

Art in America

From the Archives: Pearlstein Today: Upping the Ante

By Robert Storr  December 19, 2022 6:40pm



Philip Pearlstein: *Two Female Models in Bamboo Chairs with Mirror*, 1981, oil on canvas, 72¼ by 72¼ inches.
COURTESY TOLEDO MUSEUM OF ART

Philip Pearlstein died on Dec. 17, 2022. To commemorate his life and career, we revisit this article that originally appeared in the February 1984 issue of *A.i.A.*

At regular intervals since the advent of Abstract Expressionism there have been declarations heralding the imminent comeback of “Realism,” but these announcements have proved themselves to be more in the line of conservative wishful thinking than a fair description of the actual rhythms of style and ideology among serious painters. In an art world arbitrarily divided between abstraction and everything else, Realism has indeed been what Linda Nochlin called the “criminal” to the “abstract law” [see *A.i.A.*, Sept.-Oct. and Nov.-Dec. 1973]. But in general critical practice, the label “Realist” has been all too casually applied to a host of essentially dissimilar and usually short-lived tendencies, from California painterly figuration and Neo-Academic pastiche to Pop art, plus a wide range of photo-generated work. Moreover, as many writers have

noted, despite the verbal abuse it has sometimes received, representational painting has in fact been a constant presence on the contemporary scene.

But even if one grants that the “exile” of representational art has been more apparent than real, and the distinction between figurative and nonfigurative work often more misleading than not, it remains true that “real-Realism”—direct observation and description of things as they are—has been the exception not only to prevailing canons of abstract painting but to those of most representational work as well. Indeed, many who clamor loudest for a return to Realism find the actual experience of Realist paintings singularly hard to take; they are as quick to belittle the skills and sophistication of a particular offending artist as are those who have confidently proclaimed Realism’s obsolescence. Nor is this new. Historically, the taste for verisimilitude stopped well short of the dirty bare feet in Caravaggio, the social and sexual frankness in Manet, and the stark even morose naturalism of Eakins. In sum, Realism is not just an affront to the modern academy but the perennial enemy of all recipe art. As its short list of masters makes plain, it is a movement best measured in the obsessive and usually solitary vocation of a relative handful of artists.

For the past 20 years, Philip Pearlstein has been one of only two or three painters with a consistent claim to this discontinuous tradition, and a currently traveling retrospective of his work, organized by Russell Bowman of the Milwaukee Art Museum, affords us a first opportunity to examine closely the scope and development of one of the most clearly focused careers of postwar art.

FROM THE OUTSET, Pearlstein has occupied an anomalous position within his generation, for he has been not only the most uncompromising exponent of an unpopular style but its most visible and possibly most successful practitioner. In large measure, Pearlstein owes his special status among fellow Realists and within the art world generally to his gift for ideas and advocacy. It was more by force of argument than by example that he was able in the early 1960s to place a supposedly marginal concern—painting the figure from life—somewhere near the center of critical debate, and to link his cause to that of other artists, many of them abstractionists, who were faced with the task of sorting out the debris left by the first wave of Abstract Expressionism.

Pearlstein understood that if realist art was to equal the conviction and power of abstract painting and avoid a permanent ghetto identity, it had somehow to find common ground with the most energetic work of other artists battling against “mainstream” dogma. He found that common ground by redefining the dialectic of modernism as taking place not primarily between representation and abstraction but between a rigorous, nonnarrative formalism and a too easily learned romanticism. Pearlstein further extended his critique of Abstract Expressionism by questioning its formal assumptions, in particular the validity of the contingent or roving point of view derived from Cézanne and Cubism, and the principle of the inviolable flatness of the picture plane, which disallowed all volume and illusionism.

Of course, Pearlstein was not alone in his mission. Fairfield Porter had a similar distaste for bombast and emotional posturing, and he shared Pearlstein’s doubts about the sanctity of the optical revolution instigated by Cézanne. But Porter’s solution was to look elsewhere in the French painterly tradition for a model, and he thus proceeded to synthesize his private enthusiasm for the work of Vuillard with his love for and profound understanding of that of de Kooning. For Porter and his heirs, Realism was not a question of intention but an intuitive result, the ever-shifting meeting place between the tangible reality of liquid pigment and the evanescent reality of things seen in their natural setting.

PEARLSTEIN’S ANSWER TO the challenge of Abstract Expressionism was almost diametrically opposed to Porter’s. Realism for him was precisely a matter of intention and its fulfillment. Indeed, his nearest ally would seem to be not another realist at all but, ironically, that other great exception-taker, Ad Reinhardt, who was by chance his colleague at Brooklyn College. Reinhardt reportedly lamented Pearlstein’s chosen direction, but their individual briefs against the romanticism of the burgeoning Ab-Ex Academy have much in common. Moreover, both men were scholars and teachers, both stubborn rationalists in their polemics, esthetic puritans even, and both defined their independent positions by a series of exclusions, a considered list of “no’s” concerning conventional ideas about Art and Meaning that together amounted to a defense of painting’s intrinsic legitimacy and autonomy.

For Pearlstein, as for Reinhardt, painting had no pretensions of offering either emotional or spiritual transcendence; it was, instead, a visual and material discipline. As Pearlstein made clear in his essay-manifesto in *Artnews* [Summer 1962], “Figure Paintings Today Are Not Made in Heaven,” the subject of painting was the act of looking and the complete identification of the painter with his subject; the question of quality in art—and, by implication, the question of the painter’s honesty as well—was not that of how expressively one could make a painting but of how well.

By thus establishing the issue of technique and execution as paramount, Pearlstein directly challenged the 1950s cult of the unfinished and unfinishable masterpiece. His tactic, however, contained a personal dare, and a curious one at that, for not only was he uninterested in the manufacturing strategies of the life-class rear guard whose territory he was now crossing, but also he plainly had little of the natural facility those strategies require. Yet, as the exhibition clearly demonstrates, it was Pearlstein’s very lack of Beaux Arts training and prejudice that enabled him to approach the problems of the studio painter as if new and untested, and as likely to yield results as unexpected as those produced by the most novel of “isms.” Like many radicals, in fact, Pearlstein is essentially an autodidact who through logical speculation simultaneously placed himself outside the

conventions of his period and ahead of his own empirical knowledge of the medium in which he worked. The drama of his career derives from the risk he took in thus exposing himself publicly while learning his craft and filling in the distance between an announced purpose and a visual reality. As with the best work in any style, the paintings themselves are far richer and stranger than their program would suggest.

FROM THE EVIDENCE of the earliest work in the exhibition, it seems “as if from the beginning Pearlstein has been caught in a tug-of-war between a natural eccentricity and contrariness, and an equally pronounced and better-known inclination toward the prosaic. The first painting one comes upon is *Double Portrait of the Artist’s Parents*, 1943; its solid modeling, dull earth tones and nearly oppressive sobriety strikingly exemplify those qualities that distinguish his mature work. Moreover, the unemotional expression of concentration on his mother’s face and the odd, apparently matter-of-fact cropping out of his father’s face as he stands behind her foreshadow aspects of Pearlstein’s attitude toward the figure that continue to alarm people. One is tempted to question the psychoanalytic content of this image of a strong, severe mother and a nearly absent father, but guesswork of this sort is given no more encouragement here than it will be in later paintings—we are offered information but no invitation to speculate on its “meaning.” Pearlstein at 19 was already making conspicuously unsentimental pictures.

At the other extreme is a pair of cartoon fantasies done some seven years later. The first is a brushy treatment of Superman flying over Metropolis in the pose of God the Creator from the Sistine ceiling. The second, done in weird cloisonné color, is a sort of *Mad Magazine* version of *Psycho* in which a nude woman is attacked by a shower head of the sort that Pearlstein then illustrated for a living. In part perhaps a rebellion against self-seriousness, these two works are characteristic insofar as they constitute rude but knowing lampoons of art historical styles, in particular Expressionism and the Grand Manner. At the same time, they betray Pearlstein’s delight in the very extravagance he sets out to parody. Caprice is not solely the prerogative of the capricious. Pearlstein’s mature work really begins, however, with a series of landscapes painted in the 1950s from drawings made during brief trips outside New York and from stones used as miniature surrogates for the craggy outcroppings Pearlstein had sketched on site. Selected by Clement Greenberg for a group show in 1954 and reproduced in the art magazines, the paintings fit neatly into the continuum between overall abstraction and gestural naturalism. They honor the principle of the flatness of the picture plane by raising the horizon to a point just outside the image or by dissolving it into busy strokes, while the surface agitation of the paint conforms to the temper of advanced art of the time. But the work is uncomfortable in more basic ways, and one can easily see why Pearlstein became uncomfortable making it.

The roughness of the paintings is wholly believable and their lack of ingratiating flourish commendable; yet the problem they embody is not one of genuine versus feigned emotion but one of process. Unlike true Action Painters, Pearlstein was not really working off of or into the pigment so much as enlarging and elaborating forms from drawings or models that were already virtually resolved. Thus, the paint does not flow until it finds its own contours; it is used, instead, as a straight drawing tool, or applied in patches to a preexisting armature. What is at issue, therefore, is not so much a failed Expressionism as a scruffy, tonal Impressionism. But to speak of Impressionism as tone without active color is almost a non sequitur, and the orange and blue-green tinted grisaille that Pearlstein employed is yet another indication that his interest was in the basic integrity of shapes and not in their decomposition by light or feeling. In the views of the Roman ruins he did in 1961 during the year of his Fulbright scholarship, the increasingly clear distinction between ground plane and sky and the firm handling of architectural form mark Pearlstein’s first decisive steps into an unambiguously three-dimensional world. It was not, however, until he came back to America and began to explore the lessons learned in a cooperative life-drawing group to which he belonged that the real turning point in his development occurred.

AS RUSSELL BOWMAN maintains in his catalogue essay, Pearlstein shared with LeWitt and the procedural artists of the 1960s and ’70s the belief that the best way to break the deadlock of taste and its unconscious strictures was to invent and make explicit one’s own set of rules. The first of Pearlstein’s rules involved the rejection of the roving point of view and adherence to the discipline of direct observation. To this he added a commitment to favor clearly rendered forms over the felicitous accidents of approximative brushwork, and

literal, often even “ugly,” detail over generalized and idealized presentations of a motif. But the shift of emphasis from landscape to the figure involved yet another consideration. While a mountain will quite naturally sit still, people will not; as a consequence, the first task of the conventional figure painter is to disguise the inherent artificiality of the project by transforming the model into an allegorical Nude, by setting a stage so that it will seem “at home” or by playing on the romance of the artist’s garret. In any event, by thus seeking to create a fictitious alibi for the simple act of painting from life, the artist exacerbates the artificiality of his situation while reducing his primary concern with the study of the figure to a mere function of genre art.

Pearlstein’s response to the problem was to accept the artificiality of his context and make it real by depicting its attributes as faithfully as he did what was apparently the central image—the figure. Thus, from the beginning, he was as attentive to the local color and the folds of the fabrics on which his models sat, the chill light on the walls against which they posed and the patterns of chair legs and molding that provide the scaffolding for these compositions as he was to the complex disposition of bodies upon which one’s eye finally settles. Much of what strikes people as offensive in his work derives from this perfectly straightforward decision. By putting the human form and its inanimate surroundings on equal terms and by painting each with the same flatfooted deliberateness, Pearlstein upset the sensibilities of many who would otherwise accept the notion of absolute, nonhierarchical treatment of all picture elements in totally abstract art. For Pearlstein, likeness is important, but the reality of human psychology has never been any greater for him than the reality of a chair or a floorboard.

It is tempting, perhaps, to read into the faces of his models an expressiveness that would provide the basis for reclaiming Pearlstein’s work for the cause of “humanist” painting, but to do so contradicts a rigorous “matter of factness” that is the most original aspect of his accomplishment. Certainly one can discover traces of urban weariness and even a vague sexual lassitude in these people, but these emotions seem to function within the paintings as they do in the world outside, merely as by-products of the situations he depicts. No moral value accompanies their presence or absence; for Pearlstein, the reality of psychology is no greater than that of a chair or a floorboard.

As Pearlstein explains in his 1962 article, the content of Realism is the concentration that it requires; the ambition of the Realist artist is to abandon the traditional search for hidden or deeper meanings within reality, and to merge so completely with the subject of his study that, in the words of an Oriental mystic he quotes, “the imager becomes the image.”

Pearlstein asks of the viewer a comparable abandonment of the self, and a comparable dedication of time and energy to the close inspection of the relation between orderly structures of vision and the unexpected and even aberrant details that the eye confronts. To the extent that Pearlstein’s exemplary exercises in concentration take place in real time, as does the frozen labor of his models, the subject of these paintings is as much the human experience of duration as it is the particulars of any given studio set-up. Thus, if in no other respect symbols, the paintings themselves are emblems of a radically simple understanding of pure states of being.

Such a homegrown Zen might be a philosophical banality were it not for the fact that it is anything but common for people to pay close attention to the spatial paradoxes and physical facts that surround them, and were it not for the extraordinary range of changes that Pearlstein has managed to work on his restricted vocabulary of bodies, furniture and bare rooms.

AFTER A FEW oily and rather washed-out ocher studies, Pearlstein quickly settled on the basic painterly terms of his reductive program: flat laminations of pigment, sharp separations of light and dark and poses that look like poses. He also soon found his characteristic large format, in which the figures were, if not life-size, big enough at a normal viewing distance to relate directly to the scale of the room in which the paintings were hung. By the mid-1960s, the monumentality of the image was reinforced by increasingly dense and complex modeling, while the monumentality of the paintings as contained spaces was activated and underscored by increasingly asymmetrical compositions with ever more daring cropping of the figure.

As time has passed, Pearlstein has further upped the technical ante and further complicated his descriptive task by branching out into such demanding new processes as color etching and by packing his pictures with elaborate props and patterned surfaces. Moreover, his initially blunt paint handling has evolved into a careful and at times almost exquisite layering process that produces densely grained surfaces that, if not overtly sensual,

nonetheless have a strong physical presence; his close-valued colors achieve a similarly understated and refined authority.



Philip Pearlstein: *Portrait of the Artist's Daughters*, 1967, oil on canvas, 60 by 72 inches.
COURTESY BETTY CUNINGHAM GALLERY, NEW YORK

He has also experimented again with landscape, and with portraiture in which personality as likeness is important even if flattery and psychological insight are not. His double portrait of his young daughters is a typical and typically curious picture. Crammed into the picture space like near giants, the two children are utterly static and their gaze is heavy and inexpressive, much like that of the children that appear in colonial family tableaux. Nevertheless, the painting has an undeniable presence and dignity, as do the portraits of such couples as the Pillsburys, the Pommers and Held and Sylvia Stone. This said, his more recent commissioned portraits of patrons like the Lewises and Gilda Buchbinder strike one as being more formal than formalist; one missed in this exhibition his smaller studies of single heads, such as his portrait of Ada Katz and Norman Loftis. Only one work of this type was chosen, a bust of Scott Burton, and its strength made one all the more anxious to see the others.

However, as Pearlstein's mastery has grown and his challenge to 1950s Abstract Expressionism has been absorbed, the danger that his role in contemporary art could become thoroughly institutionalized has also grown, along with the threat that his work, without new technical problems, would simply repeat itself. Insofar as his theoretical importance is concerned, this has probably already happened. The current revival of romantic figurative painting belongs to another generation and does not really intersect with and thus recharge Pearlstein's prior critique of the romantic fallacy. In addition, there are signs of a superficial but identifiable Pearlstein influence alive in art schools; a recently published book with lavish color photos of the artist's step-by-step progression through a painting and a print can only encourage imitation, whatever the artist's own warnings against it and however unteachable his peculiar and salutary combination of rigor and awkwardness in fact is.

But the work itself faces no such codification, and as the most recent paintings in the exhibition suggest, Pearlstein's dialectic may not be as "simple" as it has long seemed to be.

It is often said that Pearlstein's aim has been to synthesize the structural integrity of 20th-century abstraction and the accidental truths of "eye-ball" painting; the result has been what Peter Schjeldahl has aptly described as something akin to a figurative Precisionism. But lately the extravagance that Pearlstein purged from his work after 1960 has reappeared in the form of a new material opulence and spatial complexity. In the past, the only

dynamic element of his setups was to be found in their strong diagonal recessions, but since the 1970s, and now more than ever, he has used his high vantage point to test the limits of three-point perspective, while filling his images with exotic fabrics, mirrors and their reflections, and ornate furniture. As a consequence, the new work is filled with eye-popping detail and alarming optical paradoxes: vastly enlarged and elongated arms and legs, radical foreshortenings, vanishing points that threaten to take off for parts unknown, dizzyingly bright and intricate costumes beneath which solid forms dematerialize.

The precedent for such pictorial gymnastics coupled with a consistent literalism is to be found not in 20th-century or even 19th-century art but only in the Baroque. Indeed, one looks on Pearlstein's dense arrangements of drapery and limbs with the same near-disorientation that one experiences when gazing into the thrusts and counterthrusts of a battle scene or up into the vertical illusions of a Roman church ceiling. What renders Pearlstein's use of such formal dynamics so strange is that despite the increasing precariousness and distension of the space his models occupy, they remain lethargic and self-absorbed, as if unaware of their physical predicament. It is significant, moreover, that as this distinction between active space and passive figures has become more pronounced, his paintings have become less, not more, predictable.

PEARLSTEIN HAS NOT simply opened the doors to a long-suppressed formal eccentricity by alluding to the compositional conventions of the past—he has in fact come close to creating a latter-day synthesis between the structural and intellectual fantasies of the High Baroque and the austere and concrete mysticism of Baroque “realists” like La Tour, Caravaggio and Zurbaran; he has done so in a thoroughly modern idiom, without aping the pious narratives of the period and, most remarkably, without turning off the lights. Thus, he tempers the new extravagance of his compositions with a respect for individual details that stop the eye and so punctuate the constant tensions of the dominant forms. Using abrupt foreshortenings, internal croppings and overlapping forms to accomplish what the erratically revealing light of the Baroque masters did, Pearlstein will isolate a particular head or hand or foot from the larger context and present it to us, without gesture or symbolism, not as a fragment but as a thing in itself. And, as with the Baroque masters mentioned before, the very deliberateness of Pearlstein's painting manner and his lack of distracting flourish only add to the eloquence of such details and to the mystery of the whole.

These observations are not meant to suggest that Pearlstein is engaged in a retrieval of lost stylistic devices and traditional ideals. On the contrary, though Pearlstein must be well acquainted with the Baroque from his visits to Rome and from his studies in art history, the appearance of this Baroque dimension in his work seems predicated wholly on the primary tensions of his formal problem as it has evolved over the years, and on the basic contradictions of his temperament as evidenced by his earliest work. Indeed, the unnatural enlargements of shapes and the high-risk spatial distortions in the newest pictures may be less a matter of deliberate exaggeration than a direct transcription of the natural hallucinations that occur when one stares for hours at the same pictorial passages without attempting to force the unexpected information they release through the template of conventional, frontal perspective.

Whatever its source, however the important fact is that a powerful, eccentric impulse has now revealed itself as the counterpart to the deadpan procedural style for which Pearlstein is already known. And even if his theoretical contributions have ceased to have the oppositional impact on contemporary art they once had, this increasingly Baroque aspect of his work may yet prove itself congruent with the concerns of much younger artists poking deeper and deeper holes in the prevailing shallow space of modern painting. Whether or not this coincidence of interests results in an active relationship between Pearlstein and younger artists, however, he remains the most tough-minded Realist of his generation and, indeed, one of its best painters in any category. As this exhibition surely demonstrates, and his newest work makes ever clearer, Pearlstein continues to exert his long-standing claim on our attention.

“Philip Pearlstein: A Retrospective” opened at the Milwaukee Art Museum in April 1983 and traveled to the Brooklyn Museum. It is at the Pennsylvania Academy through Feb. 26, 1984, and moves to the Toledo (Ohio) Museum of Art in March and the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, in May. The catalogue contains essays by Pearlstein, Russell Bowman (the show's curator) and Irving Sandler.