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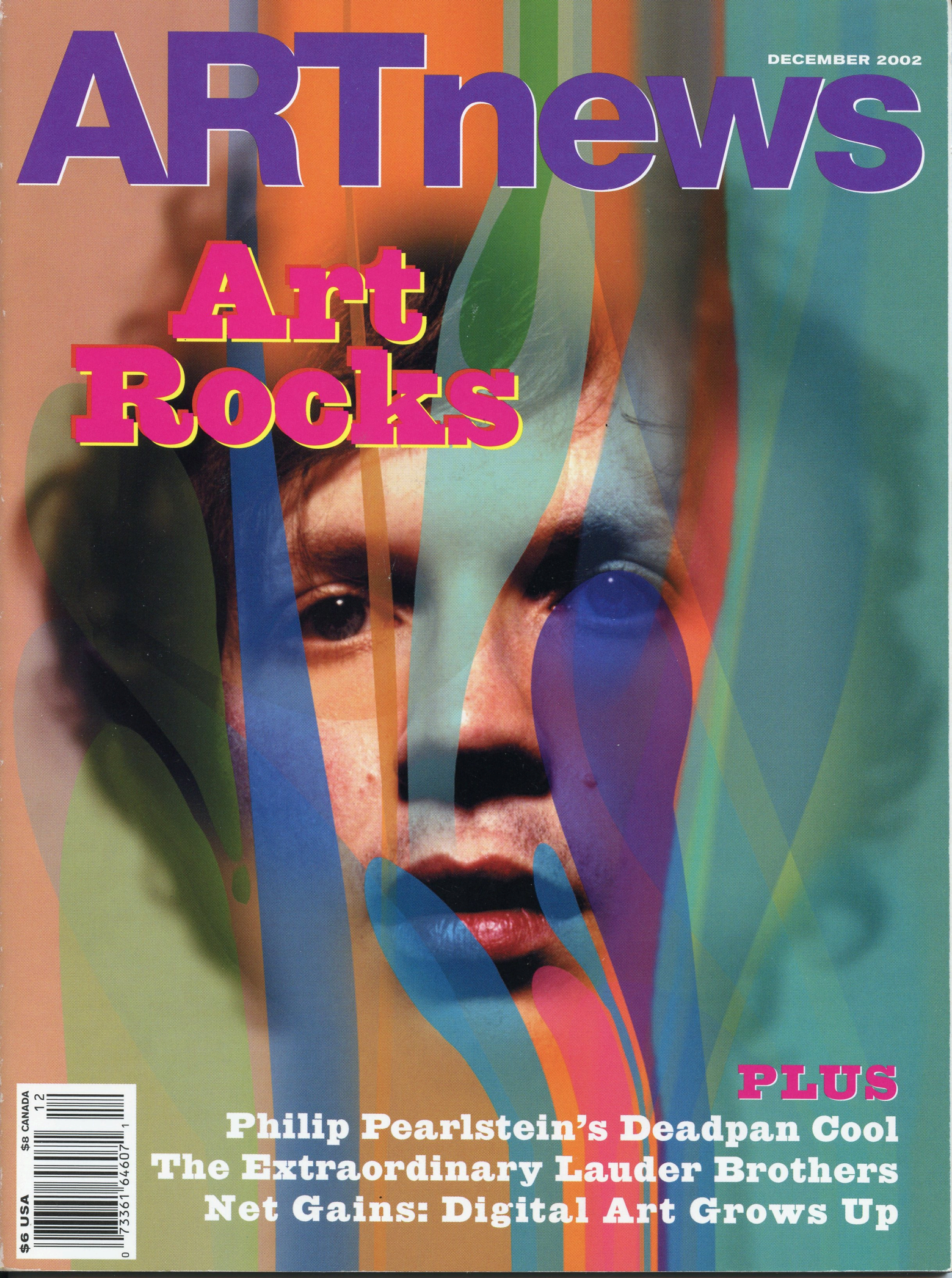

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Philip Pearlstein's Deadpan Cool

His refusal to idealize his figures or allow them even a psychological beauty gives his works their power—while infuriating some viewers • By Linda Yablonsky

"There is no right way to go about being a realist," says Philip Pearlstein, and he would be the one to know. Realism, he points out, hasn't been all that popular an idea in art since the advent of modernism, but Pearlstein has stuck with it for 40 years, and he has no regrets.

A diminutive and plainspoken man with a gentle voice and a barrel chest, Pearlstein is, at 78, one of this country's most highly regarded figure painters. Like his old college roommate, Andy Warhol, he is also one of the world's great flea-market hounds.

COURTESY ROBERT MILLER GALLERY, NEW YORK

***Two Models with Green Japanese Robe*, 2002. Pearlstein's recent work, says one critic, has become more decorative, more mannered, more polished, and "more kinky."**

On display in the dining area of the 4,000-square-foot loft in New York's garment district that he and Dorothy, his wife of 52 years, call home, a jaw-dropping collection of weathervanes, duck decoys, and other folk-art treasures mingles with Native American arrowheads, Pre-Columbian statuary, primitive stone tools, potsherds, birdhouses, Eskimo baskets, vintage marionettes, and an ancient and imposing terra-cotta storage jar from Peru. And that is just what one table holds.

There is more on every windowsill, in cubbyholes, on the floor. Hidden away are the dozen or so Eadweard Muybridge photo plates that had gone begging at a flea-market stall until Pearlstein showed up, willing to pay $10 apiece for them. "No one cared about them then," he says, unable to hold back a smile.

He leads the way through a narrow hall to his studio, pointing out several fine Japanese prints hanging above shelves that are crammed with antique dolls. In the studio itself, which runs the length of the loft, more objects are hanging from the ceiling or are piled on chairs. A visitor nearly trips over not-quite-casual groupings of hobbyhorses and large model sailboats, airplanes, and fire trucks on the floor. There's even a mummy case and a birdhouse replica of the White House.

All of these items will be familiar to viewers of Pearlstein's nudes of the last two decades. The paintings are reproduced, along with portraits of several well-known art-world figures, in *Philip Pearlstein Since 1983* (Harry N. Abrams), a recently published monograph by Robert Storr, who left his curatorial post at the Museum of Modern Art last spring to become the Rosalie Solow Professor of Modern Art at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts.

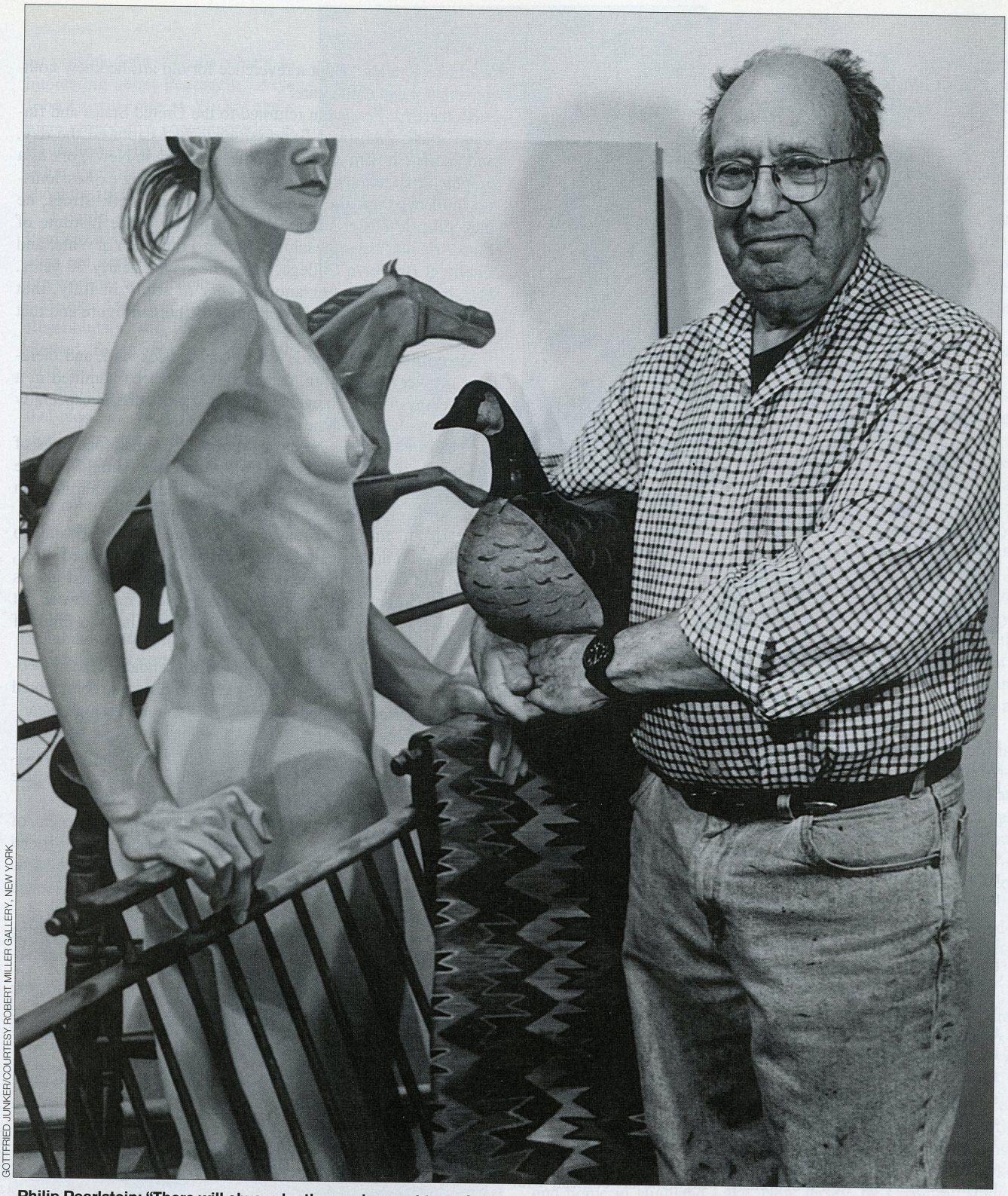
The book illustrates the increasing formal complexity of Pearlstein's work after his move, in 1978, from the narrow, Upper West Side brownstone where he and his wife raised their three children to the loft, which offered him more room for painting and more places to show off his junk-shop finds.

And yet, it wasn't Pearlstein who thought of using objects from this splendid collection in his paintings. He says the idea came from a studio model who wanted to pose with one of his black minstrel dolls. Ever since then, his nudes have had to share increasingly larger portions of their canvases with likenesses of kiddie-car tractors, toy dirigibles, Navajo rugs, and carousel lions.

Storr cautions his readers against imbuing with any special meaning the paintings he describes as Pearlstein's "inhabited Wunderkammers, idiosyncratic museums in which the attendants have been stripped of their clothes. . . . For those inclined to read everything as a symbol or sign of something else," he writes, "Pearlstein's paintings can be maddening."

Ask Pearlstein if he cares. "One of the things I learned from studying art history," he says, "is people's interpretations of what's going on in a painting, where every piece of fruit or fly on that fruit has a meaning, but no one can prove it—and so what? That's not why I'm looking at the painting. Like Egyptian art—I read the mythology and I still don't understand it, but the works are marvelous and it has nothing to do with what the meaning is."

All the same, Pearlstein's almost grim resistance to metaphor



GOTTFRIED JUNKER/COURTESY ROBERT MILLER GALLERY, NEW YORK

Philip Pearlstein: "There will always be those who want to make paintings of the human form with its parts all where they should be."

isn't the only reason his superreal paintings unsettle people. His refusal to idealize his figures or allow them even a psychological beauty also frustrates viewers. Still, the self-conscious illusionism that infuriates some is for others just what gives Pearlstein's work its currency and power.

"He's one of those artists who was always completely out of sync but lived long enough to be relevant again," says the art historian and onetime Pearlstein subject Robert Rosenblum.

Does that relevance translate to sales? According to Pearlstein's primary dealer, the Robert Miller Gallery, his new oils easily command $35,000 to $85,000; prices for watercolors range from $22,000 to $28,000. The market for both remains steady.

That hardly surprises Rosenblum. "Interest in the body and portraiture, varieties of realism, Lucian Freud and Jenny Saville—Pearlstein's right in there with the ugly flesh," he says. "And the deadpan cool of his work is suddenly very compatible with a lot of art today."

Lisa Yuskavage, who came to prominence in the 1990s with

***Two Models with Mummy Balloons and Toy Fire Engine*, 2001. Viewers were shocked when Pearlstein painted male and female nudes together.**

paintings of women whose figures were wildly distorted, acknowledges a debt to Pearlstein but doesn't see him as such a hard-core realist.

"He's so much an abstract painter," she says. "He's a genius. There was no American figure painting for a while—Wyeth didn't count—and I see Pearlstein as having created a bridge between nonobjective flat painting and Pollock, or allover painting. And that is an important step to what is going on at this moment."

Embracing the realist tradition in the middle of the 20th century actually required a huge leap of faith, but Pearlstein, perhaps more than anyone, was well prepared to make it.

"Philip was the art star in high school," says Dorothy Pearlstein, who met her husband when both were art students at what was then Carnegie Tech (now Carnegie Mellon University) in Pittsburgh, their hometown. Pearlstein started drawing as a child. In fifth or sixth grade, he says, he started visiting the Carnegie Museum of Art, and in junior high school, he took Saturday morning art classes there. His parents (his father sold chickens and eggs from the back of a truck) knew nothing about art and neither encouraged nor discouraged him, but his teachers recognized his talent. In 1941 he won a *Scholastic Magazine* art contest, with subsequent publication of his two entries in *Life*. After just a year of college he was drafted and sent to Italy, but he never saw combat. "I was always in training," he says. He was also looking at art.

Put in charge of an Army sign-painting shop in Italy for a year after the war ended, he saw all the Baroque and Renaissance art he could. "My basic education in art history took place then," he says. "The unit I was attached to was rebuilding the roads from Rome to Florence and Livorno, and all of the big cities had art shows that were set up by the British army, which had gathered it from various hiding places." He still has some of the catalogues, he says. "That was the difference between me and Andy Warhol," he adds. "I got a reverence for old art; he knew nothing about it and didn't care."

By the time Pearlstein returned to the United States and finished school, Abstract Expressionism had captured the day, and Pearlstein with it, briefly. After working in New York as a graphic artist and, beginning in 1955, exhibiting expressionistic landscapes at the Tanager Gallery on Tenth Street, he picked up a master's degree in art history at the Institute of Fine Arts and began teaching, first at Pratt, then at Yale, and finally at Brooklyn College, where he stayed nearly 30 years. He also decided, after another year of study in Italy, that someone really had to keep painting the human figure and that it might as well be him.

Many in the avant-garde saw this as a backward, and therefore not very interesting, career move. Even he admitted in a 1962 essay for this magazine that it was madness, especially since he took it up on the eve of Pop.

"There will always be those who want to make paintings of the human form with its parts all where they should be," he wrote. "The flatness of the picture plane is no more a truth than was the flatness of the world before Columbus."

Pearlstein further dismayed his colleagues by choosing to specialize in nudes, painting unfashionably proportioned, tired, hairy, and sagging models whom he faithfully captured just as they were after months of posing naked several days a week. At the time, as Storr notes, it "would have been hard to think of anything less promising."

The nudes, painted far larger than life, scandalized some people and depressed others. More than one observer commented on their similarity to corpses. As if that weren't enough, Pearlstein put male and female nudes together in single paintings. Such things were not done, unless you were a pornographer, and Pearlstein clearly was not. Nor did he attempt to glamorize his subjects in the manner of, say, his friend Alex Katz.

"Philip was enormously important in the development of American art," says art historian Irving Sandler, a close friend since the 1950s. "He and Alex Katz, too, had a sense that the kind of painterly figuration that came out of de Kooning was over and that there had to be a shift toward a more perceptual art."

But Pearlstein seemed to take a perverse pleasure in exposing his models' every wrinkle, pimple, and fold of flesh to the harsh-

COURTESY ROBERT MILLER GALLERY, NEW YORK (2)

Portrait of the painter Jane Kaplowitz, 1996. "Very rarely do people come out looking beautiful," Kaplowitz says.

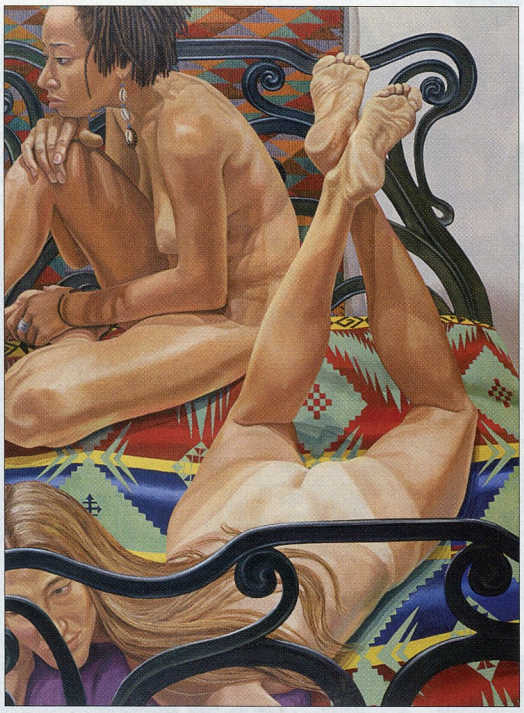
est possible light. "That's what's so interesting about Pearlstein," says John Currin, one of Yuskavage's more provocative contemporaries in figuration. "His violent shadows. What I miss is any social feeling about the figure."

"I could use still-life objects," Pearlstein says, "but still-life objects are very dull. It's a lot more fun working with people."

Painter Jane Kaplowitz, who is Rosenblum's wife, has posed (fully clothed) for two portraits by Pearlstein and would gladly do it again. "In life, you don't look at people that closely," she says. "Philip sees it all. Very rarely do people come out looking beautiful, but he's after a true representation, warts and all." She compares her sessions to visiting a friendly doctor.

Pearlstein simply describes himself as "the sum of all the influences I've absorbed." He cites Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, Ad Reinhardt, and Philip Guston as the most significant—and there isn't a realist among them.

"I admit that the painter I've studied most and responded to most was Mondrian," he says, in the same imperturbable tone that characterizes his painting. "I think he was a real hysteric."



***Iron Bed and Western Blankets*, 1996. Pearlstein's "props" sometimes have as much personality as his human subjects.**

Pearlstein adjusts his hearing aid, which is suddenly producing static. "Mondrian was a fascinating painter, a true expressionist," he goes on. He would have done his thesis on Mondrian if only Allan Kaprow, who was then in the MFA program at Columbia, had not already picked the same topic. Pearlstein did Picabia instead.

"You look at Mondrian's work and feel this tremendous tension, and you try to figure out what produces it," Pearlstein says, clasping his hands and gazing into them. "His paintings break apart." He looks up. "That's what I miss in a lot of what I see now in galleries: there's no sense of visual necessity or coherence in the way things relate to one another, as shapes."

He recalls a *New Yorker* article in which the chess champion Bobby Fischer described the chessboard not in terms of individual pieces but as "a field of forces." In Pearlstein's estimation, "that's how Mondrian saw his paintings—as fields of force in space. He didn't even see those black lines. They were simply a way of delineating those fields."

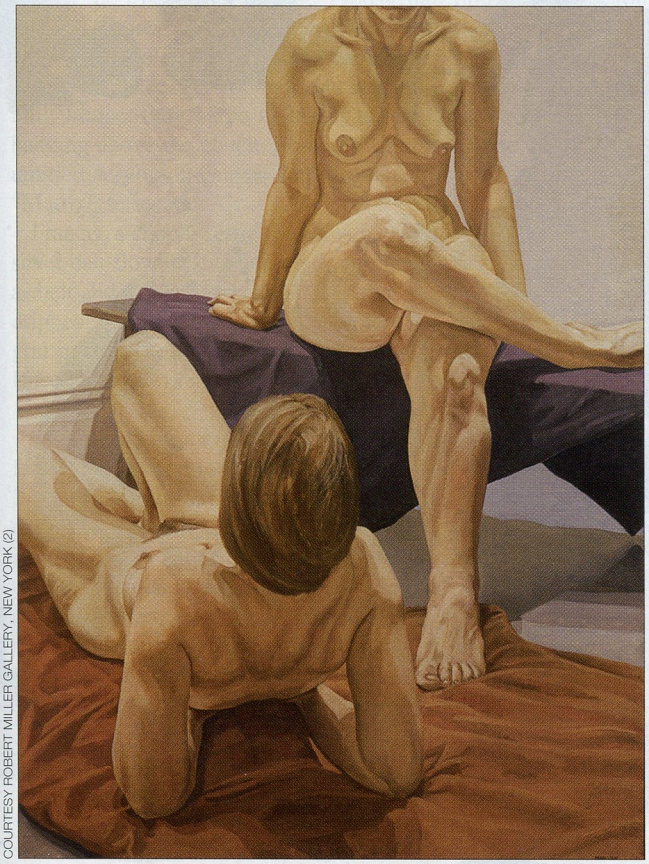
Pearlstein regards his own setups—collaborations with his models based on chance arrangements of objects and improvisation—in the same way. He calls them "fields of force that I've stumbled upon in my own 4,000 square feet." Though he works only from direct observation and calls painting from photographs "inefficient," it is his surfaces—essentially abstract compositions of form—that can make his slack-limbed nudes seem closer to landscapes than people.

Art historian Linda Nochlin, who sat for a now-famous wedding portrait by Pearlstein in 1968, believes that his work has become "more decorative, in a formal sense, more mannered," his style more polished and, she says, "more kinky."

That assessment is fine with Pearlstein. All assessments are fine. According to Sandler, "paranoia is the occupational disease of the art world, and Philip doesn't have that. He doesn't see or feel the need to put anyone down."

He does seem to be as unaffected by criticism as by praise. "Whoever looks at my painting is going to bring their own attitude or understanding or meaning, no matter what," he explains. And so, when he's not hitting the antique centers near his weekend home in Highland Lake, New Jersey, he's painting studio nudes or portraits of his friends, or his friends' children, and occasionally dignitaries including, recently, the British diplomat Brian Urquhart—in other words, doing what he's always done.

"You can't work for a market," he says. "You can't predict it. You just work for yourself. That's the only way to keep moving ahead." ■



***Models in the Studio*, 1966. Radical cropping, odd angles of vision, and merciless detail have been present in Pearlstein's works since the 1960s.**

Linda Yablonsky is the author of the novel The Story of Junk, *and often writes about art and artists. She lives in New York and teaches at the School of Visual Arts.*