

ARTFORUM



Philip Pearlstein, *Self-Portrait: Two Sketches*, 2001. Photo: Philip Pearlstein Studio.

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PHILIP PEARLSTEIN (1924–2022)

Philip Pearlstein, whose planar arctic nudes of the 1960s revitalized realistic figure painting for a new generation, died December 17 in New York at the age of ninety-eight. An accomplished illustrator by his teens, Pearlstein flirted with the emotional hues and geometric

shapes of Abstract Expressionism before diving fully into figuration with his disaffected, antisexual nudes and paving the way for such twentieth-century notables as Jack Beal, Alex Katz, and Alfred Leslie. “A typical Pearlstein nude, in which the genitals are rarely as obvious as in any of [Larry] Rivers’ earlier nudes, establishes so corporeal a presence that, despite its seeming somnambulant apathy, it bursts through the limits of style,” wrote Sidney Tillim in a 1966 issue of *Artforum*, attempting to explain the controversy then surrounding the artist’s work. “The nude, in other words, regains its existential dignity.”

Philip Pearlstein was born May 24, 1924, in Pittsburgh, his childhood marked by the Great Depression, during which his father sold eggs and chickens to make ends meet. Encouraged by his parents in his artistic tendencies from a young age, he attended classes at the Carnegie Museum of Art from a young age. At eighteen, Pearlstein won a national competition sponsored by the youth-oriented *Scholastic* magazine; both of his winning paintings appeared in an issue of *Life* magazine. Shortly thereafter, he enrolled in the art school at the Carnegie Institute of Technology but was drafted in 1943, as World War II raged overseas. After being taught how to make screen prints during basic training, he was stationed in Italy as part of a unit making road signs; while there, he visited

Rome, Florence, Venice, and Milan, gaining exposure to the Renaissance masterworks that populated those cities' museums.

On his 1946 return to the US, he re-enrolled at Carnegie, graduating in 1949. With his classmate and friend Andy Warhol, he moved to New York and gained employ with noted Czech designer Ladislav Sutnar, designing catalogues for such industrial concerns as plumbing companies. Around this time, he began exhibiting in the city's galleries, mainly painting landscapes in the Abstract Exhibitionist style then garnering widespread attention as the first major postwar art movement. Earning his master's in fine arts from New York University's Institute of Fine Arts in 1955, he began working for *Life* as an illustrator and from 1959 to 1963 taught painting at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute.

It was during this span that he abandoned abstraction and turned to figuration, having been inspired by a series of classes he attended that were led by fellow Pratt professor Mercedes Matter, who instructed her models to adopt casual, unrestrained poses. The louche attitude and slack facial expressions of these painterly subjects would come to be a hallmark of Pearlstein's work over the next five decades, as he painted mostly women but also men in natural, often unflattering poses, their limbs or torsos lopped off by the edge of the canvas. Though the nudes were the focal point of his paintings, Pearlstein frequently mentioned them only incidentally in the works titles, which typically centered on the objects surrounding them, as, for example, in 2009's *Model with Mickey Mouse and Unicycle and Wicker Chair*. Writing in *Artforum* in 2001, Barry Schwabsky characterized Pearlstein as "taking perverse delight in giving every detail of scenery the same cool scrutiny as he does the body's folds and creases."

"I wish to emphasize that my involvement with the human figure as subject grew out of . . . technical procedures," Pearlstein told the *Paris Review* in 1975. "The meaning of the figure in its particular situation had no interest for me, I refuse to be an amateur psychoanalyst [*sic*] or novelist, I would prefer to be thought of as a sort of stilled-action choreographer."

Though Pearlstein's work in this vein initially met with resistance, being in various instances banned, defaced, or publicly decried, it fast gained international acclaim, and is now held in the collections of more than forty major museums around the globe, with Pearlstein himself being much decorated and lauded for his efforts. He taught from 1963 to 1988 at Brooklyn College, where on his death he was a distinguished professor emeritus. Queried by the *Brooklyn Rail*'s Phong Bui in 2005 regarding his thoughts on younger figurative artists then ascendant, among them Lisa Yuskavage, Elizabeth Peyton, and John Currin, Pearlstein was sanguine regarding the past and future of figuration. "I look at their work with great interest, as I look at most art," he said. "It's the only way to try to figure out what somebody has done, without being critical. I'm happy they've had such success without real struggle," he concluded. "Our generation had some real struggle."