Interview with Philip Pearlstein Studio International
By Janet McKenzie

Philip Pearlstein is one of the most important artists of the twentieth century who worked in an abstract expressionist style before shifting to large-scale formalist nudes constructed theatrically with a range of props from merry-go-round horses to the Eames chair. Pearlstein turns 92 this month yet he continues to work on large scale paintings where the nude figure is juxtaposed with a diverse range of objects: from crashed model aeroplanes to marionettes, a model of the White House that is in fact a birdcage, and richly patterned rugs and fabrics. A sense of enigmatic drama is created, perhaps alluding to the anachronistic nature of human existence, to the disconnect that exists between an individual and war and politics in the wider world. Pearlstein studied with Andy Warhol at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh after the war spent in Italy; they travelled together with Pearlstein's future wife, Dorothy Cantor, also an art student, to New York where Pearlstein studied art history at New York University with Erwin Panofsky. His career has been hugely influential whilst consistently pursuing an independent path for over 60 years. In the lead up to a new exhibition of 170 of his wartime drawings, at the Betty Cuningham Gallery in New York, next month, Pearlstein speaks at length about his remarkable career.

Janet McKenzie: You have been an active and productive artist for over 60 years, and so your career has taken place through numerous significant art world changes where you have played an important role. Can you recall your early urge to make art as a child and young artist, and why it was always so important to you?

Philip Pearlstein: It started in kindergarten. The teacher told my mother I should be encouraged; my mother was an innocent person who knew nothing about art. But she kept all my drawings and paintings and that stash existed until I returned from World War II to Pittsburgh. Stupidly, I threw them out, as well as a lot of puppets. I had been involved with a lot of theatre. My father made me my first puppets out of the cardboard tube inside toilet paper. They would look very modern now but I was embarrassed by them. All I ever did was art; I wasn't very good as a student. At high school there was a teacher who had a group of students during the last couple of years there, and so he he would gather us together and set up an afternoon art club where everyone would work on their own projects and several went on to great careers. One became an industrial designer, another in advertising; one became a director of the Walker Art

Museum in Milwaukee for many years, another became a designer for a Japanese firm in America of household objects, and several of us became artists. In 11th grade he encouraged us to apply for the National Scholastic High School art contest and I entered a painting I did in 10th grade, as well as a more recent watercolour and they both won first prize. The exhibition went from Pittsburgh to the Metropolitan Museum in New York where **Life** magazine wrote it up and my two paintings were reproduced. All the winning entries were reproduced but mine were reproduced bigger and in colour. Within the next 18 months I was in the US army. In the induction interview I showed the **Life** magazine to the officer and I was immediately put into a higher category. I was put into the infantry, which was very rough to become an infantry soldier, a rifle foot soldier as a replacement for combat casualties. At the end of that I was assigned to a special unit for weapons and worked for about 8 or 9 months with a man who had been a professional commercial artist - he had been in advertising and so [working with him] was my basic art education. I learned all about perspective, layout, lettering, spacing, page design, drafting and silkscreen printing. For me it was a wonderful experience at the height of the war. It came to an abrupt end after about seven months and we were put back into basic infantry training at Monte Cassino.

J.McK: Your work is based on perceptual drawing, so close observation is the key. Can you explain how you came to be "blinded"? And what you experienced at the time?

PP: It was a training exercise at night at the base of Monte Cassino and there was a huge phosphorous explosion, and I couldn't see. People were always being injured during these exercises, so the medics were on hand. I waited to be led back to the field hospital and I waited for my turn to be treated, and I couldn't see a thing. And I thought, "Oh well, that's the end of being an artist, but at least I get to go home alive" and the doctor came round and he took off my glasses and I could see. My glasses were simply covered in mud.

J.McK: I am interested in the unofficial art education that happened during the war. It is amazing that you had such opportunities, and such an extraordinary war experience.

PP: I made a visual diary, drawing every day the simulated battles our training involved. There are sixty or seventy of those, firmly realist in the tradition of artists from the Civil War onwards. I made studies of weapons too. There is going to be an exhibition of my wartime drawings next month at the Betty Cuningham gallery, here in New York. There will be 170 such drawings altogether.

J.McK: You were based in Rome and in Monte Cassino and therefore saw remarkable destruction but also remarkable art and architecture.

PP: The British had a remarkable team of art historians and as each town was liberated from German occupation they would bring together works that had been hidden for safety. They would put on exhibitions in churches and halls, and produce little pamphlets in English. I still have them. The pamphlets were just there to be picked up, from Naples and the surrounding area and later in Rome. They were dense compact exhibitions of great masterpieces that had been hidden, set up for the soldiers curated by Bernard Berenson and others who were then joined by US art historians. At the end of the war I remember a gigantic exhibition in Venice on the second floor of San Marco, organised by Berenson. I was also based in Rome and at that time the Vatican was open at weekends so I could go there regularly to study the art. In Tuscany we were stationed outside of Pisa, painting road signs. I got into Florence regularly and we would park outside of the Pitti Palace. I would walk to the nearby Carmelite church of Santa Maria del Carmine where there are Masaccio frescoes. It was still closed and piled high with sand bags; I would climb up the sandbags and study the Masaccio works through the windows.

J.McK: That's a profound experience and an unexpected one to have during the war. I did my art history training in Australia, so almost entirely through reproduction, so in coming to Europe and seeing the works in the flesh for the first time is absolutely thrilling, and it's an unforgettable experience.

J.McK: The combination of your unofficial art training and the chance to see marvellous exhibitions curated by Berenson *et al* must have compelled you to take a career in art further when you returned to the US?

PP: By the time the fighting ended I had been in Italy for about 9 months and I was then transferred to an engineering unit there, where one of the German prisoners of war introduced himself to me as having been the chief calligrapher for UFA, (Universum Film-Aktien Gesellschaft) the German movie studios, [established in 1917]. He taught me a lot more about the refinement of layout and fancy calligraphy and lettering. At the end of the war I returned to Pittsburgh, which then struck me as very provincial, and I went back to school on the GI Bill. I chose to live with my parents as I felt that I owed them [after my absence during the war]. At the Carnegie Institute I became friends with Andy Warhol. Most students there were older though Andy was younger. In New York the following year after graduation I married one of the other students, Dorothy Cantor. So I had my official formal education [BFA] in Pittsburgh.

J.McK: I am going to move to the 1950s, in New York, where after the war you had already acquired a lot experience of life for your age. Most artists were horrified by the atrocities of the war, culminating in knowledge of Auschwitz, then Nagasaki and Hiroshima, to the point that images of the human form in art were deemed by most as not acceptable. Abstraction therefore came to dominate post-war art.

PP: All the experience I had acquired came together when I moved to New York. I had got a job in Pittsburgh working with Ladislav Sutnar on the design and production of industrial catalogues and that let to a job with him in New York that lasted for 8 years. He was the man who encouraged me to go back to university, and in fact to study art history, so I worked for him while I did a degree at the New York University.

J.McK: Where Erwin Panofsky taught?

PP: Panofsky dominated the institute at that point. I chose to do my thesis on Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia, which is unlikely but they were working with the shapes that I had learned to work with whilst a designer. They gave them personas, acting out funny human activities. But I soon switched to Picabia because I realised that it was Picabia who came up with the ideas; Duchamp followed. I now realise that it was probably Picabia's wife who came up with the ideas.

J.McK: Ah, the genealogy of creativity!

PP: That gave me the opportunity to do a thorough study of Modernism, it was a wonderful opportunity and I had to give meaning to everything I wrote about, for Dr Panofsky!

J.McK: The commission for a Portrait of Erwin Panofsky, (1892-1968) in 1992 to mark the centenary of his birth (from a photograph) can be seen as an important episode in your career. Can you recall the issues it threw up for your studio practice?

PP: I was commissioned to do a portrait of Panofsky after he had died, from photographs, one of the very few I have done. Another student of Panofsky asked me to do the portrait and I said, "He's dead, and I never work from photographs, on principle", and he said, "It's time you did"!

J.McK: I think it's a very fine portrait so it can't have been too bad an experience?

PP: I did subsequent portraits and the sitters asked if I would do them like Panofsky, including Kissinger.

J.McK: You railed against Panofsky?

PP: Well I didn't exactly rail against him. The photo I chose to use was taken by one of his grandchildren using a box Brownie camera. The hands were blurred so I gave him my hands; I figured I was about the same age as he was in this photo. While I was working on it I realised this was the guy I had been fighting with! I had been making landscape paintings based on abstract expressionist ideas and I decided I didn't want to express other people's ideas [any longer] so I decided I wanted to paint what was in front of me. From that point on I have been doing perceptually oriented paintings, choosing titles that refer descriptively to the objects, and figures in the work. This was a departure from Panofsky's insistence on meaning. In this I realised I had been fighting Panofsky because his dictum was stated early on - in 1914. He was giving an impromptu lecture, when this major idea came to him - that you cannot understand art if you do not understand the civilisation that produced it. Further, he insisted - you can't understand the culture without studying the art. His whole career was based on it and it's a terrific idea, unfortunately it evolved in to Pop Art. Pop art was the total realisation of Panofsky's theory. I decided I didn't want my work to have any meaning; it was about the total visual experience. The meaning is up for grabs anyway. Whoever stands in front of a picture gives it their own interpretation.

J.McK: That brings me on to the fact that in art historical terms, realism has been traditionally connected to politics. Can you tell me how your work is quite different to social realism or Socialist Realism? What do you set out to do?

PP: Well the high point for social realism was 19th century French painting. A friend of mine Linda Nöchlin did a book on Realism, investigating all of that: about social meaning and class with paintings of peasants tilling the fields; at the beginning of Van Gogh's [career] **The Potato Eaters** (1885) belonged to that context. Things evolved away from that, historically; the Impressionists couldn't care less about social realism or those meanings. In the history of Russian art, realism made a far less contribution than modernism. In the 1920s, after the Russian Revolution, modernism was squelched, suppressed and a kind of idealist realism, with a dominating view of the workers, so politically oriented, took its place. At the same time in the US, where modernism was being suppressed, there was a realist movement that was becoming dominant. Abstract artists were regarded as the very opposite- as evil and foreign! You were not meant to look at modernist work; ordinary people who painted nice abstract works were looked on in Pittsburgh as communists! It was such a crazy turn around. After the

[second world] war abstraction replaced everything else for at least the next two decades. That's the position that I reacted against. Some of the critics were taking an almost Fascist role dictating what the style young artists should do. It was a dictatorship based on Rosenberg's writings that decided what style art should be, and if an artist did not follow, he was not chosen for exhibitions.

J.McK: And if symbolist or decorative subject matter was employed, it was not uncommon for it to be denigrated in Greenbergian terms as "kitsch" such a put down!

PP: Rosenberg described art in terms of interior mental process: existential philosophy: always searching so it's always unfinished. There's an exhibition on just now at the Met: **Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible** (18 March – 4 September 2016). In the 1950s there was never a finished painting. It was inbuilt stylistically; it's always up for change. For Greenberg art had no meaning, art is always visual. Anything objective was out according to Rosenberg.

J.McK: You introduce objects into your work and at first glance there is quite a drama going on in your studio: there are planes crashing, and all sorts of goings on. Can you explain?

PP: This happened while I was teaching, by the 1960s. I had a Fulbright grant to go back to Italy for a year to study, even though I was older, so I went with my wife and family, we had just one child then. We lived a year in Rome and I got caught up drawing the Roman ruins, which slipped abstract expressionism! I spent my year there, making very precise wash drawings of the ruins and of the cliffs on the Amalfi coast. During that year I got hired indirectly to teach at Pratt Institute. I had moved from my first job to *Life* magazine (it had health benefits) and by then I had a good background in graphic design, I had a degree in art history and had published some articles, had a number of exhibitions so I was well qualified to teach. I taught art history in the studio by taking examples of art from history and bringing them into studio practice. I wrote up what I would do and stuck to it for the next 30 years.

J.McK: When I was first preparing for this interview I wanted to ask you, "How do you take a drawing or painting of the figure, a nude, and make it into a painting?" And then I saw your graphic work and I didn't need to ask at all because all of the graphic work was, still is, so exciting, full of energy where you seemed to understand the picture plane and what you could do with it. Your paintings are very much a consequence of the experience you had in graphic art.

PP: Well teaching was itself a great learning process. One of the artists I fell in love with as a student was Mondrian. I used the library at the Museum of Modern

Art and when I needed a break I would go down to the galleries, and in those days they were empty so it was possible to stare at works without interruption. Mondrian was already the God of all layout artists; as you really got to know his work, it began to vibrate, to do very strange things. It moves, the elements move if you give the work time. All sorts of things happen with the optic nerves, I guess, so lines drift and move around. You blink your eyes and it's all gone. I tried to teach on that basis. Everything I taught involved some of that lesson I learned from Mondrian, from his picture structure and how the picture structure drifts. The setups I produce in my studio are really theatre designs maybe that's what I should be exhibiting.

J.McK: It seems somewhat anachronistic that the beautifully rendered figures are sometimes missing their head. What does this vital omission perhaps signify?

PP: I start in the centre of the canvas, what is missing around the edges of the canvas is someone else's problem.

J.McK: I have observed a sense of detachment, at times a meditative stance in your figures, while all around there is mayhem and destruction, though it is admittedly a constructed mayhem. Am I projecting too much on to your work, to think that this is in fact the 21st century state of humanity, that it is essentially dichotomous?

PP: I get stuff from flea markets, eccentric pieces of furniture, things now from eBay. It's my take, my playing around with what became Pop art when I was still living with Andy Warhol. I did paintings of Superman that started with the Angel of Destruction after seeing the painting in Pisa, **The Triumph of Death**. I was so moved by it, My **Angel of Death** (swooping over the landscape in black robes) came from drawings I did during the war as well, this crazy angel in the sky over soldiers doing bayonet practice in the field. Our training was based on World War I trench warfare training, with the rifle as bayonet: we lined up every morning and tried to kill our friends, whoever were standing across from us. I sometimes still do those as exercises. Back in New York I also did the Angel of Death flying over New York. That and Icarus led to my paintings of Superman. Everyone laughed at it and now it's in a current exhibition New York and has been reproduced.

J.McK: It is a very great achievement to be well, to be creative and active in your nineties. You still work on large canvases and are still highly productive. Has old age been helpful or illuminating?

PP: It just gets in the way. Instead of working 5 days a week I only do three. Two

days a week have to be kept for doctor visits, either for my wife or myself. I can still walk to them! I have always stood to paint, and that has contributed to still being okay. Most doctors who see me can't quite figure it out.

J.McK: I have loved talking to you, thank you. It's been brilliant.