

Philip Pearlstein: A Giant of New Realism

by Josep Segú

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I visited Philip Pearlstein at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York a couple of months ago. He had entered for a rib fracture. Three mornings of calm, pleasant and inspiring dialogue with one of the great contemporary painters. We went through detail about his personal life and his pictorial career.

One of the things he remembered ironically was the meteoric ascension of his friend Andrew Warhola to the heavens of fame (Andy Warhol since he stepped on New York). Not even two months after that three youths from Pittsburgh —Philip, Dorothy Cantor and the shy and dyslexic Andy— shared a flat, that the latter was already flying to the star. Philip Pearlstein's career, however, had a less strident evolution than his partner Warhol's POP ART.

Mobilized in Italy during World War II, from 1943 to 1946, he never entered combat. - I drew a lot, he said. Explanatory catalogues on the composition and assembly of weapons. I had the opportunity to contemplate the great Florentine murals of Masaccio in Santa Maria del Carmine and the work of the Italian Renaissance giants. And he smiled at remembrance of contemplation.

He worked as a graphic designer for Life Magazine for several years. He also drew catalogues of plumbing artifacts for Ladislav Sutnar. At the same time, he successfully began his first stage of abstract painting, following the model of Willem De Kooning.

In the mid-1950s he received his doctorate from New York University, with a thesis on the Dadaist movement, focusing on Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp. During these years he began to paint first plans of rock formations between abstraction and figuration. Returning from a Fulbright Fellowship in Italia (1958), he began his teaching career at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, continued teaching at other universities and closed his career as a professor at Brooklyn College (1963–88).

While trying to explain to his students the perspective of an image, he realized that the most exciting challenge for a painter is the representation of the three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface. From that moment, he faced flat painting, changing point of view, emotional brushwork and all the clichés and dogmas of faith of 20th century abstract and conceptual modernity.

From 1961, the nude body became the center of his artistic work. He represented the human figure based on the observation of the model itself, breaking all the composition and beauty codes imposed by the 19th century academy. The nude figures putting in uncomfortable poses, the compositions of headless bodies, with arms carved by Pearlstein's wrist or elbow, became, in the late 1960s, one of the milestones of the new American realism.

In 1992-3, Philip Pearlstein and his wife Dorothy Cantor took me for a year in their workshop-home at the New York Hell's Kitchen. Each year he chose two or three young artists from American universities and around the world.

His method of working was very similar to shooting a motionless film. He organized two or three sets, filled with ostriches, horses, rabbits or wooden ducks, plastic figures, kimonos, kilims, etc. He then placed one or two models,

usually female, Desiree and Angela, some also male, James. He made marks on the floor and chairs to remember the posture for weeks or months. He illuminated the scene with fluorescent lights that caused characteristic shadows. Eventually he chose the point of view and placed the easel, the students did the same with ours.

He began to draw with a charcoal from the part of anatomy that was of most interest to him and continued the figure until the fabric was finished. This peculiar process is the reason that parts of the body are cut off and outside the painting. Once he had completed a simple drawing, he began to paint in oil or watercolour, carefully observing the shape and color of fingers, ankles, knees...

He was working on two or three pictures at the same time and each morning he would agree with the models which of the compositions we would tackle during the day. A particular talent and exhaustive working hours, with brief stops to rest the musculature, explain the result.

Philip Pearlstein observed the human body stripped of narrative meanings, away from pornography and any symbolism. Even his portraits follow this philosophy. He gradually incorporated objects from the collection of art and crafts into his compositions.

He defended new realism in articles in ARTnews, Art in America, The New York Times, Paris Review and in recognized periodicals. His paintings can be seen in over seventy major museums. The MOMA, the Metropolitan Museum of New York, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Berlin Nationalgalerie in Germany are among the most notable. The new figures of Eric Fischl, William Beckman Janet Fish flourished under his protective influence.

Since the second half of the 20th century, American art has replaced French art in prestige, as a century earlier the latter had usurped the throne in Italian art. The new Catalan, Chinese, French, Italian realisms are difficult to explain without the inputs coming from the United States.

Our friendship has remained constant and close for decades. - You will live over 100 years, like your father! - My father was 99 and he was stronger than me, he replied.

On Saturday, 17 December, her daughter Ellen Pearlstein informed me of the death of Philip, my teacher. He was 98. A placid transfer, she told me.

The echoes of figures such as Philip Pearlstein, Chuck Close, Alice Neel, Alex Katz and Richard Estes have stimulated artists from this turn of the century around the globe in the resumption of figuration.