

DEC 21-JAN 22 Issue

ArtSeen

Philip Pearlstein: *I Love Mud*

On view, Betty Cunningham Gallery

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By Jessica Holmes



Philip Pearlstein, *Antiquities on My Shelf I*, 2021.
Watercolor on paper, 30 x 23.5 inches. Courtesy Betty Cunningham Gallery.

For those of us who can't help but wonder about the colleagues, companions, and strangers who populate our lives on a daily basis, one of the fascinating outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the unexpected view into the interior lives of others. With so much time spent communicating through video conferencing mechanisms over the past two years, curious daydreamers have been afforded an intimate peek into the personal situations of others, as the idea of "home" has been variously reconfigured as school, a bar, a workplace, and then made visible to others through the oblique glow of a laptop screen.

As a prodigy of figure painting who has devoted nearly 60 years to rendering the nude human form from life, Philip Pearlstein is well-versed in intimacy as a corollary of his work. However, during the long months of pandemic-enforced physical separation, Pearlstein was unable to invite models into his studio. Seeking an outlet, he turned to the many treasures he has accrued through 97 years of a sociable, cultivated, and well-traveled life. These accumulations of a lifetime became the subjects of the watercolor paintings now on view in *I Love Mud*, Pearlstein's current exhibition at Betty Cunningham Gallery. The offbeat title of the show comes from the artist's own observation that, upon surveying the artifacts, antiquities, and knickknacks that make up his vast and varied collection, he could only conclude that—based on the number of clay, terracotta, and other earthenware objects in his array—he must be especially fond of the substance.

This affinity is obvious at the outset, as the first three paintings one encounters upon entering the gallery, all entitled *Antiquities on My Shelf* (and all dated 2021), depict varied clusters of items from regions across the globe, their one unifying quality being that they each seem to have originated in the medium of wet earth. Across the trio of works, a clay urn provides a backdrop to a serene Hindu bust, among other characters, while a Han warrior gazes to a point beyond the frame in another. In the third, an assortment of Asian artifacts sits at jaunty angles to one another, drawing the eye through the painting at an upwards slant.

This diagonal thrust is common to a number of the paintings, deriving from a natural effect of the chance groupings of objects that Pearlstein depicts. It has the added benefit of enticing the viewer into the given scene, as if we too are in close commune with the items on the shelves. In *Thai Piggybank and Other Antiquities* (2021) the piggy bank in question sits front and center on the table, Pearlstein's tender brushstrokes belying the pig's fierce expression. Arranged around it are a horse, a monkey, a hippopotamus, no one of them aligned precisely. And in *Gaggle of Decoys in Studio* (2021) a charming assemblage of the lifelike hunting lures are heaped on a sumptuous rug, their heads criss crossing each other as if in lively, almost human conversation.



Philip Pearlstein, *Antiquities on my Shelf III*, 2021.
Watercolor on paper, 30 x 23.5 inches. Courtesy Betty Cunningham Gallery.



Philip Pearlstein, *Gaggle of Decoys in Studio*, 2021. Watercolor on paper, 23.5 x 30 inches. Courtesy Betty Cunningham Gallery.

Not every subject that Pearlstein paints is made of clay. Several of the most personal works are devoted to old toys, many of which have been in Pearlstein's collection since he was a child. In *Antique Toys with Godzilla* (2021) the eponymous monster towers over a sweeter variety of plaything: a merry-go-round, a drumming bear, a windup chicken, and a swan on wheels. In the catalogue that accompanies the show, Pearlstein recalls the receipt of *Godzilla* as a childhood birthday gift, and that it once featured glowing red eyes and moving arms and legs before its mechanical innards quit long ago.

What is the human impulse to amass collections? We collect because, on some fundamental level, the objects gathered bring us satisfaction. We collect what we revere. In Pearlstein's endearing works, the viewer gains a little insight into his private domain, what one individual among the billions in the world reveres: rare antiquities and broken toys, the sacred and the profane. And by exalting them in his paintings, Pearlstein acknowledges the powerful effects a collection can have, and the balm it can elicit in difficult or sorrowful times—times like our pandemic age, when we're too often cut off from people and experiences we cherish. It's rare to see a body of work not only untouched by cynicism but also infused with comfort and hope, but that's what Pearlstein's gracious paintings have given us. They feel like home.

Contributor

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