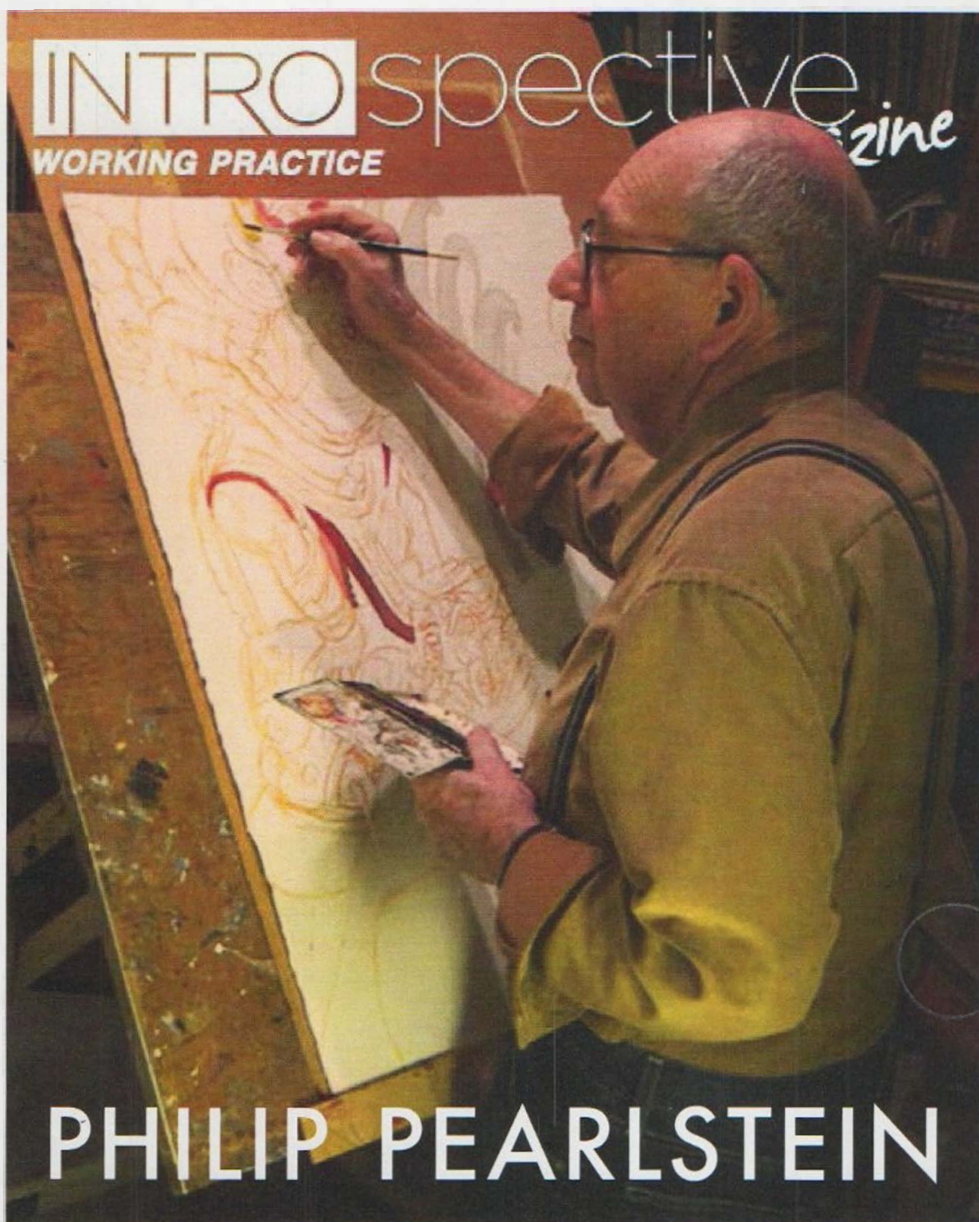


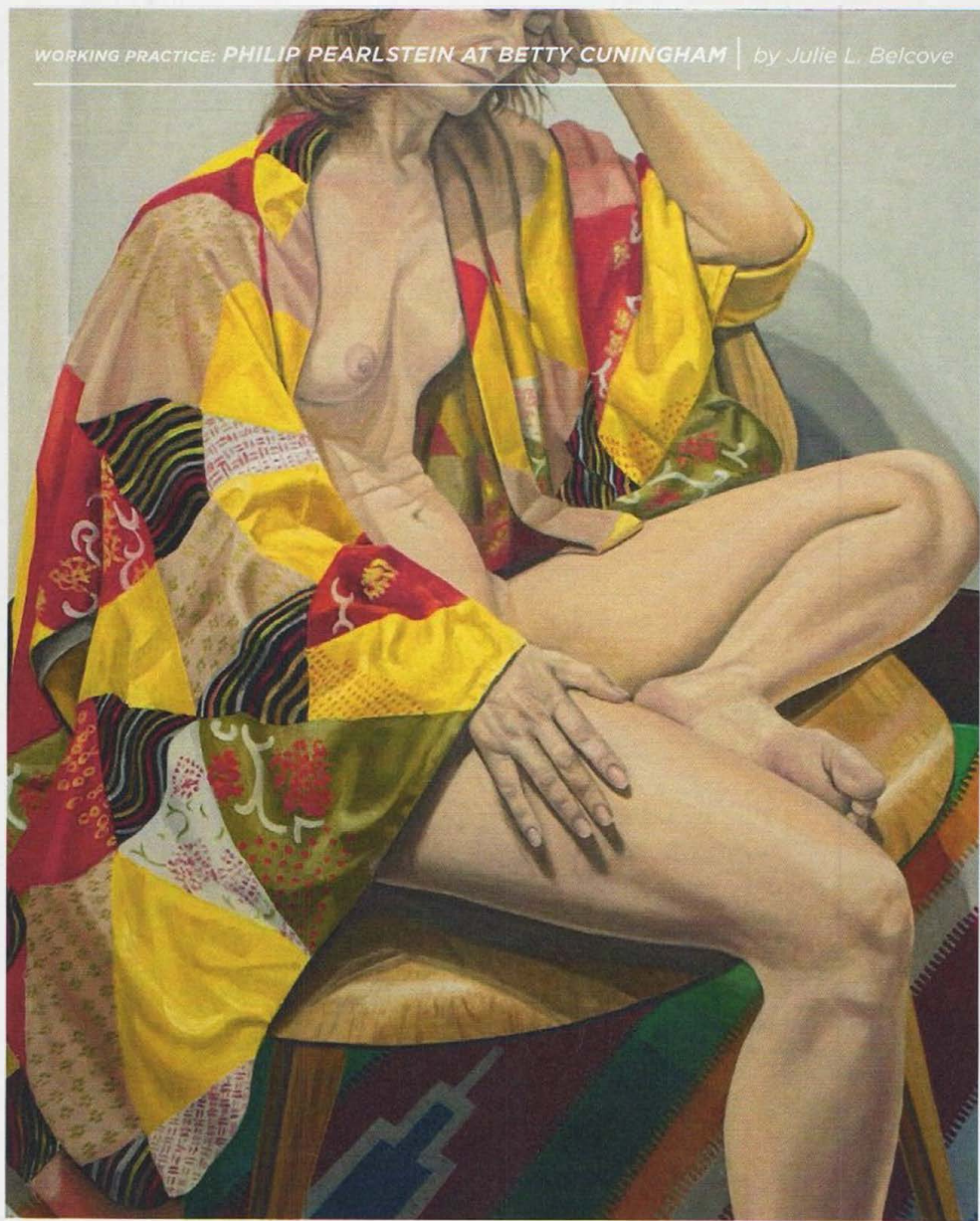
# INTRO *spective* *azine*

WORKING PRACTICE



PHILIP PEARLSTEIN

WORKING PRACTICE: PHILIP PEARLSTEIN AT BETTY CUNINGHAM | by Julie L. Belcove





FEBRUARY 2013

# PHILIP PEARLSTEIN'S

name may be synonymous with the contemporary nude, but it's his vast collection of objects, culled over more than half a century, that seems to give him the biggest thrill. The artist lives and works on a full floor of an unobtrusive building in New York's Garment District in the West 30s. He and his wife of more than 60 years, Dorothy, now make their home in its front rooms, hung with some of Pearlstein's famed canvases — one features a creepy-cute Popeye doll peering out between a disrobed man and woman — and a wall full of classic prints by Eadweard Muybridge. Other charming pieces on display include Tiffany lamps and whimsically decorated high heels bequeathed by a shoe-designer cousin. It's a spacious back room, however, that reveals the real cabinet of curiosities: a treasure trove of objects spanning cultures, continents and centuries.

New York-based contemporary painter Philip Pearlstein, a master of the female nude, is also a collector of ephemera of all kinds. Shown here is *Model on Eames Chair in Patchwork Kimono*, 2012. All images courtesy of Betty Cuninghame Gallery and the artist





A pair of carved mahogany lions with a Japanese flair, which purportedly once adorned Luna Park at Coney Island, guards a group of Indonesian animal puppets, and, across the way, an elegant swan sits amid a cluster of wooden duck decoys. One can see old toys, an antique American birdhouse, a carved Tibetan monkey, tiny figurines, an Ethiopian chair made from a tree trunk, Native American antiquities and a cutout of George Washington. Odd, unidentifiable pieces cover every surface; some are Etruscan, others Egyptian. Pearlstein points to one piece of unknown origin, a sculpture roughly a foot high of a female holding her breasts, her shape flattened in a primitive style. "She's so much like Matisse, I had to have her," he says.

Pearlstein amassed the collection from flea markets, private dealers and auctions, and if there's a thread connecting them, it's that "all these cultures go together," he says. Scores of the objects have co-starred with nude models in Pearlstein's canvases, injecting them with elements of the modern still life. "Almost everything's been used in paintings unless it has very religious overtones," he explains. "With the nudes, it would offend people, and I'm not interested in making points."

A back room in the painter's Garment District home reveals shelf upon shelf of objects and art of all kinds, amassed from all over; many of the pieces make their way into his paintings.







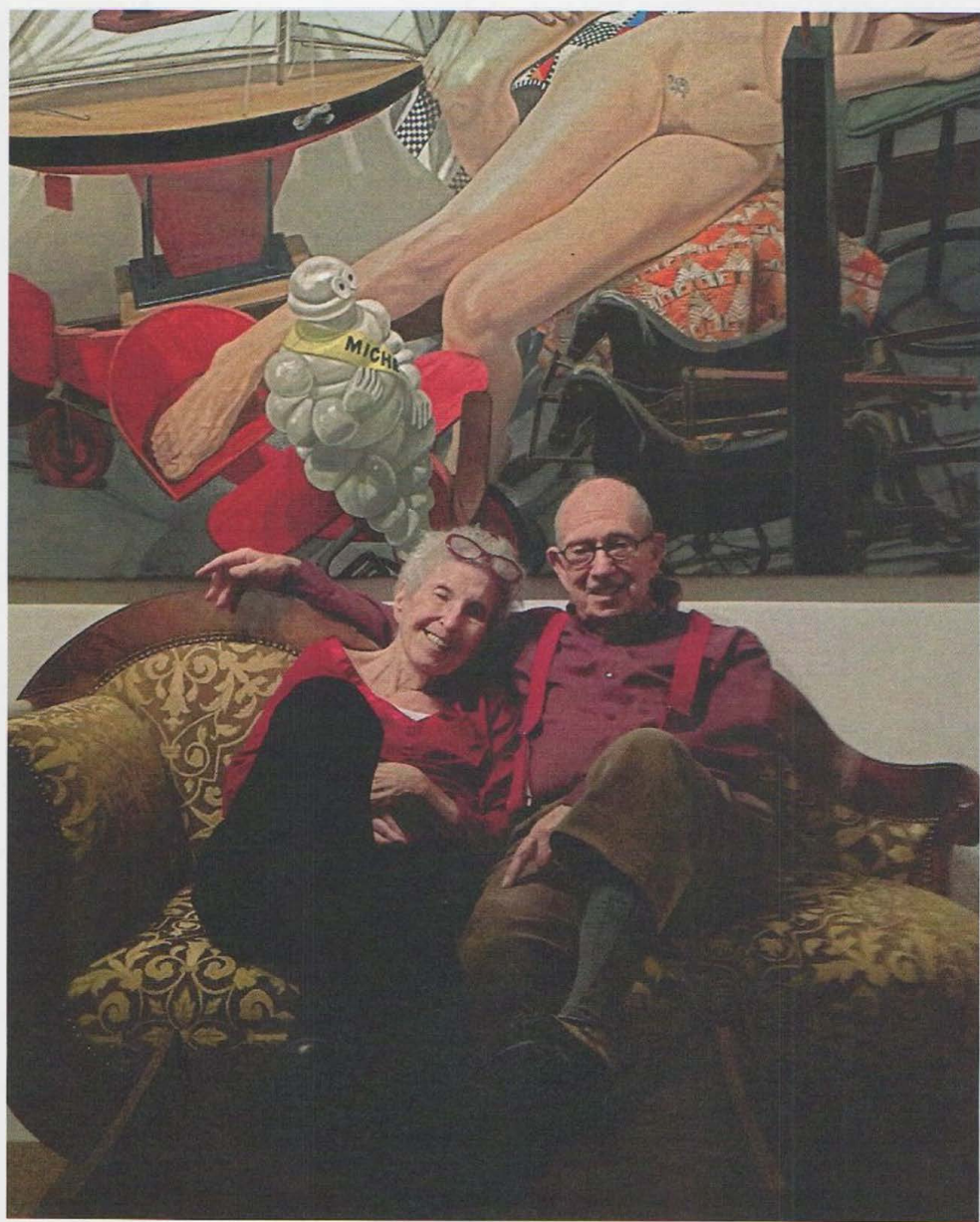
In his latest show, on view through March 30 at Chelsea's Betty Cuninghame Gallery, which has represented him for eight years, one painting, for example, depicts a nude woman with her legs draped over the swan. In another, a model reclines on a Mickey Mouse blanket. The props, he says, provide another layer of difficulty. But not insurmountable difficulty it appears: The man is 88 and still painting, "officially three days a week," he says with a gleam in his eye. "But then I do portraits and work on prints," he adds.

*Model on Wooden Lounge with Swan, 2013*

**R**ecently, a pleasant afternoon in February finds Pearlstein, neatly dressed in a dark brown T-shirt and jeans held up by suspenders, eating a salad during his lunch break. As he reminisces about his early days as an artist, he puts down his fork to go look for something in the adjoining studio. After wading through a stack of works awaiting packing for a solo exhibition in March at the Museum of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, Florida, he pulls out a small, framed canvas of a carousel. The brushstrokes are quick and light, capturing the speed of the horses and tigers spinning by, and the colors are bright. "It's a total American scene painting," Pearlstein remarks. It was also his very first oil painting, completed around 1940, when he was in 11th grade in Pittsburgh. The painting won a national competition and landed Pearlstein in the pages of *Life* magazine.

Pearlstein and his wife, Dorothy, sit in front of *Two Models with Kiddie Car Airplane, Chariot, Whirlygig and Michelin Man*, 2011, which incorporate a variety of odds and ends from his collection.



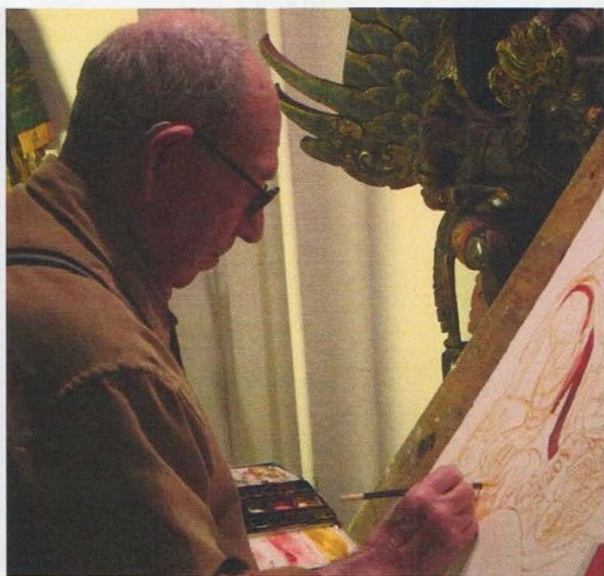
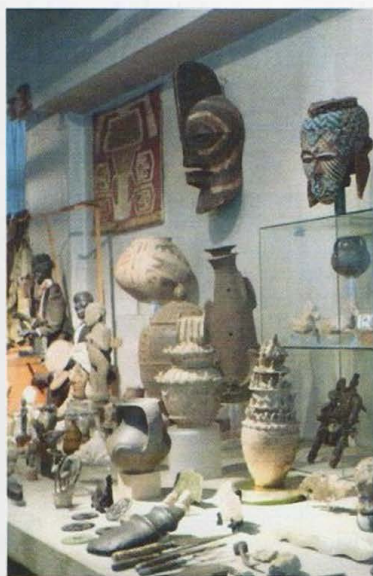


**T**hat would prove to be just his first brush with fame. Perhaps more than any other artist in the second half of the 20th century, Pearlstein made painting the human figure a viable option in contemporary art. By Pearlstein's assessment, though, his decision to tackle the nude arrived relatively late. First came art school at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in his hometown, interrupted by service in World War II, during which he painted signs and the like.

When he returned to Carnegie after the war, he befriended a younger student named Andy Warhola, who would, of course, later drop the ethnically tinged "a" from his surname. "Someone pointed out later that I was probably the first person he met who was famous," Pearlstein says. "The first time I met him, he said, 'What's it like being famous?' I said, 'It only lasted five minutes.'" (Naturally one can't help but wonder if he inspired Warhol's famous 15-minutes-of-fame quip.)

The artist, now 88, still works at least three days a week, inspired, as ever, by the objects in his cabinet of curiosities.







*Al Held and Sylvia Stone, 1968*





**A**fter graduation, the two moved to New York and became roommates. Pearlstein says Warhol's older brothers trusted him to take care of their little sibling because they knew Pearlstein's father from the wholesale food business in Pittsburgh. The two artists roomed together for almost a year before being evicted, and Warhol was in the wedding party when Pearlstein soon married Dorothy Cantor, another Carnegie alum. (She stopped painting shortly after her first solo show in the 1950s, a topic that, he says, "we were never allowed to discuss. Even now." A moody Maine landscape by Dorothy does hang in the studio, however.)

Pearlstein and Warhol remained friends, though their lifestyles diverged. Asked if he was ever a regular at the Factory, Warhol's studio-cum-party palace, Pearlstein shakes his head. "Oh no. I think I visited twice."

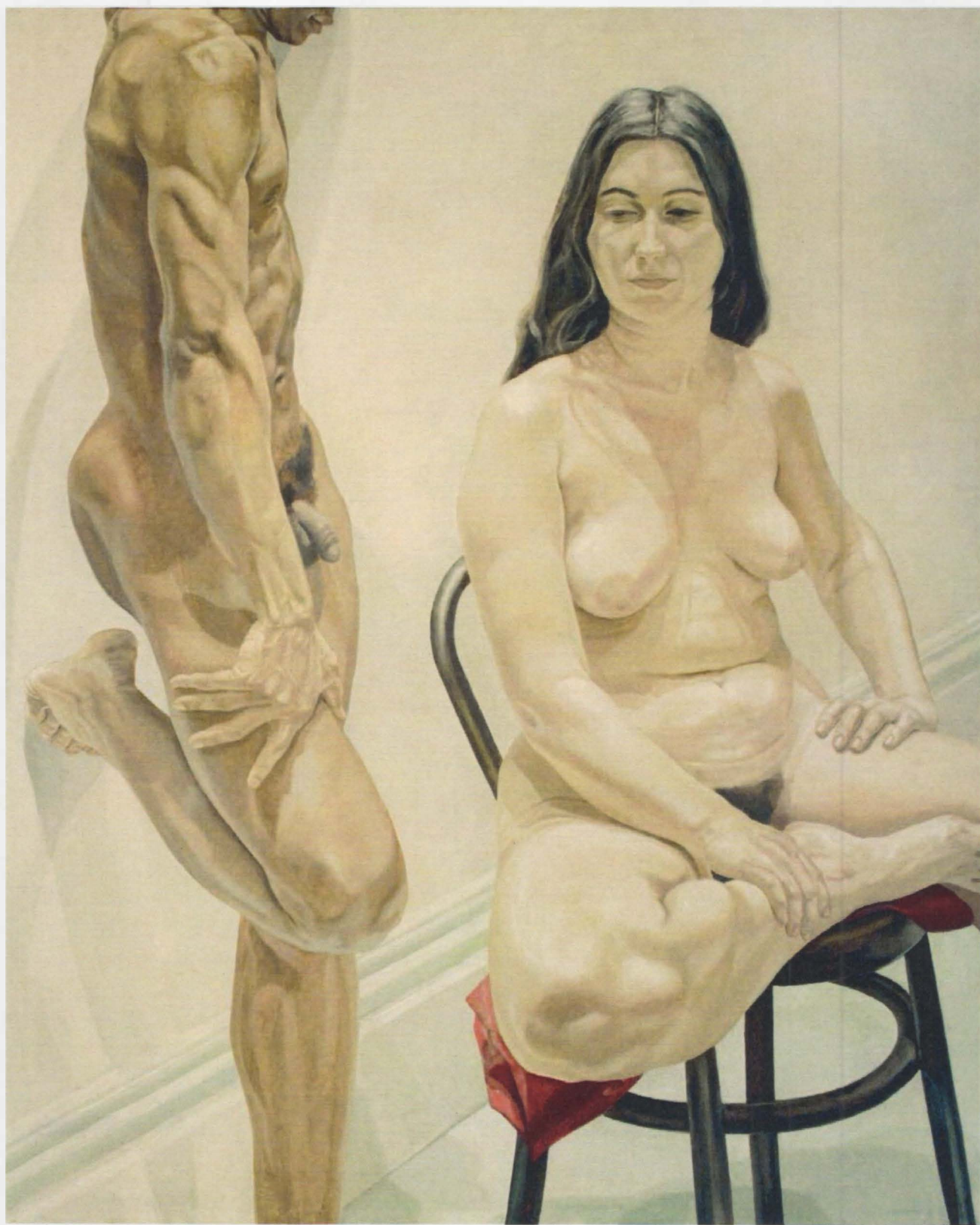


In the 1950s, Pearlstein fell into the category of second-generation Abstract Expressionists — “like everybody else,” he says — which he attributes in large part to the war. “I think that altered my generation,” he says. “I think the whole Abstract Expressionist movement flourished because we were using painting as a way of working out our wartime experiences. I reached the end of that when I was roughly age thirty-seven or thirty-eight.”

At that point, having earned a Masters from New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts, Pearlstein was teaching at Pratt and painting at night in his Upper West Side townhouse. He was a married father of three. “I realized my life was nice,” he says. “There was nothing to be expressionistic about anymore.”

*Standing Male, Sitting Female Nudes, 1969*





A current show of Pearlstein's work at Chelsea's Betty Cunningham Gallery includes *Two Models*, *Blow-up Chair*, *Mercury and Kite* (left) and *Model on Eames Chair in Patchwork Kimono*, both 2012.

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*Two Nudes, Rabbit Marionette.*  
1997

**M**eanwhile, he was teaching a figure-drawing class at Pratt, where the Ab Ex movement and the idea of the “gesture” so dominated that “they wanted you to scribble [the nude],” he recalls. One faculty member told him, “Nobody bothers to teach perspective anymore because nobody is using it.”





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**B**ack in his studio, within arm's reach of his first real painting, is his latest work, begun just this morning: a drawn outline of a female torso. Pearlstein encourages his models, who could be termed ordinary-attractive, to position themselves however they like, though he might make adjustments here or there. "Move one of the model's feet over and you have a totally different composition," he says, noting that he's learned a thing or two from a couple of particularly inventive subjects. He then chooses a vantage point. "I start somewhere where a couple of forms overlap and go on from there," he says. "In the drawing I started this morning, it's where the woman's hand and knee meet the base of the demon" — "the demon" being one of his newest props, of course.

He hasn't finished his salad, but a glance at his watch stops him. "I have to get back to work," he says with a polite shrug. The model is waiting in the next room, after all, and time is getting away from him.

Pearlstein surveys some of the objects in his collection, looking to select just the right one — or two or three.