

PHILIP PEARLSTEIN

Paintings and Watercolors 1990 - 2007



OCTOBER 16 - DECEMBER 8, 2007

University Art Gallery, Staller Center for the Arts, Stony Brook University

An Interview with Philip Pearlstein

by Harry J. Weil (July 2007)

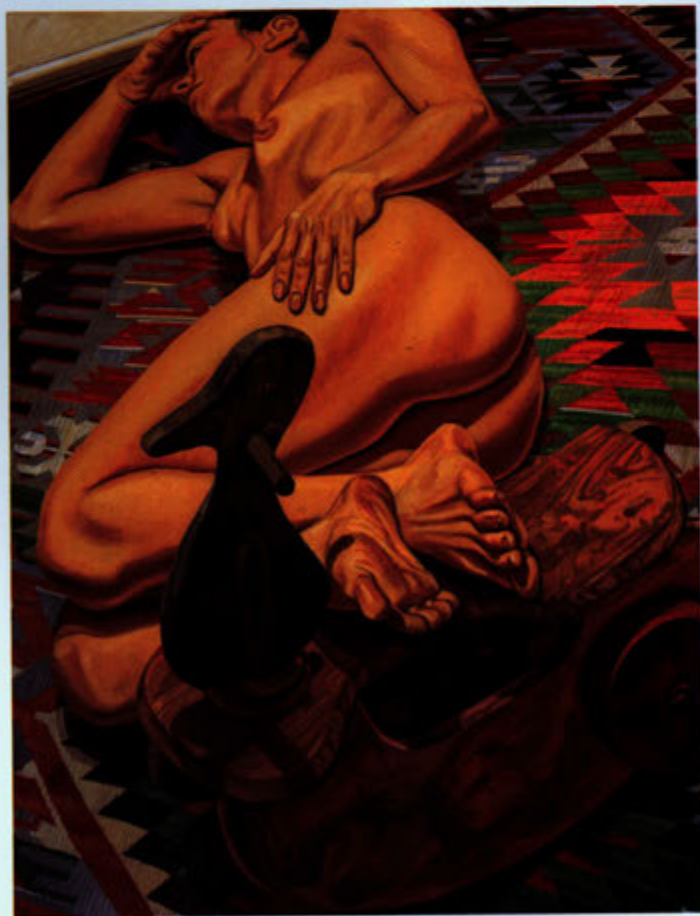
HW: Tell me about your early career and influences.

PP: The work of the first part of my exhibition career was abstract but based on landscape ideas. A lot of those early paintings were studies of rocks, and it's those same rocks you see around my studio today. I was very influenced by Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston, and Franz Kline. At that time I was part of the 10th Street Gallery, The Tanager, which became a social center. Everyone lived around there. De Kooning's studio was in the building next door and Guston's was around the corner. Kline was down the block. A lot of people dropped in and would sit for a while and talk. It was very casual. There was no sense of history in the making. We were just there and creating work. During part of that time, I was working at *Life* magazine, and before that I worked some eight years as an assistant to a graphic designer. These were full-time jobs. I needed a steady income for my family.

HW: You were stationed in Italy during World War II and later returned to Rome as a Fulbright scholar. What impact did these experiences have on your career?

PP: When I returned to Rome on the Fulbright Grant, I had had a lot of drafting experience as an assistant to a graphic designer. I used those skills to draw the ruins of Rome. I had no stylistic preconception. I was interested in the ancient Roman painters, like those who had worked in Pompeii and Herculaneum. If there was any influence, it

came from them. There was such an extensive collection of ancient work to explore in Italy with some amazing museum collections. You can see where artists like Poussin and Ingres came from, as they had studied the work of these ancient artists. Instead of studying the late Renaissance or 18th or 19th century art, I fell in love with the ancients. Once I realized Ingres had looked at another source, I went to the source. I never tried to imitate but instead looked and tried to figure out what they did.



Model with Duck Kiddy Car on Kilim Rug, 2005
Oil on canvas, 48 x 36"

HW: What triggered the switch from painting landscapes to painting human models?

PP: While I was in Rome I got hired to teach at Pratt Institute, and I joined the faculty when I returned. Mercedes Matter, who was a member of the faculty, organized a drawing group that met every Sunday night in her studio. She was enthusiastic about drawing from the model. There were a good number of us there, and we all drew in our own style. There was no discussion. The group included Philip Guston, George McNeil, and Jack Tworikov, and it kept growing and changing over time. Matter had a collection of fabrics that the models would pose with. She encouraged them to pose casually and not take poses that echoed classical paintings or made historical references.

I kept drawing from the model the exact same way I drew the ruins. It was empirical. I had taken anatomy courses in undergraduate art school, but they were more concerned with what was inside the body, muscles and bones, not so much with the surface. Anatomy as a subject has nothing to do with what you see, just the same way that what you see has nothing to do with diagrams in anatomy books. I became fascinated with the surface of the model. I immediately saw a connection between the models and my rocks. And that was how I began to approach the figure. It's direct portraiture, in a manner of speaking.

I also discovered that you don't have to concentrate on the whole figure. If things go off the page, the figure looks larger. I eventually hired models to come to my own studio. And I could get close to them and have them fill my entire vision. I would paint them with parts going off the canvas. It wasn't cropping. It was just the opposite. The



Study for Model with Butterfly Kite, 2007
Watercolor, 30 x 22½"

forms broke off naturally at the edges of the canvas, and I accepted what happened. For me, it was a breakthrough. I know other people have done it, but it was great to not have the whole figure crammed in there.

I had a show in London in 1969, and immediately the critics said: "Who needs this stuff? We have Lucien Freud." I didn't know who he was at this point. He was doing his early canvases that were quite small. The English critics were very unfriendly, to say the least. Alex Katz had a show around the same time as mine, and we both got impolite reviews. They said, "Who needs this second American invasion?" They didn't want our type of realism, and, as they already had the invasion of Abstract Expressionism, they weren't going to buy this "New Realism."

HW: Visually, what are you looking for in the dynamics of your painting?

PP: The interaction of forms and the space they move in—the way life is suggested by that. When I first had models come to my studio, the floodlights made a tremendous difference. In art schools light is usually so diffused. Floodlights make everything sharp, and the shadows become part of the visual experience. I didn't fight them. I accepted them. What shadows do over the forms I find fascinating. Once I felt committed to the subject matter of models in the studio, I would work with ordinary people who were willing to model for me. There wasn't going to be any psychological overtones, pseudo-psychiatric themes or narratives. I wasn't interested in storytelling. I had an MA in Art History and studied at the Institute of Fine Arts at the time Irwin Panofsky was at his greatest influence. All the emphasis was on meaning, symbolism, iconography. I wrote my thesis on Francis

Picabia and Marcel Duchamp—specifically, their Dada period, the ten-year period when they were concerned with movement and used diagrams of machine parts. I felt related to their work as they were using the kind of diagrams from industrial catalogs that I was then drafting when I worked as an assistant to the graphic designer, Ladislav Sutnar. I worked mostly on plumbing catalogues for the building trade. The diagrams that Picabia and Duchamp worked with were intended by them to mean something. They were playing around with them, giving them personifications. It was exciting trying to figure those things out.

HW: How do you choose the objects in your painting? Are you looking for something in particular?

PP: I collect objects, often without intending to use them in my work. I started accumulating so much, and it has just exploded all over my work space. A lot of the time the groupings are accidental. Like that over there [*points to the other side of the studio*] will be the basis of a new painting. At first I just worked with rugs and chairs in my paintings. When I moved into a larger space, I began adding these objects into the work. I like to use objects that suggest something compositionally.

I am also fascinated by whirligigs that have all this action happening in them. They are strictly an American phenomenon. The rest of the world didn't come up with them. America may have been less sophisticated than Europe, but you see a lot of interesting mechanized objects that became popular in this country in the 19th century. I think that is really fascinating—and that is as far as I would go with symbolism. [*laughs*]



Two Female Nudes and Mickey Mouse, 2001
Oil on canvas, 60 x 60"



Model on Cast Iron Bed with Weathervane Airplane #2, 2005
Oil on canvas, 36 x 48"

New York is one big flea-market. And there are a lot of antique shops. I collect everything. I'm attracted to things that decorators aren't interested in. I had one dealer who referred to this stuff as "American junk." I find them intriguing as sculptures and as works of art.

HW: How do you feel about being labeled as a realist artist?

PP: I am a realist in as much as I paint bits of the world around me. Realism used to have political overtones, and in that traditional sense I am not a realist. I am not trying to illustrate social issues. I think for a lot of the people who are using conceptual approaches to their art, the work itself doesn't ultimately convey the message they are involved in. It becomes a series of interesting statements that don't lead anywhere. So right now I can't comment on the Iraq war or our current president. Hopefully they are just passing in the wind. What young artists need is a sense of art history. In my case it made a tremendous difference. Art history gives you a vocabulary. You may react against past art, but you need to know it.

HW: How do you respond to the ongoing talk about "the end of art"?

PP: This business of art as coming to an end has always been around. The reason I become belligerent about the way I work is that while I was reading for my thesis, I came across a lot of early modern theory on how photography will make painting obsolete. At one point I wanted to make the camera obsolete, thinking that I could possibly see better than the camera. Recently cameras have become much better than they used to be. So I've always been aware of the competition with photography. Photography has changed so much more than painting has over the past 20 years.

What has happened is that philosophy departments in universities have had a big influence on the art departments. A lot of the art now becomes verbal, and you have to be tuned into the language or you don't get it. I walked through the Armory Show on the piers last spring, and out of the hundreds of works shown, I could relate to at most ten. I look at it as some kind of theater. I don't understand a lot of it. I can understand some in terms of what it means, but I see it as a form of theater. At this point I feel unrelated to most contemporary art.

HW: How do you want to be remembered a hundred years from now in university courses and museum exhibitions?

PP: I just hope to be remembered.

STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY



CENTER FOR THE ARTS

STONY
BROOK
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ARTIST'S LECTURE

Wednesday, October 24, 1:00 pm

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to Harry J. Weil for co-curating this exhibition and interviewing Philip Pearlstein for this publication. Thanks also to Betty Cuningham, Diana Erdos, Director, and Aimée McElroy, Registrar, of the Betty Cuningham Gallery in New York City for their generosity and assistance with the organization of this exhibition. Special thanks are extended to Fred Badalamenti for introducing me to his friend and colleague, Philip Pearlstein.

The 2007-2008 University Art Gallery exhibition schedule is made possible by a generous donation from the Paul W. Zuccaire Foundation. Additional funding for this exhibition has been provided by the Suffolk County Department of Economic Development & Workforce Housing, The Cowles Charitable Trust, and the Friends of Staller Center. We are extremely grateful to our sponsors for helping us present this wonderful exhibition to our students and faculty as well as to the local and regional community.

I would also like to express my appreciation to members of the Staller Center for the Arts staff: Fumito Hiraoka, Pat Moran, Pete Pantaleo, and Christian Routh, for exhibition assistance; Amy Marinelli and Harry J. Weil, Curatorial Assistants; Jillian Kehoe, Jumi Kim, Joseph Motroni, Kerry O'Connor, and Derrick Tan, Gallery Interns; Allison Conley and Kabir Dehqanzada, Gallery Assistants; Liz Silver, Staller Center Production Manager, Liz Lamendola, Technical Director, and the Staller Center Technical Crew for exhibition lighting; Amanda Meyers, Staller Center Director of Advancement, for Gallery fundraising; and Barbara Schimmenti, Gallery Secretary.

Most of all, I want to thank Philip Pearlstein for sharing his work with the Stony Brook community.

Rhonda Cooper
Gallery Director

Catalogue design: Karsten Grumstrup

©2007 University Art Gallery, Stony Brook University

University Art Gallery
Staller Center for the Arts, Stony Brook University
Stony Brook, New York 11794-5425

Tel: 631.632.7240 Fax: 631.632.1976
www.stallercenter.com

Cover Image:
Model on Kiddie Car Tractor, 2002
Watercolor, 60 x 40"