

Philip Pearlstein

*Figures, Props, Objects, and other things*

8 Mar – 27 Apr 2024

39 Walker

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Bortolami Gallery is pleased to present a solo show by Philip Pearlstein (b.1924, d. 2022) featuring paintings, watercolors, drawings, and other works on paper spanning 1962 to 2018. For the first time, these works are exhibited alongside his encyclopedic collection which populated his paintings; from pre-Columbian and African sculpture to Mid-century furniture and Americana. This exhibition provides a concise history of Pearlstein's oeuvre and offers a fuller picture of this scion of contemporary American figurative painting.

Born in Pittsburgh, Pearlstein found early support for his artistic practice. After enrolling in Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie-Mellon University) in 1942, he was drafted into the Army, later finishing his studies in Pittsburgh, and moving to New York in 1949, where he shared an apartment with childhood friend Andy Warhol.

In New York, Pearlstein initially found inspiration in Abstract Expressionism, achieving critical success with his expressionistic landscapes, exhibiting at Tanager Gallery in the East Village and Peridot Gallery uptown. Yet as the 1950s progressed, Pearlstein grew disillusioned with the movement's parameters and having his work relegated to "second generation Abstract Expressionism." In 1958, he joined the drawing club organized by Mercedes Matter, which included the likes of Lois Dodd, Alex Katz, and Philip Guston, amongst others. It was here that Pearlstein began drawing figures from life.

Although the general turn to the nude figure marks the beginning of Pearlstein's signature subject, he cements his mature style in 1963-64. He began applying sharp cropping, close viewpoint, a subdued palette, manifold shadows created by fixed floodlights, and steady, flat brushstrokes. In the 1970s and '80s, Pearlstein's style, often contextualized within the larger New Realism movement, began to fully take shape as a mélange of the traditional elements of realist painting and his depictions of the depersonalized figure as object.

Perhaps the most important shift lies in the increased complexity of Pearlstein's images which continued to evolve from the 1970s. An avid collector of all things, from Greco-Roman antiques and varied rugs and kilim to Pop and Folk Americana, he began to further populate the picture plane with these items. As the compositions became increasingly complex, Pearlstein gave the items and the figure equal importance, both in their depiction and placement amongst each other. In the simulated studio created in the gallery, the physicality of the objects juxtaposed against their painted duplicate allows one to comprehend the artist as something other than painter, here he takes on the role of image maker. The work is just as much about balance, editing, and choice as it is about the act of painting itself. Pearlstein was thus as much a painter of the human figure as he was that of inanimate objects, rendering neither as objects of beauty, but rather as matter of fact.

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Philip Pearlstein (b.1924, Pittsburgh, PA, d. 2022, New York) lived and worked in New York for nearly 70 years. He has been the subject of major exhibitions at institutions such as the Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA; Springfield Art Museum, MO; Carnegie-Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA; The American Academy of in Rome, Italy; Frye Art Museum, Seattle, WA; The Brooklyn Museum, NY; and the Milwaukee Art Museum, WI.

Pearlstein's work features in over 70 public collections, including at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; as well as at Tate Britain, London; Nationalgalerie, Berlin; Museum Ludwig, Cologne; and the Berardo Collection Museum, Lisbon.

Pearlstein's items seen in the exhibition will be featured in an online auction through Hindman Auctions on 14 June 2024.