

Pasatiempo

Naked truth: The evolution of Philip Pearlstein's nudes

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Mickey Mouse, White House as Birdhouse, Male and Female Models (2001), oil on canvas



Model with an Indonesian Mask (2015), oil on canvas

Beyond the presence of the Navajo blanket, with its abstract geometric designs, there's nothing particularly Southwestern about Philip Pearlstein's painting *Nude in Santa Fe with Self Portrait* (1994). The title is merely matter-of-fact. It names a location where the composition — a male nude, lying prostrate on the floor before a large mirror set in a gilded frame — was painted. It could be a scene from any studio anywhere. It could be Pearlstein's New York studio. It could be Paris.

What does make it unique among the artist's canvases is his own reflection in the mirror. "That's a rare one," says Pearlstein, who's only painted two or three self-portraits over the course of his seven-decades-long career. "Gerald Peters ran an artist workshop in Santa Fe, and it went on for several years. A number of New York artists went there. The workshop was in Downtown Santa Fe somewhere. I set up the model in my usual fashion with all this junk and the mirror, and I decided to do my own self-portrait in that mirror after catching my reflection."

One of the nation's foremost artists, Pearlstein, 96, speaks plainly over the phone in a pragmatic manner that's not unlike the straightforward titles he gives his paintings. He's amiable but a little out of breath, having just completed an online physical therapy session.

Pearlstein's *Resilience of the Real* runs through July 3 at LewAllen Galleries (1613 Paseo de Peralta, 505-988-3250, lewallengalleries.com). His painting style, in which the human figure is presented without any attempt at classical idealism or narrative, grew out of a unique period on the American art scene, when abstract expressionism was on the decline and new realism and pop art were burgeoning movements. Pearlstein was at the forefront of a radical shift in how artists interpreted the human body.

"I don't think there is a contemporary realist of the last number of decades who, if they're serious about their work and their career, would not be influenced in one way or another by Philip Pearlstein," says Louis Newman, director of modernism at LewAllen. "His work is something you have to deal with. Ken Johnson, art critic for *The New York Times*, had a wonderful quotation: 'If it's a question of contributing something original and influential to 20th-century art, only Mr. Pearlstein's nudes will answer.' "

He painted the figure devoid of any references or meaning beyond what was right there in front of him. And he placed equal emphasis on the random objects that surrounded them, whether they were birdhouses, Indonesian masks, or any one of a number of disparate items that just happened to be in the studio at the time. In *Model with Swan Decoy on Ladder* (2002), for instance, there are no overt references to, say, Leda and the Swan, which is perhaps the most obvious reference the viewer would bring to the work. What you see is what you get. Or rather, what he sees is what you get.

His paintings represented a complete break from how the figure had been represented in the eras before modernist abstraction. “These oddly intimate pictures not only invite you into a private universe of languid splendor, but they also mark a dividing line between what we might call old-fashioned figuration and something postmodern,” wrote art critic Benjamin Genocchio in a 2008 *New York Times* review of a Pearlstein survey exhibition at the Montclair Art Museum.

“It was shocking,” says Newman, who selected 19 works by Pearlstein for the exhibition. “It was almost blasphemous. The Ab-Ex people didn’t know what to make out of them. But they couldn’t be easily dismissed either. On the other side of the equation, the people who stayed true to some form of realism didn’t know what to make out of his realism because it was stripped of any historicism.”

The LewAllen exhibition spans about a 25-year period, from the early 1990s through 2015. Several of the paintings are large in scale, measuring 4 feet by 6 feet, or slightly larger.

Dadaism and design

So why did Pearlstein, who entered into the 1950s as an abstract expressionist, take his paintings in an entirely different direction? “Abstract expressionism, as a style, had died around 1960,” he says. “I don’t know why. I was in Italy when it happened. When we left for Italy — my wife and I — everything was abstract expressionism. When we came back a year later, it had disappeared. People were beginning to do Color Field paintings and all kinds of geometric things. Everything was changing.”

After completing a year in Italy on a Fulbright scholarship, Pearlstein returned to the United States in 1959 and joined the staff of New York’s Pratt Institute. He taught graphic design, a survey course on art history, and figure drawing — although, he says, he knew nothing about anatomy. “I was just interested in the figure as a shape. So I just combined my two-dimensional design course ideas with figure drawing and that became my style.”

Pearlstein was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Growing up, his parents supported his interest in art, for which he showed an aptitude from an early age. They sent him to the Carnegie Museum

of Art every Saturday to attend art classes, an education that paid off when, at the age of 18, he won a national scholastic art competition for two of his paintings, an oil and a watercolor. The award-winning work was included in an exhibition at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. Life magazine covered the show and featured a reproduction of his oil painting, which ran on a half-page and in color. "It made me an instant hero in Pittsburgh high school circles," he says, laughing.

The following year, he received a scholarship for his freshman year at Carnegie Institute of Technology. It was 1942, and after a year of deferment from the draft, Pearlstein had no choice but to enter basic infantry training. Eventually, he was sent to Italy as part of a unit of infantry replacements.

When the war was over, he was transferred to a sign-painting unit "because the roads were all bombed out, and they needed new traffic signs."

It was his introduction to the field of commercial art, and he continued working as a sign painter over the next year, which provided him with opportunities to visit cities such as Florence and Venice, where he encountered troves of majestic Italian art in the museums and galleries. When he returned to Pittsburgh in 1946, he continued studying art at Carnegie under the G.I. Bill. He focused on commercial art. He met his future wife, artist Dorothy Cantor, there and began a long friendship with a young Andy Warhol, who recognized him from the story published years earlier in Life. "Andy came up and said, 'How does it feel to be famous?'"

In 1950, the same year he married Cantor, Pearlstein moved with Warhol to an eight-floor walk-up tenement apartment on St. Mark's Place at Avenue A in Manhattan. They had no plans to be fine artists but intended to work in graphic design. "Andy was much younger. He had two brothers who would only let him go to New York if we would live together, which wasn't my plan. But we went to New York and shared a tiny apartment for about the next 10 months."

Pearlstein supported himself by doing design work for industrial plumbing catalogues at companies like American Standard. In 1950, he enrolled in a master's program at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University. His treatment of the figure in his realist works owes

something to the in-depth study he did for his thesis on the work of Dadaists Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp. “I realized that the early-20th-century abstractionists were treating the figure as an object, non-expressively. In the case of Picabia and Duchamp, it was to make fun of it, using the figure as a pun, and not in the French classical manner. There was no attempt at correct anatomy and no attempt at idealism, because it doesn’t exist; it was a set of rules that was established by the academic tradition in the 18th century. The early 20th century just totally ignored it. One of Picabia’s more famous pieces was a drawing of a spark plug and he called it *Portrait of a Young American Girl*.”

Pearlstein was also intrigued by the Duchampian notion of artistic arrangements based on the laws of chance. When he began painting the figure, he included extraneous objects based on this concept. In a way, his portraits of models in the studio feel less like portraiture and more like still lifes. Even his late work retains this chance placement of unrelated objects. In *Model with Chrome Chair, Kiddie Car, Kimono, and Bambino* (2009), for instance, the model, who poses languidly as though sleeping, is in the background. A bright red kiddie car’s reflection in the model’s chrome chair becomes a focal point. But there’s no implied relationship between the model and the other objects in the room. There is no story.

Pearlstein works from the center of the canvas out, which explains why the figures are rarely seen in their totality. Instead, limbs and backsides are cropped off at the boundaries of the picture frame, like in *Mickey Mouse, White House as Birdhouse, Male and Female Models* (2001). Or a figure’s head is cropped, as in *Model with Indonesian Mask* (2015), a painting dominated by the grimacing face of the titular demonic mask. Rather than a person, the model is another object in the room with no face.

Working outward from the center is something that he carried over from his abstract expressionist days. He was influenced by his interest in the compositions of Franz Kline, where the energy seems to move, likewise, from the inside out.

From abstract expressionist to postmodern realist

In 1955, the year he obtained his master's degree, abstract expressionism still reigned. Pearlstein was part of a co-op of young artists, mostly veterans of World War II, who ran Tanager Gallery on 10th Street. "Back then, the galleries wouldn't show anybody under the age of 40, so we started our own," he says. "Artists like Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline lived immediately adjacent to this gallery. I became extremely familiar with their work and I learned from them, especially Franz Kline. His compositions were just these big shapes moving across the canvas. He said he picked that up when they demolished the elevated Third Avenue train. He made drawings of the structure that held up the tracks as it was being demolished and sketched it in a telephone book. His paintings were based on those. So I just took over that idea.

"I began making the paintings very big, over-life-sized. It was so against the grain of what everybody else was doing at that moment in New York, I received a lot of attention. Suddenly, Lucien Freud appeared on the scene. He was expressionistic, but he was using the same approach, with the figure just flopping down. Suddenly, I was known as the American Lucien Freud. I had shows in London, Paris, Germany."

Pearlstein's reclamation of the human figure paved the way for a kind of realism that emphasized empirical observation. He's still painting in this manner, thwarting our expectations of the nude and how we see it. But, if anything, there's less of a focus on the figure in his recent work and even greater emphasis on the objects. The figures are more remote. They're rendered with less precise anatomical detail than his earlier work — less realism — which makes them appear almost like abstractions.

He never really left his roots behind.