



ArtSeen

February 3rd, 2016

Pearlstein, Warhol, Cantor: From Carnegie Tech to New York

by Ed Breslin

BETTY CUNINGHAM GALLERY | DECEMBER 3, 2015 – MARCH 5, 2016

Pearlstein, Warhol, Cantor: From Carnegie Tech to New York,—featuring the work of three provocative artists—is as informative as it is pleasurable. As you enter the gallery you are faced with their ensemble photograph, taken on the front lawn of Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Tech in the late 1940s, the beginning of their lifelong friendship.

Lining the wall in front of this photograph are early Pearlstein paintings: *American Eagle*, *Dollar Sign*, *Portrait of Andy Warhol* (a facsimile; the original is in the Whitney), *Portrait of Dorothy*, and *I Had Blue Eyes*, a Pearlstein self-portrait; all dated 1949 – 50. They show the importance of Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism on Pearlstein, dominant influences in his formative years that he later assimilated and abandoned in favor of writing his own pictorial grammar and defining his own painterly idiom.

On the opposite wall, at the back, you will find a reproduction of Pearlstein’s *Superman* (1952)—a precursor of Pop, like *American Eagle* and *Dollar Sign*, which may have served as early sources of inspiration for Warhol. Next to *Superman* is Pearlstein’s *Merry-Go-Round*, a painting that won him honors in a scholastic contest, was displayed in the Met, and was reproduced in color in *Life* magazine in 1941. When Warhol met Pearlstein these accolades prompted him to ask, “How does it feel to be famous?” Pearlstein quipped, “It only lasted five minutes.”



Dorothy Cantor, *Curvements*, 1953. Oil on canvas, 37 × 41 1/4 inches. Courtesy Betty Cuningham Gallery.

Pearlstein served as a role model and mentor to Warhol, in school and in their early days in New York. Like his early Pop works, Pearlstein's interest in portraiture may have had an influence on Warhol. Pearlstein's care for the young Warhol is apparent in *Art Class* (1946 – 1947) a small painting which shows Eleanor Simon, a friend of Andy's, working in a Carnegie Tech studio class dressed in an orange shirt and Warhol working beside her. Further along, notice Pearlstein's *Seated Figure*, and Warhol's *Male Figure* (1948), the Pearlstein subtly articulated and the Warhol more charged, immediate, and muscular. Note, too, Pearlstein's *Student Work (Human Characteristics as Revealed by Possessions)* (1948 – 1949) and Warhol's *Living Room* (1948); the Pearlstein is diagrammatically composed and tighter, the Warhol looser and more spontaneous.

This wall offers a retrospective on Pearlstein and Warhol in their embryonic years. Don't miss Warhol's *Kids on Swings* (1946), his *Still Life* (1948), and, especially, his jaunty *I Like Dance* (1948). Pearlstein counters with the graphic accuracy of *Street Fight* (1946 – 1947), the sketchy allusiveness of *Bogey Man* (1949), and the clarity of *String Quartet* (1948 – 1949). As Pearlstein has stated, he focuses on process, and so can you in viewing *Picket Fence I* and *Picket Fence III*, the earlier charcoal work delineating the later painted version.

Near the front are two mature portraits by each artist. The Warhol, 1980, is titled *Portrait of Helene Verin*. It highlights his innovative technique of applying acrylic and silkscreen ink on canvas to produce one of his signature portraits with almost religious implications, nearly Byzantine in its iconic connotations. In the same year, Pearlstein painted *Portrait of William*, a detailed, nuanced, colorful depiction of his son. This portrait and the two at the rear, at the head of the iron staircase—one each of the artist's parents—show that Pearlstein's preoccupation with portraiture has been lifelong. These 1946 renditions of his mother and father shun the trendiness of the Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism seen in the portraits of Warhol, Dorothy, and himself encountered up front.



Philip Pearlstein, *Bogey Man*, 1949. Casein on masonite, 26 × 18 inches. Courtesy Betty Cuninghame Gallery.

These six Pearlstein portraits underscore his second major influence: Renaissance painting, its realism, and its dependence on superior draftsmanship. Walk back along this wall and study the two small ink-on-paper sketches titled *Soldiers (Monte Cassino, Italy)* and *Civilians Climbing onto Train (Naples, Italy)*, both drawn by twenty-year-old Sergeant Pearlstein in 1944. Discounting the anachronisms, each might be mistaken for the work of a Renaissance master. Now picture Sergeant Pearlstein, a year later, climbing the scaffolding in the Church of the Carmine in Florence to study

the Masaccios or scaling the pile of rubble in Milan to study, on the one wall left standing after the bombing, perhaps the most famous—if temporary—graffito ever, da Vinci's *Last Supper*.

Behind you on the opposite wall hangs this show's outstanding revelation: the work of Dorothy Cantor, wife of Philip Pearlstein and nurturing friend of Andy Warhol. These descriptions sell her short. In her own right she is a talented artist. Her work confirms a major sensibility, a preternatural gift for draftsmanship, a discerning eye for composition, and a genius for the architectonic arrangement of lines, angles, planes, circles, and negative and positive space, all enhanced by potent shadings of color and light. Her first student painting, *Family Seder* (ca. 1948) evokes the influence of Soutine, but her compositional flair and feel for muted colors predominate.

Her next four paintings, three untitled and the last called *Curvements* (1953), radiate an architectural accuracy vivified by masterful spatial arrangement and compositional integrity, much of it symmetrical, all bolstered by an infusion of subtle but sturdy color. Don't miss her deft sketch titled *Drawing of Andy Warhol I*, and, behind the reception desk, her uncannily delineated subway sketch.

Two further Cantor epiphanies await. The first occurs as you descend the iron staircase to the lower gallery. To the left is her dynamic painting *Tunnel*, an amalgam of surrealist and architectonic elements governed by a color scheme so dense it borders on the mystical. At the foot of the staircase hangs her broody Maine lakescape. At the top is a fretwork of trees and, in the center, a constellation of clouds reflected on the lake's murky surface. Around the corner from the iron staircase, under the setback, hangs another Cantor subway pencil sketch, highly stylized, spatially balanced, and aesthetically buoyant.

The rest of the downstairs gallery is devoted to the mature figure painting of her husband Philip. If you have never seen a Pearlstein painting of nudes in person and up close, you have never seen one. So vibrant are his colors, so riveting his arrangements, so deft his compositions, and so prepossessing and unique are his sensibility and style that you must witness them in person from ten feet or closer. In his youth Pearlstein had one foot in Bauhaus, the other in the Renaissance, and a head enveloped in the contemporary movements of Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. In maturity he outgrew all of these influences but never sacrificed an essential virtue of any. His style is Bauhaus clean and plain, Renaissance rich and realistic, and surrealistically solipsistic and unique.

In this room you realize how his nude bodies are, actually and mysteriously, disembodied. Post-



Andy Warhol, *I Like Dance*, 1948. Oil on masonite, 24 x 24 inches. Courtesy Betty Cunningham Gallery.

Puritan and post-Freudian, they are neutral—as natural and innocent as the toys and decorative rugs or the kimonos and mirrors or Oriental vases or statues surrounding them. Though the anatomy of a Pearlstein nude is as detailed as a coroner’s snapshot or a medical text illustration, the models themselves are nevertheless so stylized and modulated by ambient light and shadow that they function as color swatches, spatial markers, or geometric forms, just as one-dimensionally as they would in an Abstract Expressionist or color-field painting. Because of this inert, neutral quality, Pearlstein’s nudes often have cropped heads or limbs, or exaggerated features, as when a leg or arm is foreshortened or elongated, or a hand or foot is outsized. Pearlstein will even cast Renaissance perspective aside for postmodern purposes that suit his vision.

The settings, the backgrounds, and the objects embellishing the nudes, including the furniture, often impart an element of the surreal to Pearlstein’s figure paintings. Besides the tension created between these representational settings, backgrounds, and objects by their abrupt interface with the abstract bodies—the collaged corpses of the nudes—they also convey a playful and bizarre visual jape, a kind of Dadaesque tomfoolery. But this is all they do and all they are. You can witness this quality in the gallery’s annex next door.

Here are recent paintings of nudes wearing exotic animal heads and masks. These accoutrements need no exegesis. All critics, commentators, scholars, and village explainers can sit Pearlstein out. He paints what he sees and expects you to see only what he paints. That’s it. In this way he is like Stravinsky, who replied to a conductor inquiring how to interpret his score, “My work needs no interpretation. Play it as I wrote it.”

CONTRIBUTOR

Ed Breslin

RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



Pearlstein/Warhol/Cantor: From Pittsburgh to New York

by David Carrier

JUL-AUG 2015 | ARTSEEN

The pleasures and perils of studio visits at provincial art schools are not unfamiliar to us critics. When you see what talented students have learned by imitating faculty artists from a previous generation, you recognize that these young people must move to an art center and radically innovate if they are to find an entry point into the contemporary art world.

IN CONVERSATION



PROMISCUOUS COMPASSION

JOHN GIORNO with Jarrett Earnest

APR 2015 | ART

John Giorno has been a New York icon since he starred in Andy Warhol's *Sleep* in 1963. Since that time he has explored sound, image, performance, and video collages from a poet's perspective.



PHILIP PEARLSTEIN

JUST THE FACTS, 50 Years of Looking and Drawing and Painting

by Robert Berlind

MAR 2014 | ARTSEEN

In the late 1950s, Philip Pearlstein abandoned the expressive painterly language favored by his elders and many of his contemporaries and set out to work directly from observation.



The Second Valerie Solanas Book You Should Read

by T Clutch Fleischmann

MAY 2014 | BOOKS

It's about damn time there's a biography of Valerie Solanas, author of the *SCUM Manifesto* and shooter of Andy Warhol. A writer, revolutionary, and icon, a frustrating reality of her life was that, no matter how singular her voice, Solanas consistently found herself surrounded by others who (well-meaning or malicious) endeavored to use her for their own agenda—a life's work incessantly stolen.

SUBSCRIBE

to the *Brooklyn Rail*
start your subscription today!