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PHILIP PEARLSTEIN: *Nudes and Other Landscapes*

by William Corwin

Philip Pearlstein, *The Capture*, 1954. Oil on canvas, 48 x 40 inches. Courtesy Betty Cuningham Gallery.

ON VIEW

Betty Cuningham
February 27–April 5, 2020
New York

Philip Pearlstein, Nudes and Other Landscapes is a casual retrospective of the artist's paintings, drawings, and watercolors going back almost 70 years. It starts with a wonderful and gritty textured painting titled *The Capture* (1954), and comes up to the present with *Two Models with Carousel Giraffe and Le Corbusier Chair* (2020), right at the front door of the gallery. These are both nudes, a bookending device that might lead one to believe that the exhibition is about consistency. We follow Pearlstein's sustained use of a decentralized approach to painting that avoids perceived hierarchy of subject, but we come to realize that this master of the still-life-with-life has a conceptual Achilles heel: landscape. In paintings like the aforementioned *Two Models with Carousel Giraffe and Le Corbusier Chair* and the dazzling *Nude with Peacock Kimono* (1988) we can sink our teeth into Pearlstein's richly detailed rendering of materials—in this case embroidered silk, woven geometric tapestry, and both rattan and reflective chromed furniture, all surfaces deployed to frustrate our eyes' seemingly unstoppable movement towards the flesh of the figure. The artist can't do that with landscape: no matter how he crops and frames a particular view, it always feels like the artist is trying to show us something specific rather than everything all at once. On occasion, as in *Jerusalem, Kidron Valley* (1987–88) or the aquatint *Machu Picchu* (1978–79), this is exactly what he is doing. In Cuningham's exhibition we see uncharacteristically traditional methods of composition seeping in via Pearlstein's landscape subjects.

Philip Pearlstein, *Positano #1*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 64 x 96 inches. Courtesy Betty Cuningham Gallery.

Perhaps Claude or Capability Brown are to blame, maybe it's just natural instinct. The human eye is trained to find some visual narrative in landscape and depictions of architecture. In the watercolor *Pagan, Burma* (1997–98), a close-up reddish stone stupa fills most of the picture plane, its edges disconcertingly cut off at the lower right-hand corner. Such a strategy of truncation works exceedingly well in a painting like *Two Models with Decorative Fan* (2019), in which a nude woman in the foreground has the top half of her head lopped off, and seemingly fades from our perception because of it. In *Pagan, Burma*, however, we remain fixated on the stupa, despite a colorful background with a lot more stupas. The same is true in *Temple of Hatshepsut* (1979) and *Mosque and New Construction, Tel Aviv* (1997), where the artist

employs an off-center point of view, looking at works non-frontally in an attempt to make them seem more embedded in their surrounding geological or urban fabric. In “The Sphinx” (1979) he approaches monumental sculpture much as he does a nude. Here he presses the uraeus of the headdress tightly against the top of the picture plane and wedges his subject into the right-hand side of the canvas, while positioning the pyramid of Khufu in the background with plenty of sky around it. Still, it seems composed with the focus on the sphinx. Contrast this to the portrait *Julia Pearlstein* (2019), in which the artist’s daughter is portrayed next to a puppet of Mr. Punch (of Punch and Judy). While clearly a portrait of the flesh-and-blood figure, Julia’s head is also cropped by the top of the canvas, and the viewer’s eye flickers uneasily between the bemused human and the devilish looking puppet, unsure of where to focus.

Philip Pearlstein, *Two Models with Decorative Fan*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches. Courtesy Betty Cuningham Gallery.

Pearlstein’s tireless crusade to, against all odds, decentralize the figure is what makes his work so vibrant and fascinating. Several of the landscape images in *Nudes and Other Landscapes* do succeed in being “all-over” paintings. *Imperial Palace #4* (1960) and *Positano #1* (1960) are both good examples. These are two works that dissolve into fields of faceted color, implying a deeper space and volume if we care to acknowledge it. But initially, they buffet us with color and texture in the same way that the raw, violent, and frenetic, *The Capture* does. Cuningham’s exhibition is a well-rounded approximation of the artist’s career without the museum-sized space that would be required to do a really thorough presentation. Particularly

wonderful is the *Portrait of Al Held and Sylvia Stone* (1968), which reminds us that Pearlstein is not reluctant to paint in any genre, from formal portrait to pastoral landscape—though he still clips off Sylvia's head in order to disorient the viewer. The inescapability of hierarchical composition in landscape painting reveals an unspoken truth about Pearlstein's classic works: it is not so much the egalitarian arrangement of objects in space—both animate and inanimate—that attracts us, but the realization of how good he is at divorcing us from our natural proclivity to stare at ourselves.

Contributor

William Corwin

Will Corwin is a sculptor based in New York. He recently curated *Postwar Women* at the Art Students League—an exhibition of the League's Alumnae active between 1945-65, and *9th Street Club*, an exhibition of Krasner, Hartigan, E. De Kooning, Mercedes Matter, Perle Fine, Joan Mitchell and Helen Frankenthaler at The Gazelli Art House in London. He is author of *&Model* a history of a cutting edge contemporary art gallery in Leeds, UK, and is the editor of the *Formalism* the upcoming collection of essays by Saul Ostrow from Elective Affinity Press. He has written for *Bomb*, *Frieze*, *Artpapers*, *Canvas* and *Artcritical*, as well as regularly for the *Brooklyn Rail*.