SPECTATOR LIFE

Philip Pearlstein (Photo by Brian Rigney Hubbard, courtesy of Betty Cuningham Gallery)

The artist who lived with war and Warhol

Philip Pearlstein on his memories of flat-sharing with Andy Warhol and how military service prepared him for life as an artist

FEATURES

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In 1946 a young GI called Philip Pearlstein returned home to Pittsburgh, and enrolled at Carnegie Institute of Technology, to study art. As he set up his easel for his first class, a fellow student called Andrew Warhola (sic) sat down beside him. ‘How does it feel to be famous?’

asked Andrew (back in high school, before the war, Philip had won first prize in a national art competition). ‘Well, it only lasted five minutes,’ said Philip.

In the Artist’s Studio (Betty Cuningham Gallery)

For the next three years, those two students were good pals, and when they graduated they went to New York together, to try and make it as commercial artists. They shared an apartment for a year, then went their separate ways. ‘He was eccentric, I guess, in a nice way – but very funny, and very pleasant,’ recalls Pearlstein, an amiable man with an infectious laugh and an engaging grin (time has hunched his compact frame but his eyes are bright and full of fun and his smile lights up the room). ‘He was obviously very talented, and after that first introduction we became very close friends.’

The rest is (art) history. Andy Warhol became the world’s most famous artist, and died in 1987, aged 58. His old roommate Philip Pearlstein took a longer, slower route. He married his college sweetheart, raised three children and took graphic design jobs and teaching jobs to support his growing family, but he never stopped painting and today he’s one of America’s most admired and respected artists, a leading figure in the renaissance of figurative art. Aged 93, he’s still painting, and now he has a new show which is part of the SALON series at London’s Saatchi Gallery.

We meet at the gallery, a whitewashed basement beneath the old Duke of York’s HQ on Chelsea’s Kings Road. It’s a small exhibition, eight paintings in a single room, but each painting is like a little world. You feel you could step right into them, like Alice Through the Looking Glass.

They're all female nudes, all painted in his New York Studio, and they're pictures of immense beauty: sensitive, sympathetic, and superbly executed. It's thrilling to see such delicate draughtsmanship, such assured use of light and shade, but it's not just their technical expertise that sets these works apart. They exude a rare sense of calm, an aura of peaceful contemplation. Unlike most modern artworks, they lift your spirits. You feel more optimistic once you've seen them, rather than hopeless and forlorn.

Naturally, such precision and insight doesn't come out of nowhere. It's the result of great latent talent and (above all) a long lifetime's unending work. His working methods are particular, honed by decades of trial and error. He uses other artists as his models. He works with the same models for years on end, on a succession of different paintings. Each painting takes many months, and the models are present throughout the process (unlike a lot of artists, he never works from photographs). 'They're there all the time – the whole visual experience changes if one of them isn't there.' He positions his easel at right angles to his models, so it doesn't create a barrier between the artist and the sitter. He plays classical LPs while he paints. His models must remain motionless throughout each long playing side.

'I did make a decision not just to hire people who were nice looking – I worked with whoever was willing to work with me,' he says. Yet it's a mark of his skill and sensitivity that all the people in his paintings are appealing. He sees the beauty in every subject, even while painting all their blemishes. 'They're ordinary people.' But they're ordinary people you could fall in love with.

Now that figuration is back in fashion, thanks to accomplished artists such as Pearlstein, it's easy to forget how brave it was to paint like this in the 1960s, when Abstract Expressionism was all the rage. Pearlstein was an expressionist himself until 1960, when he decided to switch to realism. It was a lonely decision with few rewards. One time, he took his students to the preview of an open exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art. The winning paintings were on one side of the room, the rejects on the other. The winners were all expressionistic. The rejects were all realistic.

Pearlstein at work (Betty Cuningham Gallery)

When he began to show in Europe, the opposition was even more intense. For many European artists, realism was still synonymous with fascism. ‘This is what Mussolini wanted,’ Italian artists told him, when they saw his work. ‘Just being a realist, to them, was a political statement,’ he says. ‘In Germany, the first show I had there, that’s what I got hit with: “Why is a Jew from New York doing the kind of work that Hitler would have liked?”’ Of course there are lots of things that Hitler would have hated about Pearlstein’s paintings (not least his liberal use of black models) but it’s a peculiarly modern notion that any art a tyrant might approve of must be bad.

Pearlstein’s long career is a great advert for the power of perseverance. If you keep doing what you do best, and do it well enough, eventually the market will come to you. For half a century, art critics have favoured artists who are disturbing and confusing, but punters have always preferred skill and beauty to shock and awe. Finally, the critics and curators have caught up with

public taste. Today Pearlstein's work is in art galleries all across America, from the Art Institute of Chicago to New York's Museum of Modern Art.

Philip Pearlstein was born in Pittsburgh in 1924. He grew up during the Depression – his father sold eggs and chickens. An only child, he was always drawing, from an early age. His parents weren't artistic. 'They were just scrambling to stay alive.' At school he had an inspirational art teacher, who encouraged him to enter that national art contest for high school students which so impressed Andy Warhol. When Philip won first prize, his painting appeared in Life magazine. Back in Pittsburgh, this was big news.

Philip went to college, but America was now at war, and after a few months he was drafted into the US infantry, and sent to Italy, to an Infantry Casualty Replacement Centre. 'It was the bottom of the barrel of the army. Nobody was expected to live. They more or less told you that.' However he'd brought that Life magazine article with him. It was a decision which may have saved his life. He showed the article to his commanding officers, and they were suitably impressed. While other recruits went to the front, he was put to work as a sign painter – an apprenticeship he never would have got at art school. The other sign painters in his unit had all been commercial artists before the war, and they showed him how to do it.

He also got a crash course in art history. As the US army advanced, driving back Hitler's Wehrmacht, precious Renaissance paintings that had been hidden throughout the war were returned to public view, and Philip was among the first to see them. 'We went to all the museums, which were just being reopened,' he says. 'It was a great education.'

He returned home having learnt more about art, and life, than he ever could have learned in college. 'The army is probably why I was able to survive in the art world,' he says. 'The big relief was surviving the army experience, and after that everything's been a gift.'

This philosophy informed his attitude to the workaday jobs he took to pay his way. Most artists resent doing teaching and commercial work. They see it as a distraction from their true calling, preventing them from painting the masterpieces they were born to paint. For Pearlstein, these day jobs were an important part of his art training. They fed his creativity and gave him a distinctive

style. If he'd gone straight from high school to art school, then straight into the studio, he would have been like so many other artists, producing introspective work that appealed purely to critics and curators.

One of Pearlstein's Paintings

Pearlstein couldn't afford to be so self-indulgent. With a family to feed, and no private income, he had to engage with the wider world, and make art that everyone could relate to. Graphic design forced him to think about the client, and the customers. Teaching forced him to test his ideas in the classroom.

He first started sketching nudes when he was hired to teach figure drawing. 'I was not equipped to teach figure drawing. I had no interest in anatomy, no knowledge.' He learnt on the job, and the nude became his mainstay, a genre almost obsolete in modern art. 'The compositions grew out of my background as a graphic designer, a layout artist, and that's what I taught.'

What's so attractive and impressive about Pearlstein's work is its equanimity, its neutrality. Like a great piece of music, it allows you to invest it with your own emotions. It's not preachy or

didactic – it's not telling you what to think. 'I decided I wasn't interested in psychology – I'd never been analysed,' he says. 'Anybody who looks at a painting interprets it in their own way. There is no universal language in art. The meaning is up for grabs.'

Pearlstein proves that contemporary art doesn't need to be ugly or opaque. His paintings aren't kitsch or schmaltzy – they're challenging and arresting – but they're easily accessible, and indifferent to the whims of fashion. They feel closer to the Old Masters in the Louvre than the Young British Artists in Tate Modern, but you don't need a degree in art history to enjoy or understand them. Warhol made a lot more noise, but Pearlstein has more staying power. Who would you rather hang on your wall? A Warhol or a Pearlstein? What will people be hanging on their walls in a hundred years, or 500 years? Bland silkscreens or these unique paintings? Warhol took art away from the artist and turned it into a commodity. Pearlstein brought it back.

SALON 004 – Philip Pearlstein: Paintings 1990-2017 runs at the Saatchi Gallery until March 25