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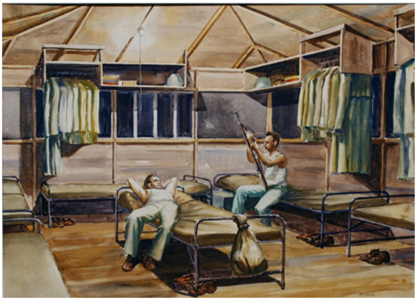
Camp Blanding: The Naked and the Undead in Philip Pearlstein

print

by **Dennis Kardon**

PHILIP PEARLSTEIN—JUST THE FACTS, 50 Years of Looking and Drawing and Painting, curated by Robert Storr, at the New York Studio School

January 16 to February 22, 2014
8 West 8th Street, between Fifth and Sixth avenues
New York City, 212 673 6466



Philip Pearlstein, Two Soldiers in Hut, Camp Blanding [#28], 1943. Watercolor on Paper, 21-1/4 x 29-1/2 inches. Courtesy of Betty Cuningham Gallery

JUST THE FACTS, 50 Years of Looking and Drawing and Painting is a bit of a misnomer given the strange disconnect between the world Pearlstein depicts, and the world that we actually experience. Additionally, the first drawing in the show was done not fifty, but seventy years ago in 1943. And, while there are plenty drawings, the show is limited in its scope to just two paintings. Nevertheless, absent the full museum retrospective he deserves, this is a good opportunity to understand the phenomenon of our experience of actually *looking* at Pearlstein's work.

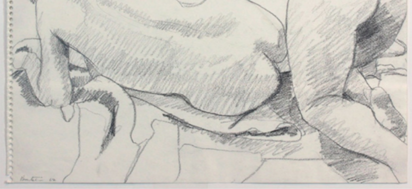
Pearlstein's supporters have always touted his contrarian steadfastness, objective detachment, and uncompromising equanimity in a rapidly fluctuating art scene. His detractors have always complained about the lifeless quality of the nudes or the dry, plodding facture of the surface. My own interest, after forty years of viewing, has caromed between fascination and an uneasiness that I find increasingly compelling.

There is a simultaneous hunger for and dread of human contact at the heart of Philip Pearlstein's deadpan work, so scary and elusive that it frustrates straightforward analysis. The real drama of the work, even from its beginnings always feels hidden. *Two Soldiers in Hut, Camp Blanding*, 1943, (could there be a better place name for a Pearlstein location?) is a watercolor he did during his army service in WWII when he was only 19. It initially seems to depict a pristinely ordered barracks interior with intense specificity. Hanging uniforms align with a series of dark rectangular windows. Tightly made beds are in parallel or perpendicular rows, shoes neatly placed underneath.

But not everything is ordered: there are two men in undershirts. One (young P. himself?) is sitting on his bunk absorbed in the straps of the rifle jutting at an angle from between his legs. The other man, sprawled on his back on an adjacent bed with arms clasped odalisque-like over his head, feet chastely on the ground, is absorbed in the man with the rifle.

Several things are striking about the drawing. The first thing is the precision with which it is executed. Everything seems perfect from the light in the room to the shadow of rifle guy's arm across his wrinkled wifebeater. As in all of Pearlstein's drawings there is a confident virtuosity, absent visible doubt or second-guessing, which creates an aura of nonchalant control and authority. And despite the specificity, the figures seem alive and engaged and turn the regimented quotidian environment into a vignette that bristles with dramatic possibility.

The young artist creates a Proustian gaze for us to occupy, a slightly disingenuously innocent p.o.v. that allows us to eavesdrop on an intimacy but from a distant and seemingly objective vantage. But watch how this gaze evolves. It is the last time, at least in this show, that Pearlstein invites a viewer to fantasize about the psychological relationships of the humans he depicts. As the years pass, the gaze moves from a comfortable distance to forcing the viewer right into the midst of the scene.



Philip Pearlstein, Untitled (Two Models), 1962. Pencil on Paper, 13-3/4 x 11 inches. Courtesy of Betty Cuningham Gallery

In search of lost time is a good way to approach Pearlstein's work. This exhibition can frustrate an attempt to chart an evolution of how the work has evolved since it is not hung strictly chronologically. But from *Untitled (Two Models),* 1962, we can start to get a sense of what he gradually came to leave out.

Gone is the specific interior of the *Ft. Blanding* drawing, though it is still dynamic. One of the women seems to provocatively crawl away from the viewer, thigh brushing the exposed buttocks of the woman lying next to her, but implicit is that it is just pencil lines that are doing the caressing. And though throughout the 1960s we may experience the frisson of interaction that could indicate a relational narrative, by the 1970s all intimations of human interaction in the work seem to disappear.

It has become a familiar story. Pearlstein's obstinate bravery reinvents figurative painting in the face of a modernist juggernaut of abstraction, bravura paint handling, and flatness. Then there is his oft-described decision to eliminate sentiment, psychological narrative, and sexuality from the depiction of the human form, aiming to achieve a tough, objective formalism. But these accounts don't touch the disturbing nature of the work.

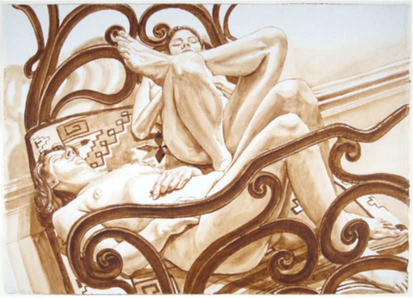
Alexi Worth came very close to pinpointing the trouble in his catalog essay for Pearlstein's 2005 exhibition in which he remarks on "Pearlstein's Fictions." Terms like *realism* or *objectivity* are cul-de-sacs in coming to grips with Pearlstein, and it is only accepting and understanding the fictive nature of his work that we have a chance to experience what is going on here.

Any painted representation is a dramatically edited one. Given that even the simplest setting contains an infinite amount of information, a final composition is always a compilation of several vantage points, focal attentiveness, formal decisions, and the elision of time. And it is the elaborate set-ups that Pearlstein employs as well as the fact that his models are hired to take their clothes off and keep a single pose of their choosing for weeks at a time, that reinforce the fictional nature of his pictures.

What actually occurs then is really a drama of absorption and control. Pearlstein's ability and desire to stay absorbed, to inhabit the moment, feels crucial to all of his work. Absorption is the big payoff for most painters. It is a respite from the confusing swirl of troubling thought. And Pearlstein's absorption is consummate, though the very things he manages to tune out are all still present *sub rosa*.

The implicit anxiety of staying in that moment drives the engine of his work. Thoughts of desire, aging, and mortality can be repressed but are always inherent in the naked young flesh of the bored models that he hires to languish year after year. In order to stay absorbed, he must relate to his subjects only as a problem to be overcome by his control and concentration.

Staying absorbed all of these years has required Pearlstein to constantly challenge his own mastery. When one model became too easy, he started using two, then he started using furniture and complex textile patterns, and finally in recent years the models have been partially obliterated, fractured, or juxtaposed with all manner of ethnic, Americana, or folk art objects.



Philip Pearlstein, Two Female Models on Cast Iron Bed, 1975. Wash on Paper, 29-1/4 x 40-1/4 inches. Courtesy of Betty Cuningham Gallery

The movement of patterns, and swirls in furniture, in *Two Female Models on Cast Iron Bed*, a 1975 wash drawing, stand in stark contrast to the two affectless supine women whom we piece together through a complex maze of baroque curves and negative spaces. This "looking through" quality results in our assuming a necessarily scopophilic gaze.

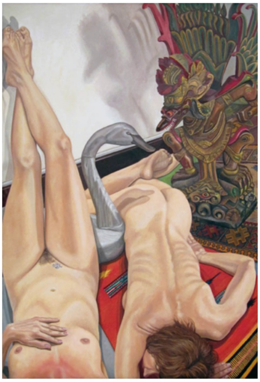
To consider scopophilia and control uncovers the peculiar sexual aspect of this work. Eroticism was something Pearlstein has said he felt compelled to eliminate to free figuration from being debased by petty prurience or illustrational content; but to free it to do what? Models are shown asleep or expressionless, bodies are cropped arbitrarily, the lighting is harsh and bright, and contours are all in focus. But just because Pearlstein renders no hint of erotic intention doesn't mean that sexuality has been eliminated. He constructs a gaze, and it isn't a mechanized construction. His gaze is embodied: made by his body, of other bodies, and embodied gazes inherently contain a sexuality.

Gender is never ambiguous. Yet certain absences in Pearlstein's work eventually becomes conspicuous. Has there ever been a woman's genitals depicted in one of his paintings? All the naked models are almost without exception fairly young, attractive, and toned. Obviously his choice of models and poses eliminates anything in the depiction of a body that would allow imagination to create an erotic narrative, as would protruding labia or an erect or large or tiny penis, a wrinkle, a blemish, a fold of fat, or a facial expression or gesture. If models touch each other in a Pearlstein picture, it is only incidentally and never with their hands.

Instead we encounter undead zombies ?- bodies with no consciousness, personality, history or sexuality, whose portrayal denies us the possibility of fantasy. The work becomes passive/aggressive. They entice with a naked human presence, but derail any imaginative involvement. We then have a choice: to either content ourselves with admiring Pearlstein's formal skill, or inhabit the pitiless, but nonetheless sexualized, gaze devoid of empathy he proffers. Whether the gaze of doctor, serial killer, or dispassionate artist, it is a gaze that coldly but actively examines and deconstructs, and not just passively observes. It is a probing gaze that makes us complicit with the attitude that creates it and underlies what can make us so uneasy.

But, this is evolving once more. In the end, it is his addition of folk, commercial, and ethnographic art objects to his compositions that have slowly started to change the nature of Pearlstein's work. The models remain passive players but in a new narrative that Pearlstein now allows through the back door. He juxtaposes his representations of them with other representational objects, which, though still painted or drawn with his usual insouciant rendering, still contain the expressive signifiers placed by their previous creators. He may disavow a specific narrative, but he certainly invites one.

In *Two Models with Swan Decoy and Carved Garuda Figure*, the title of both a large drawing and adjacent painting from last year, the reclining nude women become collateral damage in the angry confrontation between a sneering wooden swan and the inflamed half man, half bird of the wildly colored Garuda figure.



Philip Pearlstein, Two Models with Swan Decoy and Carved Garuda Figure, 2013. Oil on Canvas, 72 x 48 inches. Courtesy of Betty Cuningham Gallery

Of course the painting of these objects is no more expressionist than the naked women they hover over. But Pearlstein formally builds feeling as the passive bodies of the models frame and emphasize the beak-to-beak confrontation of the two objects in the upper right, while the Garuda's wavery shadow animates it by repeating its own sharply accented lines.

The swan's head casts a phallic shape across the buttocks of one model and all diagonals point to her rear as her pelvis nestles the base of the swan. The other model's extended legs running vertically up the side of the canvas, mirror the curve of the swan's neck as her delicately crossed ankles and feet come to rest on the depicted wall, congruent with the top of the canvas. She sports a tattoo that sits on the surface of the painting above her pubic line like a turquoise signature, and her sunburnt chest above her breasts implies a personal history unusual for Pearlstein, and is the last part of her body that is visible before her head and shoulders disappear off the bottom edge of the canvas. Her absent head is right where a spectator might normally stand.

This is truly one of Pearlstein's most accomplished and revealing paintings. Emotion is finally allowed open expression in the context of exposed flesh. All the formal pictorial games Pearlstein plays here amplify the feeling of the painting. And it is finally a relief to see uncovered what one always sensed was simmering beneath the controlled depiction of a lifetime's worth of naked bodies.

Philip Pearlstein, Two Models with Swan Decoy and Carved Garuda Figure, 2013. Pencil on Paper, 40 x 30 inches. Courtesy of Betty Cuningham Gallery

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BW **Bruno W. Schaerer**
10 years ago

Seen the paintings of Philip Pearlstein some 5 years ago for the first time, I've found an artist who obviously shares my love for these fine bodies, legs and mainly them bony knees. I love it. These paintings are the most erotic ones I've ever seen in my life and I'm 66 years of age.
At least once a week my computer gets hot when running thru all them pictures showing THE FINEST ART of Philip Pearlstein.

Best ever, ever ! Thank you Philip Pearlstein

Bruno

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ST **Sam Thurston**
10 years ago

This is an excellent review but note the personal and psychological approach can be limited. There can also be historical reasons for Perlstein's choices. Pearlstein was not the only male painter to shy away from erotic content during the '60's - a period when there was was a new interest in the figure. Alex Katz also shied away from the erotic with exclusively clothed figures in a cool style. Nor did Porter paint the nude. The West Coast painters painted nudes but but with a style that kept the erotic at bay. With greater realism may come greater opportunity for the erotic but the reasons to pass might be as much (or more) art historical as personal.

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