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Philip Pearlstein, Whose Realist Nudes Revived Portraiture, Dies at 98

His harshly lit studies of life models represented a major departure in American painting and shocked modernist critics.

By William Grimes

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Philip Pearlstein, an artist whose coolly observed nudes reclaimed the naked human body for painting, and who found a persuasive modern idiom for the portrait genre, died on Saturday morning in Manhattan. He was 98.

His death, in a hospital, was announced by Betty Cuningham of the Betty Cuningham Gallery in New York.

In the early 1960s, Mr. Pearlstein turned from landscapes executed in a brushy Abstract Expressionist style and began painting nude models from life. In an era dominated by Color Field abstraction, and still heavily influenced by the emotional extravagance of artists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, his icily lit nudes, presented as implacable facts rather than symbols or characters in a narrative, represented a shocking departure in American painting.

“He has done what most of the ‘advanced’ critical opinion of the last two decades had declared impossible: He has created a major pictorial style based on an accurate and painstaking depiction of the figure,” Hilton Kramer of The New York Times wrote in 1969, reviewing a one-man show at the Allan Frumkin Gallery, adding, “They are certainly like nothing else in the painting of our time.”

Robert Hughes, reviewing a retrospective of Mr. Pearlstein’s work at the Brooklyn Museum in 1983, wrote in Time magazine that he “probably did more to ‘break the ice’ for realist painting in America than any other artist of his generation.”

For many mainstream critics, the very idea of painting the figure from life represented a reactionary leap into the past, a nostalgia-laden venture into the swamps of 19th-century academic art and a betrayal of the hard-won victories of the modernist avant-garde.

Mr. Pearlstein overcame these objections by taking a rigorously modern view of his subject. His models, in defiance of traditional posing, lolled and slouched, their faces slack with boredom or fatigue. Harsh lighting fractured their bodies into abstract planes of muted color, which Mr. Pearlstein allowed to be cropped ruthlessly by the canvas edge. A torso might end at the neck; arms were cut off at the wrist or elbow.

The artist's unsparing eye, usually positioned well above his models, refused to edit out stray shadows, even those cast by the easel. The result was chilly reportage, unsettling yet compelling.

This "hard realism," as Mr. Pearlstein called it, broke decisively with the torrid emotionalism of the Abstract Expressionists, embracing an art that was, he asserted in a statement to ARTnews in 1967, "sharp, clear, unambiguous." His nudes resisted interpretation or erotic interest. Anti-symbolic, they refused to participate in a narrative.

"The meaning of the figure in its particular situation had no interest for me," he wrote in an artistic statement for The Paris Review in 1975. "I refuse to be an amateur psychoanalyst, or novelist. I would prefer to be thought of as a sort of stilled-action choreographer."

Mr. Pearlstein's "Model With Empire State Building" (1992). His nudes resisted interpretation or erotic interest. Betty Cuningham Gallery, New York

Philip Martin Pearlstein was born on May 24, 1924, in Pittsburgh, to David and Libby (Kalser) Pearlstein. His father was a self-employed vendor of eggs and poultry.

As a high school student, Philip twice won a national art contest sponsored by Scholastic magazine, and his winning paintings — one of a merry-go-round, the other of a barbershop in a Black neighborhood — appeared in Life magazine.

His art studies at the Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University) were interrupted when he was drafted into the Army in 1943. Posted to Italy with a unit that made road signs and illustrations for training materials, he spent his free time in Florence looking at the Renaissance art in the Pitti Palace and the Masaccio frescoes in the Church of Santa Maria del Carmine.

After being discharged from the service in 1946, he returned to the Carnegie Institute, where he

combined art studies with work designing catalogs for building products at the architectural firm Altenhof & Bown.

His fellow students included Andy Warhol and Dorothy Cantor, whom he married in 1950. She died in 2018. Mr. Pearlstein is survived by their children, William, Julia and Ellen Pearlstein, and two grandchildren.

In 1949, after receiving his bachelor's degree in fine art, he moved to Manhattan with Warhol, whose

Mr. Pearlstein, right, at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in 1948 with his fellow students Dorothy Cantor, whom he later married, and Andy Warhol. Leonard Kessler

brothers allowed him to go only if accompanied by Mr. Pearlstein as a guardian. The two shared an apartment for several months.

For the next eight years, Mr. Pearlstein worked with the eminent graphic designer Ladislav Sutnar, designing plumbing catalogs for American Standard and other companies. He began exhibiting with the Tanager Gallery, an early co-op, and studied at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University, where he earned a master's degree in 1955. His thesis was on the Dadaist artists Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp.

His early paintings, from what he later called his symbolist period, were brightly colored abstractions that incorporated some of the unusual shapes from his plumbing catalogs. He also painted, well before the advent of Pop Art, a series of paintings based on American symbols. "Superman" (1952) shows a heavily muscled superhero flying through thickly painted storm clouds over the Manhattan skyline, where two missiles threaten to collide. The pose imitated the figure of God in Michelangelo's painting "The Separation of Light From Darkness" on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

On vacation trips, Mr. Pearlstein became fascinated by rock formations and began seeking out what he thought of as ready-made Abstract Expressionist compositions in nature. A series of drawings that he did in Maine in the mid-1950s provided the source material for the semiabstract landscapes he painted for the rest of the decade.

“By eliminating the sky, by looking down instead of taking in the whole scene, I got a composition that was essentially a two-dimensional arrangement, and at the same time it corresponds to nature,” he told an interviewer in 1979.

In the late 1950s, Mr. Pearlstein began drawing the figure with a group of artists assembled by the painter Mercedes Matter, who instructed her models not to adopt tense, muscularly expressive poses but instead to lounge and sprawl. At the same time, Mr. Pearlstein found himself increasingly intrigued by the exercises in form and perspective that he assigned his students at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, where he taught from 1959 to 1963.

“I remember standing at the blackboard trying to describe, first two-point perspective, and then three-point perspective, and finally giving up and asking if any of the kids in the class knew how to do it,” he told the critic and curator Robert Storr in 1983. “Suddenly it seemed like the most complicated, sophisticated, interesting thing to do, to try to be realist.”

Mr. Pearlstein in his studio in Manhattan in 2002, in front of his painting “Mickey Mouse Puppet Theater, Jumbo Jet, and Kiddie Tractor With Two Models.” Sara Krulwich/The New York Times.

Mr. Pearlstein declared war on what he called the “two tyrannies” of modern art. The first was an insistence on the flatness of the picture plane. The second was the roving point of view — the demolition of three-point perspective by artists like Cézanne and Picasso, who eliminated volume from the human form and fractured its contours.

“A moralistic ban has been placed on spatial illusionism,” he wrote in ARTnews in 1962. “But it is an arbitrary ban. The flatness of the picture plane is no more a truth than was the flatness of the world

before Columbus.” That year, he exhibited his figure drawings at the Allan Frumkin Gallery in Manhattan.

Mr. Pearlstein’s campaign became less lonely when artists like Alfred Leslie, Jack Beal and Alex Katz also began exploring the human figure and rediscovered the portrait genre, where Mr. Pearlstein had blazed a trail with such forceful, unsparing paintings as “Portrait of Allan Frumkin” (1965) and “Portrait of Al Held and Sylvia Stone” (1968).

He remained faithful to the (usually female) nude throughout his career, gradually introducing greater formal complexity and visual pizazz into his paintings. In the 1970s his models began posing on brightly patterned kilim rugs. In the later paintings, he complicated the visual field by introducing still-life props and pieces of bric-a-brac— duck decoys, weather vanes, plastic inflatable chairs, fluorescent Mickey Mouse signs, model boats.

When asked by Art in America in 1981 if his art had changed over time, he replied: “It hasn’t so much changed as simply fulfilled itself. I think when any artist hooks into an idea, the idea itself simply takes over and dictates to him — you follow through in as logical a manner as you can.”

Mr. Pearlstein taught at Brooklyn College from 1963 until his retirement in 1988. He was given a retrospective at the Georgia Museum of Art in Athens in 1970, and a retrospective of his work organized by the Milwaukee Art Museum in 1983 traveled to the Brooklyn Museum.

He resisted attempts by critics to find a charged psychosexual message in his work. “As a rose is a rose, so my paintings of models are paintings of models,” he wrote in “Why I Paint the Way I Do,” a 1971 essay published in The New York Times. Later, in the catalog for his 1983 retrospective, he put the same idea more whimsically:

“Symbolist ideograms are easier to live with, but I am the I.R.S. man of a few bodies that inhabit New York City and visit my studio periodically.”