

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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## PHILIP PEARLSTEIN *JUST THE FACTS, 50 Years of Looking and Drawing and Painting*

by Robert Berind

NEW YORK STUDIO SCHOOL GALLERY | JANUARY 16 - FEBRUARY 22, 2014

In the late 1950s, Philip Pearlstein abandoned the expressive painterly language favored by his elders and many of his contemporaries and set out to work directly from observation. He ignored contemporaneous aesthetic programs based on Greenbergian next-step assumptions about art history and the various self-reflexive aesthetics that permeated the New York art scene during those years. He briefly touched on popular culture in 1954 with a Superman image but left that domain behind, committing himself instead to straightforward studies of the figure. With his continuous linear contours and unbroken bodily volumes, Pearlstein diverged from the exploratory and, in curator Robert Storr's word, "neo-Cezanne" manner of drawing favored by the Studio School and avoided traditional, beaux-arts procedures of academic rendering, along with their standard stock of classical poses. *JUST THE FACTS, 50 Years of Looking and Drawing and Painting* is a testament to this impulse and the singular body of work it precipitated.

Apart from two items from the 1940s and a single example of his rock cliff studies, the 41 drawings and two paintings included in this five-decade survey spotlight a rigorously disciplined practice of drawing the nude, singly or in pairs. Most of the works on view are from the 1960s, giving a sense of a daily devotional practice on the way to achieving mastery; many were never intended for public display but were ferreted out from the artist's studio by Storr. As a result, the exhibition affords a candid and long overdue view into Pearlstein's methods and process.



Philip Pearlstein, "Study for Aquatint and Line Etching, Nude on Settee," (1977), Wash on paper, 40 3/4" x 29 1/4".

Yet another stylistic refusal that distinguishes and, for some, problematizes Pearlstein's art is his subjectmatter: models posing naked. The viewer knows nothing about them as individuals; their personalities, psychological states, social status, and even their erotic aspect play no role in either the drawings or the paintings. To the extent that we can impute any affect, the figures seem bored, naturally enough after hours of posing. Rarely do we see their faces; in fact heads are often cropped entirely. Degas proposed that the artist should regard the figure as an animal, merely a dynamic, live body. Pearlstein can be said to displace the human presence even further, viewing the figure as mere elements in a landscape: boulders, hills, and valleys. Accentuated foreshortening that emphasizes, say, a foot or hand, as in "Model with Marionettes" (1992), indicates the close presence of the artist/viewer but offers no intimacy, either emotional or physical.

And yet there is verve in the drawings, an unself-conscious spontaneity afforded perhaps by their informal status as studies. Here, anatomy is *discovered* rather than referring to a pre-existing system. Unlike Pearlstein's paintings, with their workmanlike finish, the drawings register a lively, responsive, perceptual engagement. Shadows are established with vigorous, expedient back and forth hatching, and minimal detail. Fluid shadows in the wash drawings indicate a light source and give volume to the body. Cast shadows, generally absent in the earlier works, become prominent features of the later paintings, in which the figures' environments are fully articulated. Contours in both mediums are generally uninflected with little variation, attentively seeking out the unfamiliar forms created by each pose.

A persistent issue with Pearlstein's nudes is the question of his emotional neutrality. The intimacy of the studio is implicit, yet our relation to the people pictured, particularly in the paintings, is vexed. These unclothed figures lounge or recline without acknowledging the viewer. Their faces, when not cropped, are incommunicative. Does the very absence of eroticism indicate an unconscious repression, a subverted psychological content running through Pearlstein's oeuvre? Or, to look at the question from another angle, does the viewer's thwarted expectation itself reveal something about *his* or *her* psychology rather than that of the artist? Throughout the history of art and, for that matter, in life itself, there is a habitual presumption that naked individuals exist for our delectation. Frank Stella's oft-quoted "What you see is what you see," with its minimalist rejection of readings beyond immediate physicality, may well apply here. From this perspective, Pearlstein's cool style aligns him, however unexpectedly, with Andy Warhol (a friend of his youth) and the prevailing anti-romanticism of the '60s.

Over the years, Pearlstein began to introduce an array of furniture, folk art, Navajo rugs, and other collectables he accumulated in his studio into his work, bringing an often comical interactivity into play. A pencil drawing from 1992 shows two marionettes, one with a banjo, gazing at a young male model. "Man and Superman" (1993) presents the model in the foreground, with head and leg cropped, humorously contrasted with a diminutive superhero. The drawing may slyly refer to his earlier, comic-based painting and, possibly, George Bernard Shaw's play of the same name. The

drawing and accompanying painting entitled "Two Models with Swan Decoy and Carved Garuda Figure" (2013) feature a recumbent pair of models at the center of a raucous drama: a ferocious, mythic Indonesian bird figure harangues a large but placid swan figurine. Other than the confrontation between these two creatures, the scene is still. Such improbable contrasts, with their diverse colors, surfaces, and surprises, have in recent years played a major role in Pearlstein's compositions, at times even upstaging the people. One can even imagine the models taking time off while the artist indulges his evident fascination with these objects and their inducements to painterly innovations. Meanwhile, the incongruities and offbeat humor introduced by these moments enliven Pearlstein's world without for a moment undermining the sobriety of his extraordinary accomplishment.

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