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### **Philip Pearlstein's Rules – For Himself and Eye**

*by Dan Aubrey*

"I considered myself a mature artist when at the age of 37 I chose to concentrate on the problems of painting realistically, but I set several rules for myself," says prominent American artist Philip Pearlstein,

The artist — recognized as one of the most important figurative painters of our time — is the focus of the Arts Council of Princeton's current exhibition "Philip Pearlstein: A Legacy of Influence" and the council's guest speaker on Saturday, February 18.

The first rule, notes the now 93- year-old artist in a printed statement, "I would draw and paint directly from life, whether from the actual person, or landscape, or object, attempting to depict the light as it fell on their forms, and the space they occupied, as accurately as I could, guided by my visual experience of them, without resorting to any preconceived knowledge of anatomy or so-called correct academic measurements of proportions, color, or rules of perspective.

"Second rule: I would depict the people I hired as models in my studio setting, or the landscapes I would paint, without references to classic mythology, or contemporary social/political concerns, or any other literary concerns, and as far as possible without paraphrasing works recalled from the history of art.

"Third rule: I would not presume to play amateur psychiatrist with my hired models (or occasional portrait sitter). I would not seek to explore their individual human concerns or problems, nor would I exploit their sex or race. I would be neutral in my depictions of them.

And "Fourth rule: I would make my paintings aggressive, and structured as strongly as I could invent, based on my knowledge of modern picture making in most of its phases (up to 1960 when this self imposed conversion took place), so that my paintings could hold their own if they would be exhibited alongside the abstract and expressionistic works of my friends. (I had no interest in producing paintings that would be polite, pleasing or picturesque)."

While his doggedness and discipline have sustained him and given him a place in American cultural history, it was not without struggle.

"As I was still ambitious to have a career as a painter in the 'art world' of New York City," he continues, "I would have to be prepared to live with, and continue to work with my set goals despite either being written-off and sent out of the game by my contemporaries, or at best, the harsh criticism that I expected from a generation of art critics tuned into abstraction and painting based on freedom of gesture and expressionism."

Though Pearlstein, like many post-war American artists, embraced the progressive spirit of abstract art, he says during a telephone interview, his decision to return to the then passe exploration of the human body — mainly the female figure — as his principle theme was unplanned.

"My approach grew out of teaching," he says. "I did graphic design for 15 years. That's how I got into teaching. And I had a degree in art history — in addition to painting. I was given a course to teach that dealt with drawing the figure. So I decided to use the figure as a design element and taught figure drawing as a compositional figure. It was the most interesting problem. It is all about design and not the figure."

Pearlstein was born in Pittsburgh in 1924 to parents who ran a small poultry business. They also supported his artistic aspirations. "It started in kindergarten," he says in a statement. "The teacher told my mother I should be encouraged; my mother was an innocent person who knew nothing about art. But she kept all my drawings and paintings, and that stash existed until I returned from the Second World War to Pittsburgh.

"Stupidly, I threw them out, as well as a lot of puppets, which I had made all through my schooling years. I had been fascinated by theater. My father made me my first puppets out of the cardboard tube inside toilet paper rolls. They would look very modern now, but as a returning adult soldier I was embarrassed by them."

A self-proclaimed poor student, Pearlstein says "all I ever did was art." He joined an art club and received two national awards. When he graduated from high school in 1942 he headed to Carnegie Mellon Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University) but was drafted and headed to Europe.

A few years later he was back at Carnegie Institute on the GI Bill and met two artists important to his development and life: his future wife, painter Dorothy Cantor, and fellow Pittsburgher Andy Warhol.

"When I returned to study art in undergraduate college," he says, "modernist abstract styles dominated the United States art world." Yet, he continues, "I decided my fight would be to have realism accepted as a valid a modern style, and thus upset the basic proposition of almost all contemporary critics and taste-makers that abstraction was the only valid path of contemporary art."

The artist says after he, Cantor, and Warhol moved to New York he was agitated that critics had become so persuasive and artists seemed to follow them blindly. He brought that sense to his teaching at Pratt, Brooklyn College, and other institutions. "I asked the students to learn to verbalize their own critical thoughts about art and to defend the ideas about their art that they would develop themselves in the future.

"But I became my own best student. Realist paintings of un-glamorous nudes painted from life became my weapons, and coincided with one of the political sayings of the moment: 'saying it like it is.' I made the decision not to be diverted and kept to my original aim of painting only from my direct optical experience of the part of the world I set myself in front of."

His approach of starting at the center of the canvas and then letting the image break as he sees it connects to his work as a graphic artist. "I was looking at what editors cropped and became fascinated by what was left on the floor," he says on the telephone. And while he is dedicated to working directly from nature, he says "I wasn't interested in working with natural imagery."

Other developments, such as allowing offbeat and colorful objects to share the plane space with the nudes, are more "found" than calculated. "I had been collecting Americana and other stuff from flea markets. When I moved my studio and moved into the new space, all the stuff was cluttering it up. So I used it with the models," he says, adding that he was interested in the random juxtaposition of the objects.

The race of the models available also added another design element. "There was no political intent," he says, "Just people available." In an aside, he adds, "No one comments on the mix of races, just how the models don't look attractive."

The nude figure also becomes a source of contention. "I have had exhibitions that were subjected to censorship and had paintings put in separate rooms. I had one show somewhere in Kansas. A police barrier was put up and you had to prove your age to go in. Even then they put paintings in other rooms. At another show in a university town near Fort Knox, a priest came in and announced me as Un-American, and a woman involved with education accused me of seducing children." Feminists also weighed in. "I was on all their early posters as someone who was evil," he says.

Asked how he has maintained that dogged vision over five decades, he draws an analogy. "It is like doing the crossword puzzles. Some people get addicted to doing it every day. It is a design problem that can be solved in a million ways. My design background made me very much aware of how a rectangle gets divided up."

Reflecting on the exhibition and the development of the artists whom he has interacted with over his long teaching career, Pearlstein says, "I never tried to get people to do what I was doing. I wanted to be exclusive. I encouraged them to investigate the geometric possibilities and to look directly at nature. Photographs flatten everything and eliminate the excitement of looking at life."

About himself, he says, "Given the light of the heavy political concerns today, it makes me realize that I have been battling in the art world since 1960 when I started teaching and fooling with the figure. And I realized that the art world is highly politicized. I decided to ignore that and became belligerent in my painting. Let my paintings do the fighting."

Philip Pearlstein: A Legacy of Influence, Arts Council of Princeton, 102 Witherspoon Street, Princeton. On view through March 25. Artist talk Saturday, February 18, 2 p.m. Free. 609-924-8777 or [artscouncilofprinceton.org](http://artscouncilofprinceton.org).

### **Portrait of the Artist As a Curator**

Painter Charles Viera remembers his early connection to the artist at the center of "Philip Pearlstein: A Legacy of Influence," the exhibition he organized for the Arts Council of Princeton. "I loved his work," says Viera, who curated the exhibition and whose work joins several other artists' in a celebration of an American master. "My background was as a realistic painter. We were still in the throes of abstract expressionism and realism had been put on the back shelf. And to see someone dealing with the figure in a very fresh new way (was) remarkable."

That was in the early 1970s and Viera, who studied at the Swain School of Design in his native New Bedford, Massachusetts, moved to New York to attend Brooklyn College and take graduate classes with Pearlstein, whom he had met while studying art at the Skowhegan Institute in Maine.

"He was wonderful," says Viera, who became involved with an intensive studio/work arrangement with Pearlstein. Viera says the older artist helped him and others find voices and serve as a role model. "I watched him as he conducted himself. He was perfect mentor who didn't have to say anything. He has a great work ethic."

Before moving to Flemington and setting up a practice painting and teaching at the Arts Council in Princeton, Viera lived in Manhattan and stayed in touch with Pearlstein, seeing him at exhibitions and exchanging holiday greetings.

Then in 2016 Viera, 66, says he felt the need for a change. "There were a few disappointing things that happened, so I was kind of discouraged. This idea of painting was not fun, and I

don't think I wanted to do it. I cut down on classes at the Arts Council and left my gallery. I was pretty much done."

And while Viera even put out a retirement announcement, he was still looking for a connection to art. "This idea of curating a show was an alternative to painting. I wanted to be involved with the art world, so I'll do this instead of painting."

One of his ideas was to pay homage to one of his instructors who also happened to be one of the most important figurative painters in contemporary American art.

"I thought the Arts Council of Princeton was a good place," says Viera. "I was teaching here and had a good connection. He also saw that it would be a positive fit for the art center's ongoing exhibitions of central New Jersey artists to host an exhibition and match offerings by regional museums.

"When I went in with the proposal, the (Arts Council staff) got it immediately. After they said 'yes,' then I had to do it," Viera says.

The artist-curator first turned to two artists he knew: Altoon Sultan and Tom Curry. "Tom was my roommate. He moved to Italy and has shows around Rome. Sultan was a relative star (in our class). One year after graduation she ended up in Marlboro Gallery. She made us all see that one of 'our guys' was making it."

Then he brought the idea to Pearlstein who "was very appreciative that he would be shown as something beyond being a good painter, someone whose work and character was noticed. I think that touched him. He was eager to help. At one point he said, 'How many (of my) paintings do you want?'"

Additional help came from Betty Cunningham, whose gallery represents Pearlstein and other prominent American artists. "Betty Cunningham has been very helpful. The second biggest name in the exhibit is Janet Fish. Her gallery wasn't helpful, and Betty got it."

Viera mentions a few challenges he encountered as he created the exhibition. One was the number of artists he could have involved. "I needed to leave out people who I wanted to put in. We didn't have the room, and we had insurance and budget considerations."

Another problem, Viera says, was "dealing with nudity. That has been the 10,000-pound elephant in the room. And it has come up over and over again. Even here in the Arts Council we cropped in on it in a way so there was no frontal nudity. We sent out a detail, just to give publications an option. (U.S. 1) was one of the few papers that would publish a full nude photo. It's a complex issue."

As Viera prepares for Pearlstein's Saturday, February 18, presentation, he says, "I was thinking of quitting painting, but being around Pearlstein made me think it was too early for that. I thought, 'I should be painting more, I have a 93-year-old mentor.' Let's start round two."

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