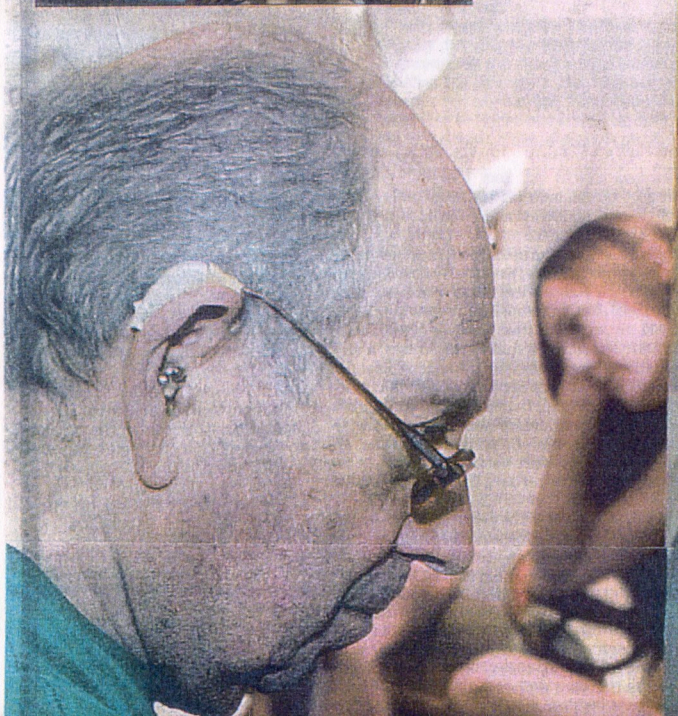
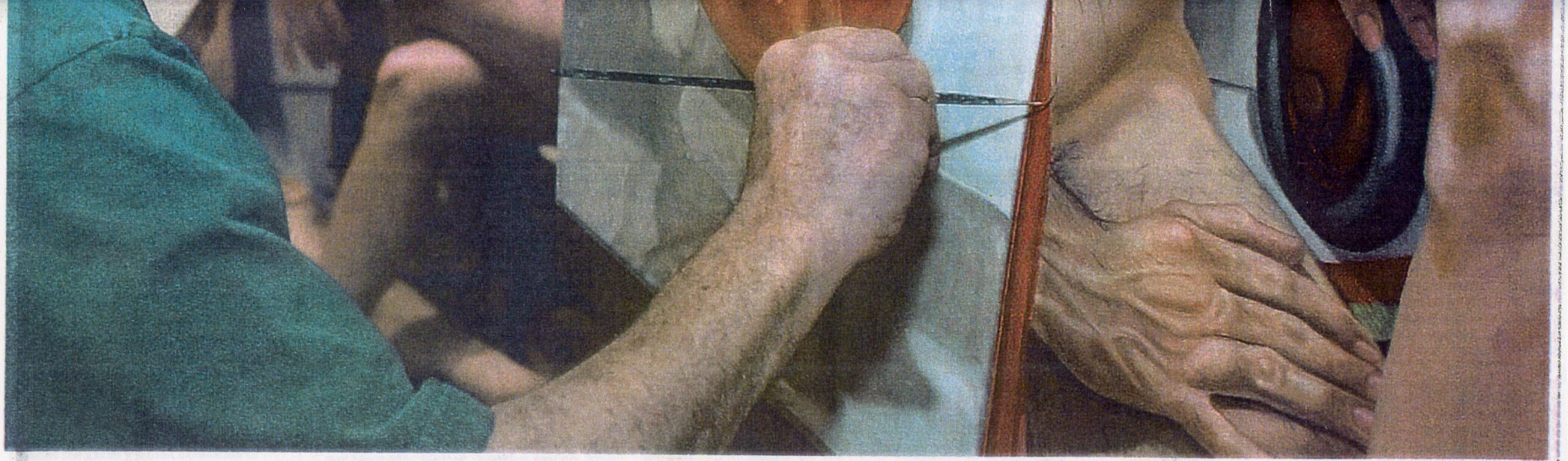
Painting Flesh That Looks Real, Not Perfect or Prurient

The painter Philip Pearlstein at work, with his model Desirée Alvarez in the background. Inset, the finished painting.





Sara Krulwich/The New York Times; inset, Robert Miller Gallery

IN THE STUDIO WITH

PHILIP PEARLSTEIN

Real Flesh, Not Perfect Or Prurient

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

TODAY — it is a Tuesday in early January — the American realist painter Philip Pearlstein, cherubic and calm as usual, is starting a new picture, another entanglement of toys and nudes, which, if the work goes at its usual deliberate pace, he predicts should take four months of sittings every Tuesday to finish.

Even in 2002 (maybe more so in 2002 than a century ago, when many more painters painted nudes) painting nudes seems to shock many people. Mr. Pearlstein's shows have been vandalized and canceled. One got a curator fired. But the work is the opposite of pornographic. It is graphic, but hardly erotic and strangely austere, considering how baroque and eccentric the compositions sometimes become. Mr. Pearlstein started out in the 1950's painting soupy, roiling abstractions, like almost every other young artist who wanted to be fashionable at the time, but by the late 1950's he (and others like Alex Katz and Alfred Leslie) were asking why, exactly, painting figures had become a defunct and academic pursuit, just because people said it was.

Paintings by Pearlstein in museums and at Robert Miller, Page 41.

So he did a radical thing: he became a conservative, sort of, devoting himself to painting nudes, except that his nudes were not the traditional idealized bodies but real people with sallow flesh, numbed by the boredom of posing in a studio.

The style was aggressively literal, unromantic, uniform and unnatural in that it showed what were clearly contrived setups, not everyday scenes, sometimes brutally cropped, with an impersonal touch that was the deliberate opposite of Abstract Expressionism.

There was something of Minimalism's dedication to just plain facts in Mr. Pearlstein's approach and a commitment to an underlying abstract geometry that gave an edge to the work, although this was not immediately easy for people to grasp. Mr. Pearlstein was among a crop of new American figurative painters gaining prominence, but he wasn't a political artist, doing hard-core realism as protest art, nor an erotic artist in the spirit of the swinging 60's. He mixed Pop elements into the pictures, painting nudes with Mickey Mouse, Godzilla and the

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INSIDE

MY MANHATTAN

In the Green Lap of Spring

By JAN BENZEL

In early spring, entering Central Park is like walking into an emerald. I go there every chance I get in this season, usually in the morning, slipping into its greenness alone after dropping a child off at school, before heading to work.

I go because I am homesick. I am rooted in the city, but I did not grow up here. I grew up in the country, where my mother still spends spring in her garden. My brother and sisters and I woke to bird song. Mares were in foal and shards of castoff robins' eggs littered the ground. In the city, my children and I wake to car alarms

To get there, I pass a wild, marshy spot on the northwest banks of the Lake where, a couple of years ago, I saw a great blue heron, feathers all fluffed out to keep warm, wintering in the park. Elegant herons and egrets often fish in the pond on the farm where I grew up, and seeing one in the city was like seeing a friend from home.

But looking for the blue heron is only a distraction today. I'm heading north, beyond the Naturalists' Walk, toward Vista Rock, the highest point in the park. I pass the Swedish Cottage Marionette Theater, which, like the blue heron and me, is a transplant in this city. It was built as a schoolhouse in 1876 for the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia — an entry from Sweden as an example of traditional design — and then moved to Central Park.

Painting Flesh That Looks Real, Not Perfect or Prurient

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Empire State Building, but no one mistook him for Warhol or Lichtenstein. He was difficult to pigeonhole.

Notwithstanding that his compositions have since become increasingly crammed with props and mirrors, Mr. Pearlstein has been doing pretty much the same thing for 40 years. His Manhattan studio, which takes up a floor in a converted garment factory building in the West 30's, is, like his art, overstuffed with objects that he and his wife, Dorothy, have collected, mostly cheaply, from flea markets, galleries and antiques shops. The latest acquisition is a Han dynasty horse, and Desirée Alvarez, one of his models, recently gave Mr. Pearlstein a mechanized Mickey Mouse marionette on a cardboard stage.

Like the paintings, the studio bespeaks orderly chaos. There are shelves of brushes, solvents, paints and glue, a metal rolling table laden with a television set and videotapes that Mr. Pearlstein has shot on vacations to remote places, a plastic blowup chair depicting the "Star Wars" character Darth Maul, a toy dirigible — and in the next room, where everybody eats lunch at a big table, pre-Columbian sculptures, weather vanes, carousel horses, potsherds, flints, a glass eyeball, wind-up toys, an ancient Cypriot head that the Metropolitan Museum used to own, Mayan tools, tiny Eskimo baskets from the turn of the last century, minstrel puppets from the 1850's made by African carvers, Japanese prints, ancient Roman heads, marionettes from Burma (which Mr. Pearlstein visited a few years ago) and a life-size sculpture by Ann Arnold of the Pearlsteins' late medium-size dog, a Hungarian puli named Lassie Shimmel.

Much of it has made its way into his art. The whole place is about 4,000 square feet. The Pearlsteins sleep on a Murphy bed to save space.

A Soft-Spoken Windsurfer

At 78, Mr. Pearlstein is tireless (a decade ago, he even took up windsurfing) and paints constantly. Soft-spoken and gentle, he has a sly sense of humor like that in his work. One afternoon during a break from painting, he related the story about a highly expressionistic landscape of his that was reproduced in Arts Magazine in the 1950's. That reproduction gave his career a big boost. Years later he met the editor and thanked him. "The guy told me that back then he had just been fired for being an alcoholic, and as a parting shot he put my picture in the magazine because it was the ugliest thing he'd ever seen."

Ms. Alvarez, a fabric artist and painter who doubles as his assistant, has been modeling for Mr. Pearlstein for more than a decade. Alexander Matte, a friend of hers, started a few years ago. Mr. Pearlstein has

roys instead) and sneakers. In his left hand he holds a paper towel, and he usually keeps that hand behind his back, standing erect, like an admiral on the deck of his ship. His palette, an old palette knife that he started using in college and a pile of half-used tubes of paint rest on a plastic tray with a jar of cloudy solvent and a makeshift cardboard backsplash taped to one end of the tray to prevent paint from spraying onto the canvas when he mixes it. The tray, in turn, rests on a metal stool. A second stool has more tubes of paint and a jar for brushes. Mr. Pearlstein spends much time sliding the stools around to make way for the easel, but somehow, through experience and an oddly balletic instinct, he avoids knocking the stools over. It is almost miraculous.

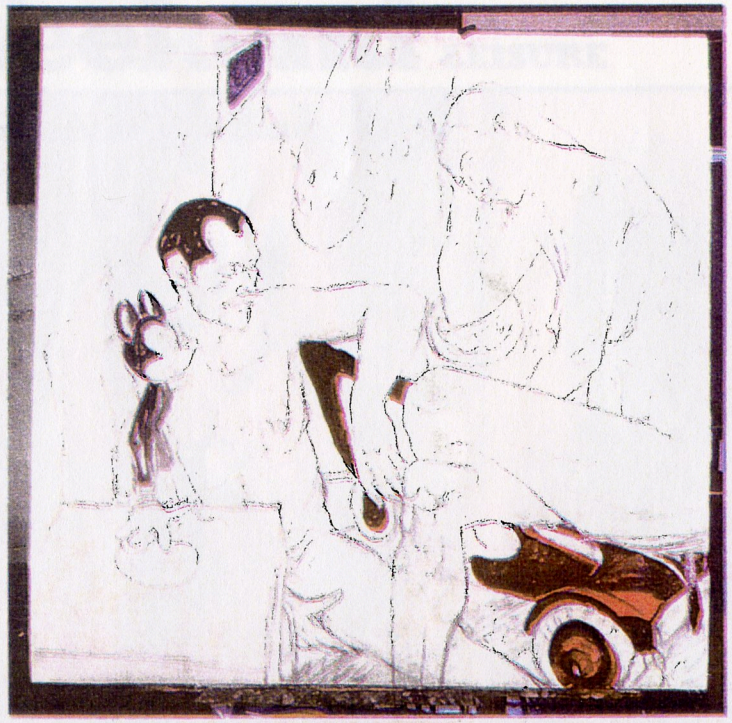
Making a Visual Rhyme

Up to a point, he lets the models pick the poses. After half an hour of trying different possibilities, Ms. Alvarez is on the tractor and Mr. Matte has settled into a position partly blocked from Mr. Pearlstein's view by Mickey, in such a way that the sides and bottom of the toy will define the lower left corner of the painting. Mickey's and Mr. Matte's heads now make a little visual rhyme: their hairlines match, to Mr. Matte's horror.

Mr. Pearlstein puts charcoal to canvas, lightly drawing two lines for the plane at the top center of the picture, then moves right to outline Ms. Alvarez's body. He next roughly marks the edge of Mr. Matte's face and his features to figure out where Mickey will fit. It is, he says, "like a jigsaw puzzle at this stage."

"What I look for in the beginning are shapes, a subdivision of the square," he continued. "You might say I think in terms of Matisse when I start. In my youth I did color separations for equipment supply catalogs, which was about reducing everything to flat shapes. Before that I did lithographs and prints in the Army and learned how to work up an image in stages, so I've taught myself to work the same way in paint: go after the big shapes first, then make them three-dimensional, from Matisse toward Vermeer."

At the first break, the models dress and read the paper while Mr. Pearlstein fiddles. Painting nudes has led him to spend his time with young people, which seems to have kept him surprisingly youthful and he goes along with what they want when possible. Unless Mr. Matte is worried about gaining weight, lunch is frequently takeout from Manganaro's Hero Boy. Mrs. Pearlstein, a wry, energetic woman, a former painter with an encyclopedic mind, joins in with a deep stock of amusing stories. One day she waxes eloquent about vacuum-packed pastrami on Rivington Street; another day she muses about the inadequacies of the Surrealism exhibition at the Met. Mr. Pearlstein, who has trouble hearing but says he picks



Philip Pearlstein's "Mickey Mouse Puppet Theater, Jumbo Jet and Kiddie Tractor With Two Models" as it evolved.

in the chest hair and pink nipple. The torso snaps into depth.

By the end of the first month, most of the canvas is covered with paint, and his wife, who wanders in one afternoon, suggests only half-jokingly that he quit at this point, when the brushwork is still obvious. Loose brushwork looks expressive, she says.

Mr. Pearlstein has heard this argument before. "The hardest thing for me when I settled on how to paint was getting rid of the active brushwork, which Abstract Expressionism was all about. That's what I was brought up on. De Kooning was the Vladimir Horowitz of the brushstroke. It was incredible. But I'm going for a smooth, finished surface. Each area still has its own subtle texture, the skin, the metal of the tractor. A painting is never really flat. When you really look at a Mondrian you see it's lumpy. The surface is alive. I sometimes think of Mondrian as a suppressed hysteric, and I'm probably one, too. He built up paint over time, through changes based on staring so long at the pictures that the lines began to move in front of his eyes. That's the time element in Mondrian. I used to stare at his 'Broadway Boogie-Woogie' in the Modern just to watch the forms start jumping."

In Ever Greater Detail

By April, Mr. Pearlstein turns to the tricky problem of Mr. Matte's foot, jutting up from the lower right corner of the picture (a serendipity Mr. Pearlstein didn't plan but capitalizes on). This is the most difficult part of the work to paint, with the carpet and especially the tractor. Mr. Pearlstein will paint something, the tractor, say, lightly at first, then later repaint it, adding one thin layer after another. Ms. Alvarez, who has posed for more than two dozen paintings by now, compares the process to rehearsing for a performance, then repeating the performance, with slight changes each time.

Repainting Mr. Matte's face, Mr. Pearlstein puts down a layer of thin beige, like a stocking pulled over the head, which then reemerges as he picks the features out again. This happens several times. Through it all, Mr. Matte tends to doze lightly (he spent a year at a Buddhist retreat outside London, which, he says, helped train him to stay still) while Ms. Alvarez, with a more difficult pose, perched precariously on the tiny tractor, manages to disguise her discomfort. Mr. Pearlstein at one point calls me over to look at how her veins pop out because she's holding her limbs immobile. It's the sort of clinical detail he weighs; popping

eling for Mr. Pearlstein for more than a decade. Alexander Matte, a friend of hers, started a few years ago. Mr. Pearlstein has a familial relationship with many of his models. Because most artist's models do that job only part time, Mr. Pearlstein employs different models on different days and works on several pictures at once. This has its disadvantages and advantages: he must drop what he's doing at the end of each day, but several days or a week later he returns to it fresh.

His studio is partly divided up by partitions, like sideshow booths in a fair, one partitioned area per picture. For this painting, he has put a child's red antique toy tractor below a toy airplane that comes from his older daughter, Julia. (He has

Where to See the Art

Philip Pearlstein's "Mickey Mouse Puppet Theater, Jumbo Jet and Kiddie Tractor With Two Models," the painting discussed in the accompanying article, will be on view with a few other recent works at the Robert Miller Gallery through June 5. After that the gallery's next exhibition of Mr. Pearlstein's work is scheduled for the fall of 2003. The gallery is at 524 West 26th Street in Chelsea, telephone (212) 366-4774.

His paintings are also in the collections of many major museums in the United States, including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Kansas City Art Institute, the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the Corcoran Gallery of Art and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, both in Washington.

In New York his work can also be seen at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In March his work will be exhibited at the University Art Gallery of Indiana State University in Terre Haute. This year "Philip Pearlstein: Master Paintings" will open in June and run through August at the University of Haifa Art Gallery in Israel.

three grown children.) The plane hangs from the ceiling. Ms. Alvarez's Mickey Mouse marionette and its cardboard stage rest on a stool beside the tractor, and Mr. Pearlstein's easel is a couple of feet away, supporting a canvas five feet square, stretched slightly loose. "Otherwise," Mr. Pearlstein explains, "the canvases are accident prone; every dent shows up when they're stretched too tight." The windows in the room are covered by thick plastic blackout curtains, which also block out street noise (models call it the Batcave, although it's much cozier than that implies), because he doesn't want to deal with the problem of natural light, which keeps changing.

Mr. Pearlstein, as always, is wearing a T-shirt, suspenders, jeans rolled up at the bottom (occasionally he wears baggy corduroys about the inadequacies of the Surrealism exhibition at the Met. Mr. Pearlstein, who has trouble hearing but says he picks up everything without necessarily letting on, usually just smiles. The Pearlsteins seem exceptionally close.

Rooming With Andy Warhola

In high school in Pittsburgh, where both he and his wife grew up, Mr. Pearlstein won an art contest for painting a carousel. He likes to say that more than half a century later he's still painting pretty much the same picture. Stationed in Florida for a while during World War II, he designed and silk-screened infantry training charts; then at the end of the war he was in Italy painting traffic signs. After that he went to the Carnegie Institute of Technology on the G.I. Bill. When he and a classmate, Andy Warhola, graduated, they decided to share an apartment in New York. There Mr. Pearlstein, to support himself while he painted (he painted images of Superman and dollar signs years before Warhol invented Pop), landed a job putting together catalogs of American Standard bathroom fixtures like urinals, sinks and toilets, in the office of Ladislav Sutnar, the émigré Czech designer. By the late 50's he was spending Sunday nights at the studio of the painter and educator Mercedes Matter, drawing models from life.

"At first I got caught up in representation as a technical challenge," he says. "By the early 60's I had begun to get attention for painting figures and was teaching at Brooklyn College with Ad Reinhardt, the abstract artist, who trapped me in an elevator at school one evening and said, 'Don't you realize you are responsible for the souls of these people in the paintings?' He was dead serious. He thought figure painting was a betrayal of everything abstract artists like him had struggled for."

A Joke About Velázquez

After lunch Mr. Pearlstein rubs the whole composition away and starts from scratch. The image is dense, busy. Mr. Pearlstein's compositions have become almost absurdly complex in recent years, with objects and more or less buried art historical allusions. (He'll paint the top of his own head or his sneakers in a mirrored reflection, like Velázquez painting himself in a mirror in "Las Meninas," but clearly as a joke.) His procedure, drawing one then another part of the picture, is not methodical.

"At a certain point I have to accept what I have seen," he says. "Otherwise I will keep shifting the image around forever, like a Giacometti. It would be easier to work from photographs, obviously, but there's an energy, an urgency working from life that doesn't come from a photograph. You're capturing something elusive, something you're not always sure of, or you're trying to capture it, before it vanishes."

The picture changes several more times in the next week. Mr. Pearlstein pushes Ms. Alvarez farther right and enlarges her to nearly twice life size. (She would be nearly nine feet tall if she stood up, I calculate.)

She keeps her eyes open, partly, she says, because she doesn't want to seem the passive object of the viewer's gaze. But she looks away from, not at, Mr. Pearlstein. To look out from the picture would make the painting more a portrait. Mr. Pearlstein's models are actual people, but they are objects, too, like the Mickeys and airplanes. Everything is given equal weight and ultimately subordinated to the geometry of the composition. It's this deadpan, all-over abstract aspect of the work that people seem to find fascinating or off-putting.

Photographs by Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Finally ready to paint, he wipes away the excess charcoal from the canvas, wipes several brushes, mixes cadmium red dark, black, Alizarin crimson and white and starts to paint part of the tractor. Squeezing blue onto the palette, he traces the trim of the airplane wings and the top of Mickey's stage with a thin brush and mahlstick. He does curves freehand, fluently. The paint starts to make the image leap into perspective.

"I put in the things first that I think will jump out and which everything else will have to compete with," he says. "When I develop the figures, they will have to compete with the airplane, which is very bright and busy, and so I need to know what to measure the intensity of the figures against. I got that partly from looking at Bonnard, his busy wallpaper competing with his figures."

The whole image will change drastically, he says, when the words on the side of the toys are painted. They'll catch the eye first. The words jumbo jet on the airplane, he says, "will be almost like the word 'God' in a medieval painting." This is Mr. Pearlstein's first painting with so many words in it. He speaks as if the choice to include them in the picture were not his, that he merely paints whatever happens to be in front of him. "Letting things happen by chance: that's a little Duchampian, I suppose," he says. "Not just copying the words I happen to see, but letting the models help choose the poses, the props."

Depth Arrives Suddenly

Mr. Pearlstein complains that arthritis in his fingers slows him down these days, making it harder to squeeze paint from the tubes, but he seems to paint effortlessly and fast. At one point he paints the shadow that Mr. Matte's head casts on his neck and chest, a kind of cowl shape, and glancing at Mr. Matte I notice the head has another, lighter shadow. Turning back to look at the canvas a second later, I see that Mr. Pearlstein has already painted it. With a few flicks of the wrist, up then down, he sketches

In the Studio With . . .

This article is part of a series about watching and listening to artists at work. Previous articles are online: **nytimes.com/arts**

over to look at how her veins pop out because she's holding her limbs immobile. It's the sort of clinical detail he weighs: popping out, they make the figure look cartoony, he says, and he doesn't want his picture to convey the sense of a particular point in time. He wants a tableau, which creates an artificial atmosphere, a kind of airlessness.

To watch Mr. Pearlstein is to realize the amount of information to be assimilated if you try to paint everything in front of you, each detail affecting another. "I know it seems a waste of Desirée's or Alex's time to pose while I'm painting the pipe or Mickey, but my field of vision changes if they're not there," he explains. "The colors change. A painter is never painting an actual color; only the illusion of it, which has to do with the relationship of colors in the picture. Mickey's shoes look more orange against Alex, the blue of the stage moves closer to purple."

What look like mistakes or anomalies are now conspicuous by contrast with the increasingly hard, polished surface: the odd, winglike shadow cast by Ms. Alvarez's shoulder, the way her elbow rests awkwardly on the steering wheel, the puny size of Mr. Matte's right leg. "It's what happens when you work with real people and two eyes," he says. "Optical truth reveals the lie of conventional schoolbook perspective. Cézanne was right: a line, like the line of a tabletop, interrupted by an object, like a tablecloth, seems to reappear at a different latitude on the other side of the object, even though that makes no logical sense. It's just how the eye works. That's the nature of realism."

Like a Wide-Angle Lens

The last weeks come down to small, crucial touches, slowly refined, which make the image snap into focus, like the tiny figure of Goofy reproduced on the illustration taped to the back of the stage and the shadows cast by the strings that hold up the plane. The deep perspective of Mickey's stage and the tractor, both now crisply delineated, create a wide-angle lens effect: a conical space receding rapidly. Your eye senses this movement despite the lethargy of the figures. This is part of the dynamic of Mr. Pearlstein's art, along with the fetishistic attention to minute details.

"By the end I feel like a plastic surgeon," Mr. Pearlstein says.

Ms. Alvarez says, only half kidding, "If only you acted more like one, we'd all be looking a whole lot better."

Mr. Pearlstein resists interpreting his own pictures, which has never stopped other people from interpreting them for him. The phallic symbols combined with nudes seem almost too obvious as a theme. The dangling airplane, in this case, is a displaced phallus for Mr. Matte, whose penis is hidden from view by Mickey's stage. Or should we see it another way? Is the descending plane a 9/11 allusion, with the tractor and Mickey and the sleepy figures, like Adam and Eve, oblivious and innocent: the American heartland and American commercial culture with a somnolent populace on the verge of catastrophe? "I see it but I prefer not to," Mr. Pearlstein says.

"I've done my best to make paintings that would sell; it's just not worked out that way," he jokes, which is not quite true. "I expect this one won't sell either. There isn't much of a market for chest hair. But this is what I do. I'm a painter. Call it my small contribution to civilization."