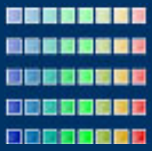


Watercolor Artist



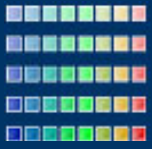
## WATERCOLOR

### Philip PEARLSTEIN

Study for Two Models with  
Fan in Front  
(1999)  
watercolor on paper, 40 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 59 $\frac{1}{4}$   
inches  
Robert Miller Gallery, New York

[Back](#)





## WATERCOLOR

**David  
SALLE**

Untitled  
(2002)  
watercolor on paper, 15 x 20  
inches  
The artist courtesy Gagosian  
Gallery and Lehmann Maupin  
Gallery

**Back**



A big survey exhibition makes for strange bedfellows, although finding themselves in the same metaphorical bed will probably make artists Philip Pearlstein and David Salle squirm. Nevertheless, their dispassionate outlooks and disdain for sentimental humanistic conventions gives a similar deSadean discipline to their work.

Okay, it's true that they are totally different kinds of artists originating from different artistic moments. One seems straightforward and sincere, the other indirect and ironic. However, the watercolor medium makes their similarities more apparent and their differences seem merely generational. Both employ elaborate visual rhymes that confuse the eye and make their work edgy. Both artists also use banality as a form of wit. Perhaps because Salle's sexual politics have always been more self-conscious and hipper, it is easy to miss how the sting of the crop flavors Pearlstein's work as well.

A large menacing fan dominates the composition of Pearlstein's *Study for Two Models with Fan in Front* (1999). The fan resembles some medieval torture device. The twisted wires of the fan's cage visually dice up the bodies of the two nude women while formally referencing various patterned fabrics as well as the bentwood rocker in which one of the nudes reclines. Because of its strange scale, the fan actually seems to float in front of the composition. The superimposition of iconic object on the bodies of women, the grissaille quality of the shadows, the combination of banality and oppressive control and, ohmigod: David Salle.

Conversely Salle, in *Untitled* (2002) wryly eschews his familiar women in humiliating poses for that handy symbol of femininity, the flower. Instead of a fan, the superimposition of an anemically rendered angel on three red poppies, before a yellow striped ground, sets the stage for his casual yet elaborate formal puns.

The curve and thickness of the lines that form the angel echo the various stems of the poppies, while the curl in the angel's hair rhymes with the vaginal folds of the adjacent red petals. The angel, with her sad expression, though, is probably the stone sort that adorns a mausoleum, and so we still end up with sex and death, albeit with a bit more subtlety. The sad memorial angel also belies the usual treacly floral watercolor clichés, invoking a funereal display, and making the whole painting into a sly image of mourning.

Both artists benefit enormously from the translucency of watercolor. Salle uses the stereotype of the genteel watercolorist to allow himself a simplicity and directness of hand that harkens back to the insouciant awkwardness of his early work. While the fluidity of the pigment softens Pearlstein's typical puritan painting style, frees his surface, and gives a healthy glow to his usually pasty nudes.

Through ironic contrast, watercolor makes us more aware of the creepy implications in both works. The medium seems to force a square stylistic unity on the desperately hip Salle and makes a usually styleless, nerdy Pearlstein look suddenly, effortlessly fashionable.

**DENNIS KARDON** is a New York artist.

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