

Philip and Me

As I recall how Philip Pearlstein begins an art work, I am still astonished at the matter-of-factness. There are the models, naked. There is the stuff: perhaps a Navajo rug, some furniture to sit on or lean against, and antiques (There seems to be a lot more stuff lately.). Great classical music is playing (Philip honors requests. I was partial to Mahler, Shostakovich, Thompson and Glenn Gould's Bach.). There is often an assistant, and, of course, Philip. So, back to how he starts. You have to understand it often takes Philip months to complete a work, sometimes over a year. Then one day it's finished. No fanfare, not a lot of anticipation. Done. Then he will ask the models to change poses and ask the assistant to switch this rug with another, throw in these objects, move things around a bit, cue the music and then start to draw. I don't remember him agonizing or changing his mind. After months of observing one situation, he commits to another in just a few minutes, then, simply, back to work.

Philip's daughter Julia set me up as an assistant in his studio just as we graduated from college in 1983. Apparently, she thought I resembled him in some way, and I think Julia, wise and kind, had a better understanding of what I was in for, and

maybe she was setting me up with my own model. I wasn't yet sure I wanted to be an artist, but it was perfect for me to be exposed right away to Philip, who dispelled any overly romantic notions I might have had about what it would be like. Back then Philip worked five days a week, more than full time. I'd get to the studio early and set up the models and all the stuff. At lunchtime the models would leave and Philip would have lunch, but he would also often have someone sit for a watercolor portrait. After lunch, another model or pair of models would come in, and I'd set up a different scenario, which Philip would work on until dinner. But before I left for the day, I would arrange yet a third scene, which Philip would observe until it was time to go to sleep. At the time the studio was a floor in the Upper West Side brownstone where he and his wife Dorothy lived. It was an incredibly efficient arrangement, and it was not a punishing schedule only because Philip was doing exactly what he loves to do, which, I came to realize, is part of the definition of an artist.

Every Sunday I get up and make a painting of the sky. I've done this since January 7, 2001, and I don't know how I found the discipline to do it all this time except that much of what I do might stem from those few short months with Philip in

1983. I think my relationship to painting has a lot to do with Philip. Back then with Schnabel and Salle and others, painting was having a resurgence. I noted that this kind of work had nothing to do with Pearlstein's, but Philip ascribes to a kind of rising tide notion of the art world. What's good for painting is good for me. But more importantly I think I understood a kind of stubbornness and contrariness, that serves Philip well, and with which I identify. Philip's early work reflected the post New York School situation he found when he moved to New York. He went through a gushy response to Abstract Expressionism and even a brief encounter with Pop. I always wondered what Philip really thought of Andy Warhol. The odd couple moved together to New York after graduating from Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh, where they both grew up. Was it hard for Philip to watch Andy and all that attention? I don't think so. I think he celebrated it in his quiet way. I have my own Andy in Glenn Ligon. Eventually, Philip landed on a mode of representational painting that had its moment in the limelight but didn't sustain that popularity very long. But I think he stuck with it because it was the perfect vehicle to sustain a challenge to paint increasingly complex pictures with meanings that, on the one hand, were very straightforward and, on the other hand, were culturally ambiguous and

could provoke some controversy. By insisting on exploring in a very tight area that would seem to be squeezed dry of meaning, he found subject matter to challenge his eye and his mind for a lifetime.

But there was a subtler point about art making that I learned by observing Philip which was that it didn't require belief or any kind of magical thinking - keen observation would do. And strong, keen, hard looking is almost better than anything. This was such a relief to me especially because I was coming from a background that had little art, and if I was sure of anything, it was that I didn't have anything to believe in except, maybe, my self (sometimes) and the people I felt strongly about. A few years later I discovered Reinhardt, another non-believer. And what a relief that was. Just now, the perverse vision pairing Pearlstein and Reinhardt passes through my mind. It makes sense to me. So, did I start making paintings of people's skin color in the early '90s in relation to exposure to a painter painting skin in such a matter-of-fact way in the early '80s? I have no idea. Did Lisa and I raise three kids in a brownstone because of Dorothy and Philip? Not really. But maybe, sort of. I think Julia was right. It has to do with affinities.

Philip is methodical and responds to surprises or emergencies with a deadpan, "Oh." This is something to which I aspire because I think it comes from a wise understanding of the immediate in relation to the greater whole. For Philip beginning and finishing are the same because the whole world is right there whether it's represented by a friend sitting for hours over the course of many lunchtimes, or a landscape of ancient ruins or by the strange relationship between human bodies and their things. The search for truth doesn't require a lot of set up. You can always start right in front of your eyes.

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