupt cropping at the paintings' edges.... The closest precedent could be the contorted proportions found in the Mannerist painters of the late Renaissance." Parmigianino's *Madonna With the Long Neck* comes to mind. (I wrote that).

The only thing I can fault the writers for is understating the breadth of my father's oeuvre and interests. My father's subject matter included nude figures, clothed portraits and landscapes, and he worked in multiple media, including oil, watercolor, line drawing, prints and lithographs. Regardless of media his work is characterized by extreme precision and detailed observation. Even at 98 his hand and eye were so good that his watercolors were as tight as other artists' oils.

The portraits recall late Republican and early Imperial Roman busts. Some subjects complained that they weren't flattering. Henry Kissinger thought the shadows from his glasses made him

look too cynical and manipulative. Right. That portrait was done under time constraints on the Rockefeller Estate in upstate New York. My father was told not to stray from the house because the grounds were patrolled by attack dogs. The conversation didn't open up until they found they both had daughters at Yale. It will be interesting to see how their reputations compare over time. Ashton Hawkins must have had a younger version of himself in mind because he hated his portrait and sold it immediately, likely for a profit. I thought it was a good likeness. There was an awkward moment at dinner with Cardinal Kroll when someone asked why a Jew was asked to paint the portrait of a Catholic Cardinal. Maybe they couldn't find an Italian?

The landscapes are museum quality and grossly overlooked. They represent a Grand Tour of the world's great sites in plein air—Rome, Jerusalem, Abu Simbel, the Sphinx, Machu Pichu, Angkor Wat, the Grand Canyon, Sante Fe. They fall squarely in the tradition of the great English travelers of the early 19th century and recall Frederick Catherwood's Mayan illustrations and David Robert's *Travels in Egypt and the Holy Land*, whose prints my father admired and owned. Not the Catherwood's which got expensive. As far as I know, my father's panoramic vista of Jerusalem's Kidron Valley has no equivalent. His Grand Canyon, commissioned for the nation's 1976 Bicentennial, rivals Thomas Moran's view from Hermit Rim Road, and his Angkor Wat is on a different plane entirely than Andy Warhol's early sketch (which exemplifies the danger of dabbling in subject matter that the masters take seriously). He was an important art historian, art writer, teacher of studio art, juror, panelist and speaker. He was a prolific collector of art and objects of many kinds and genres, including antiquities, Americana, folk art, vintage toys, pre-Columbian art, African and Oceanic art, Old Master Prints, kilims, Navaho rugs, Native American pottery, photography and furniture. Other artists' paintings not so much. He had paintings covered. He also loved his boats, which at various times included a small fleet of sail boats, row boats, kayaks and wind-surfers. He wasn't a natural sailor, and several important members of the New York art critical establishment almost drowned in the Great South Bay off my parents' summer home on Fire Island. Linda Nochlin comes to mind. On the other hand, he rescued a few guests who managed to get stranded off-shore, including my classmate Carl Schechter, here today, who owes him his life. My father said that growing up, he didn't know that Jews could own boats. And who can forget the honorary tribal dance on the Navaho reservation, where my father was introduced as a representative of the European artistic tradition.

My father was a prodigy and a virtuoso. He grew up in near poverty in Depression Era Pittsburgh as an only child in a large extended family. As a child, he hot-bunked with various uncles. Eyeballing fertilized eggs against the light for a non-kosher blood spot was a likely career path. But he started taking art classes on weekends at Carnegie Museum, and benefited from good art teachers in high school, where he submitted paintings to the Scholastic Magazine national competition. He took first and second place one year and first and third place the other. Sounds like an Olympic swimmer who dominates an event. At a TEFAF Fair at the Park Avenue Armory, we passed a Marsden Hartley and my father said that Hartley had been one of the panelists. In 1941, Life Magazine printed a color reproduction of the prize-winning Carousel, which won him a scholarship to Carnegie Tech, when higher education would otherwise have been unattainable. In 1943 he was drafted into the US Army. The Army assigned every other college student to officer's training school or a non-combat specialty like intelligence or engineering. But they didn't know what to do with him because he was in studio art. So he got assigned to infantry as a buck private and went through basic training first for trench warfare in

Georgia and next at Camp Blanding in Florida for jungle warfare, where every now and then a trainee would jump into a fox hole with snakes, jump out and get shot by live fire.

The one good thing to come out of World War II (except possibly the invention of penicillin and radar) was my father's exposure to commercial design and Italian art and culture. He was befriended by an officer with a commercial art background and put to work designing visual training aids such as drawings of weapons and compasses. He shipped out as an infantry replacement to Italy and landed after the Anzio fiasco in late 1944. Assignment to the replacement depot or "ReppleDepple" was the kiss of death. Infantry replacements had a short life expectancy and were simply fed into the line as cannon fodder. The only book available to read on the transport ship was the Bible, so he read both Testaments during the three-week voyage. That was a timely introduction to the biblical themes that are the subject of so many Renaissance paintings and opera librettos. In Italy, he went through basic training again and once thought he had been blinded when the explosions covered his glasses in mud. He was fully trained on the Army's standard infantry weapons, including M-1 rifle, Browning Automatic Rifle and mortar. I think I heard him say that he was a sharpshooter, which makes sense because of his good hand-eye coordination. They made the short guys carry the heavy weapons, like BARs and mortar base plates and tubes, so that the tall guys wouldn't hurt their backs. He developed an enduring resentment of society's prejudice against short people. (A favorite joke was "When do you serve the shrimp? Last.") When on leave, he would go into Rome to see the museums, cultural sites and opera with a group of similarly high-minded soldiers. They were armed with cigarettes, condoms and candy. Just before his unit was sent North to attack the German's fortified Gothic Line, an officer saw the Life magazine page, took pity, and transferred him into the sign shop; signage was needed to mark the Italian roads. He told me that some of the men he served with are still in Italy; that is, they died in action. After the war ended, he remained in Italy with the Army of Occupation through 1946 and moved up north around Pisa, I believe. He supervised German POWs in the sign-shop. They got along. One of them had been a graphic designer with UFA, the German film company, so he continued to learn—which is an underlying theme of his life. It was a wild time, right out of Catch-22. There were shooting fights with the Mafia over the surplus equipment that lined the roads. One GI shot himself in the head rather than be shipped home with advanced syphilis. My father helped clean up the blood and hide the weapons. Immediately after the war ended in May 1945, he hopped a ride on a transport plane and flew over the Apennines to Venice. That was his first ride in an airplane and in a gondola. He thinks he recognized Bernard Berenson leading a tour in the Museo Correr on St. Marks Place. While he was in Italy he saw a lot of art—the Sistine Chapel was empty and they would drive to Florence to pick up the mail from Fifth Army HQ in the Pitti Palace. Throughout his time in the Army he did a series of sketches and water colors illustrating his experience. These remain fresh, fascinating and technically advanced. At the Soames House in London, I saw a series of Piranesi prints of the Temple at Paestum depicting three lines of columns in perfect perspective and receding size. One of my father's war-time watercolors, a view of tents, a road and barbed wire in three receding lines, achieves the same effect, although done freehand and without mechanical aids like grids to the vanishing point or the camera oscura.

Back in Pittsburgh, he resumed art classes at Carnegie Tech. His friend, and future wife, Dorothy Cantor, introduced him to her friend, Eleanor Simon, who introduced them to their friend, Andy Warhola. Warhola was dyslexic and Eleanor had helped coach him through high school and then

into college. The story goes that Warhola asked my dad “How does it feel to be famous?” to which he answered, “It only lasted about five minutes.” My mother said that Warhol was extremely talented, with a gift for design and an easy stroke. My father said that it was incomprehensible—then and now—that, together with Picasso, Warhol would become the most important figure in 20th century painting. With the approval of Warhol’s brothers, they moved to New York and roomed together on the Lower East Side. They ate at Ratners Deli which featured complimentary crackers and pickles where Warhol favored the fruit soup. With introductions from their friend and my godfather George Klauber, Warhola showed his portfolio around New York in the heat of summer staying cool in a white corduroy suit. He was hired immediately and became New York’s most successful graphic designer. With the help of savvy advisors, he invested the money he made from magazine covers and department store windows in real estate, including the Factory and the Montauk estate. He retired from commercial work and with coaching from Henry Geldzahler, the Met curator, went into edgy and provocative subject matter—electric chairs, car crashes and impaled bodies—and then celebrity portraits in prints and multiples—Chairman Mao, Mohammed Ali, Tom Seaver, Jackie Onassis, Marilyn Monroe. He got a nose job and a platinum wig, changed his name to Warhol, and became the center of his own entourage and an extended circle of celebrities and acolytes. His subject matter, style, media and lifestyle were the polar opposite of my father’s. They were the yin and yang of 20th century American painting. Byron Kim called them the Odd Couple. Byron was one of a long line of studio assistants who worked for my father, most of whom, including Byron, went on to have careers as visual artists, some quite successful. When I was a teenager, Sante D’Orazio pointed to something in the studio and said that “a curved line is always more interesting than a straight line.” Which was prescient because Sandy went on to become a leading fashion photographer. Back on the Lower East Side, the lady who ran a dance studio next door encouraged Warhol to move out because my father was holding him back. Which was probably true. They lost touch but years later met on the street. Andy pulled up his shirt and showed off the scar from the gunshot wounds inflicted by Valerie Solanas during her failed assassination attempt. My father pulled up his shirt and showed off his scars from his latest hernia or gall bladder operation. He threw out his back plastering the walls of his brownstone on 88th Street, paid for with bartered artwork while still a tenement occupied by multiple families.

For a number of years my mother was easily the most developed and polished artist of the three. Which is saying quite a lot. But after I was born in 1957, she stopped. I think she like being a mother, and frankly there probably wasn’t enough room under one roof for two highly talented, ambitious artists. My mom confided to me that she “stopped because it came too easily.” In other words, she had talent in abundance but lacked the internal compulsion to wake up every morning and struggle to make great art. My father didn’t have that problem. Every day was a challenge either to compose the painting in its early stages or to execute and complete the work in painstaking, minute detail.

My father lacked Warhol’s charisma and his career as a commercial artist wasn’t as successful. His first portfolio included a complicated but ill-advised illustrated history of the Constitution, which baffled prospective employers and raised political suspicions in the McCarthy Era. He ended up working for a dollar an hour for Ladislav Sutnar, a Czech-born expatriate graphic designer who arrived in the US as a refugee in 1939. Sutnar was an important figure in the Czech Bauhaus movement. They did catalogues of plumbing fixtures for a living. But there was also an

important project for Buckminster Fuller, Transport, which was a rush job that my father and Sutnar produced featuring Fuller's futuristic visions for roads, cars, airplanes and spaceships. Fuller complimented my father's work. Sutnar eventually offered my father a partnership but he declined feeling that Sutnar really needed a business getter. After seven years the relationship had frayed and my father took a job with Life Magazine editing photograph layouts. This got him into cropping photos and laying out the page. More graphic design, more learning, more practical experience composing images within a rectangle. There was an exciting night as the staff followed Fidel Castro's capture of Havana and the fall of the Batista regime.

Sutnar had pushed my father to get a graduate degree in art history, observing that most American artists seemed to lack a working knowledge of art history, which is probably still true. He applied for the Master's program at the NYU Institute of Fine Arts, which then and now is one of the preeminent graduate schools for art history, with a nod to my daughter's alma mater, The Courtauld Institute in London. My father took advantage of the GI Bill, which paid the veterans' tuition, and was admitted to the Institute. Alvin Kernan called the GI Bill the most enlightened act of generosity a nation has ever made to its veterans. In essence, American decided to invest in itself and was handsomely repaid by The Greatest Generation, which led a decades-long post-war economic boom. Keernan was much like my father. He grew up on a ranch in Wyoming during the Depression where his mother committed suicide out of despair. He served on the USS Enterprise at the Battle of Midway in June 1942 and was on the USS Hornet when she was sunk by the Japanese in October 1942. He took advantage of the GI Bill to attend Columbia, Williams, Oxford and Yale and went on to become professor of English emeritus, a Shakespearean scholar, and dean of the graduate school at Princeton. H.C. Westermann, an edgy American sculptor, likewise served aboard USS Franklin when she was hit by a Japanese kamikaze off the coast of Japan in March 1945, burned and lost 800 men. Westermann reflected the trauma in his drawings and artworks, which I got to see at the home of Hank and Gilda Buchbinder in Chicago; they are great collectors and old family friends. Apologies for the digression, which is a long way of saying that my father was smart to advantage of the GI Bill and lucky he kept that page from Life Magazine. It may have saved his life.

In the 1950's the faculty at the Institute was heavily populated by a number of important first-generation European art historians, who like Sutnar were refugees from the Nazis. At that time, art history was a new and emerging discipline. His faculty advisor was Horst W. Janson, a student of Erwin Panofsky in Hamburg, who likewise emigrated and taught at the Institute. Janson was an important scholar of Renaissance painting and 19th century sculpture. In 1962, he published the first comprehensive survey of art titled The History of Art. At the Institute, my father had to teach himself how to read and write because he had previously gotten by with A's in studio art. At the Institute he got C's in art history before he learned to tape the photos on the wall and memorize the art historical timeline. He was politely asked to discontinue his studies of the German language but he learned enough French to read the art reviews in French newspapers that were footnoted in his master's thesis on Picabia and Duchamps. This involved an examination of the origin and theoretical underpinnings of modern art and gave him insight into how and why artists choose their subject matter, medium and style. Picabia and certain of his contemporaries were highly political. My father decided that, based on their own statements, they wanted to destroy society. At MOMA's Picabia retrospective in 2016, the curators deemphasized the artists' statement of intention and focused more on the work and less on what

the artists said about it. Different approaches to art history. For decades his thesis was one of the few authoritative reference works on Picabia and was heavily consulted. It is about to be published under the title, "Picabia Inside Out." One of the professors at the Institute pressed him to get a doctorate and become an art historian. Again, he declined. He wanted to be a painter.

He left Life Magazine after one year to study in Rome on a Fulbright Scholarship, just after I was born in 1957. Here he reacquainted himself with Italian landscape painting, and his style and approach to painting began to take shape, very painterly and dense at first. He also developed what became a life-long addiction to collecting, which began with classical antiquities. He used to wait until the check for his monthly Fulbright stipend arrived in the mail then ran down to the atelier of Signor Medici, who was father of the now notorious antiquities looter and smuggler Giacomo Medici. Medici The Elder had a lot of stuff and let my father pay in installments, like a good crack dealer. At one point my father and a friend climbed into an Etruscan tomb but decided not to excavate, discretion being the better part of valor. At some point more recently, one of the Medici sons was murdered.

When he returned to New York, the art scene had changed. Abstract Expressionism was out and other things were in, such as Pop, Minimalism and Conceptual art. The painting scene in New York was a hot bed and a hot mess. There were shouting matches between the "Hearts" and the "Minds." My dad got pegged as one of the Minds. He made a pact with another artist to paint straight and avoid both easy subject matter—such as sex, politics, sensationalism and celebrity—and technique that conveyed emotion, such as heavy impasto, moody lighting, and burnished or air-brushed portraits. Which is exactly what went on to dominate the art market—what he called the "cartoony stuff" and "design." He painted with de Kooning, who he found passed out and asleep on the stairs of his gallery. Jackson Pollock was also a heavy drinker whose drinking seemed to fuel his intense action painting. They were bad career models. My father was a responsible guy with a job, a growing family and a burgeoning career as a painter, academic and writer. And an increasing self-confidence in his abilities and judgment. On one occasion, he and other painters curated their own exhibition. One of the critics resented the presumption of artists who could not be trusted to understand or interpret their own work. My father in turn resented the presumption of the critic who assumed that he necessarily knew more than the artists. As Andre Emmerich, the great art dealer and connoisseur, told me, "Your father is a very sophisticated man." Emmerich had a very deep, rich voice that I can't imitate.

I think it was Blake Gopnik who wrote that to understand his art you have to start with the Renaissance and then consider the other influences and innovations. That sounds about right. He could execute a large-scale figurative painting with the confidence and virtuosity of a Renaissance Master. Which is the path he chose. I think he came back to New York and filtered through the noise, the shouting and the egos, evaluated the competing theories, and returned to the Renaissance as his touchstone. In his studio he always kept a copy of Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation of Christ* handy in a plastic sleeve. That painting is a study in disinterest and dispassion, depicting three merchants on the right side of the panel indifferent to the flagellation of Christ on the left. So every day, while my father worked, the Old Man, Piero, was looking over his shoulder, setting the bar and serving as a constant reminder of how high it lay. I told my father that he had earned a chapter or at least a long footnote in the revised edition of Vasari's

Lives of the Artists. He said “I’ll take it.” Of course, Vasari might have written something snarky, like his first chapter on Paolo Uccello, but at least he would be in the book.

He started teaching at Pratt Institute from 1959 to 1963 and in 1962 was a visiting critic at Yale. He came up for the department chairmanship at Yale and got an offer letter. But his candidacy elicited unexpected but intense opposition from another faculty member and someone else got the job. But he was simultaneously negotiating for a position at Brooklyn College, where he had a friend and patron, Morris Dorsky. They said “Philip, we like your resume. In addition to teaching studio art, you’ve got experience in commercial art and graphic design, a Master’s in art history, you’ve published articles, and exhibited your own work. If you can show us that you have an offer, we’ll match Yale’s salary.” So he pulled out the offer letter from Yale and got the job at Brooklyn.

While teaching he evolved a system of studio art education that required the students to experience the four methods of depicting an image on a flat surface: Egyptian hieroglyphics; three-dimensional perspective; cubism; and Japanese prints. At one point, he suggested that the faculty at the Brooklyn College Art Department meet to consider developing a standard curriculum for teaching studio art. On the theory that no good-deed goes unpunished, that elicited a storm of protest from Louise Bourgeois who resented and rejected the notion and essentially put him on public trial for holding retrograde, authoritarian views about art education. He survived the spat, somewhat chastened and learned a lesson about how delicate and brittle art world politics can be. This recalls the aphorism that the intensity of academic disputes increases in inverse proportion to their importance. When Mark Rothko resigned, Morris Dorsky gave him tenure “because he has kids.” He continued to teach until 1988 when he took early retirement as Distinguished Professor Emeritus. He complained that they bilked him of a year of pension. I can only assume that at some point the Department finally implemented a standard curriculum. After that, my parents moved into their loft on West 36th Street and my father focused solely on painting from models in his studio until the Covid pandemic in Spring 2020. During the pandemic, he continued his extraordinary productivity and produced a series of several dozen still-life watercolors of the toys and artifacts in his personal collection, working on two or three at once during the week in New York and on weekends in New Jersey. These are joyful, colorful and irresistible. You want Pop Art? How about Micky Mouse, Godzilla and King Kong? Without nudes and the art world baggage they carry, these late watercolors are a joyful, final expression of a great talent doing what he does best—rendering complicated compositions with grace, humor, vivid color and virtuoso technique. Robert Simon, the important Old Master dealer, thought they were brilliant. He had previously thought my father’s work was cold. My father completed these after recovering from a series of strokes suffered at 95 while in Paris. I think of Oscar Peterson, the great jazz pianist, who was better towards the end of his life playing with one hand than others were with two. The Army works and the late watercolors make fascinating bookends to the main body of his oeuvre and are equally important and informative.

A friend told him, “Philip, you’ve managed to construct your life and live exactly as you wanted to.” That’s also about right. After he retired from teaching in 1988, he had 34 years to paint on his own schedule. He lead an active social life among a circle of friends that included a number of distinguished academics, critics, gallerists, art dealers and artists. He was President of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a member of the Century Club since the 1980s. As a

visual artist he managed to pay full tuition for three children through prep school, college and grad school. Which is mind-boggling. He had a beach house with boats in Saltaire, Fire Island and then a lake house in New Jersey. He continued to exhibit until this past summer, when the late watercolors went to Santa Fe. I don't think my father died with any significant regrets. Well, that's not quite true. He was in Paris to celebrate his 95th birthday with an opening at Galerie Templon. The problem is that Templon has two galleries in Paris and Kehinde Wiley was having an exhibition in the other gallery. Wiley got all the attention. That's the reality of the art market, which can seem like a giant wheel of fortune. If you visit Frederick Church's Olana, you will see that his personal taste ran to old brown paintings, which weren't really very good. He continued painting his own landscapes even as Impressionism was dominating in France. My father curated a show at the American Academy of Eugene Speicher, a leading American painter 100 years ago whose work is virtually forgotten today. My father assumed that his work would die with him. I hope he was wrong.

Figurative painting remains alive and is making a come-back on the market. But between my father and his figurative peers--Lucien Freud, Alice Neel, Chuck Close, Alex Katz and maybe David Hockney-- there's no direct comparison, except perhaps for Freud, who takes a different approach.

So Philip is now standing in front of the Pearly Gates and the Chairman of the Admissions Committee is looking up over his glasses. "Philip, we love your resume. You taught studio art, you've got experience in commercial art and graphic design, you wrote an important Master's thesis, published articles, have a lengthy exhibition history in galleries and extensive museum representation at home and abroad and served as President of the American Academy. You're in. But listen, on the side, some of the members said that they weren't too crazy about their portraits and they've asked me to see if you can lighten up a little next time."

In Memoriam.

Philip Pearlstein, May 24, 1924 -- December 17, 2022.