

Arts

Pearlstein opens up about his art, exhibit



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Artist Philip Pearlstein stands in front of his 10-foot-long panoramic view of Jerusalem, which he printed at Graphicstudio at the University

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We recently sat down with internationally renowned artist Philip Pearlstein at the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, where 62 of his works, "Philip Pearlstein's People, Places, Things," are exhibited through June 16.

Pearlstein is known for his large-scale realistic paintings of the human nude in various unconventional poses.

Sitting in the gallery in St. Pete, surrounded by many of these paintings, the soft-spoken Pearlstein talked about his art and about his connections to Tampa and to Florida.

Q: Most of your work since the late 1950s has been of posed nude models. Some critics — including, according to you, the late artist Alice Neel — have suggested that these paintings are cold and indifferent. What's your response to that?

A: I'm not a collector of souls. I'm not interested in analyzing my models. We talk about other things during breaks — politics, the world, ancient times.

Q: A lot of the models in your paintings have their eyes closed, or almost closed. Did you pose them that way?

A: They're bored, and sleepy. I'm painting them objectively. For me it's an exercise in using my eyes. I once wrote an article about my work and I titled it, "I get my highs from using my eyes."

Q: Can you talk a little more about "using your eyes?"

A: When I started painting models, I decided I would throw away everything I knew and try to paint as if I'd never seen a realist painting of a model and to reinvent the whole thing for myself and accept whatever happened. I didn't do any academic research about proportions or anatomy I just decided to paint what I could see. I turned myself into a camera, one with a wide angle.

Q: In the 1950s and '60s many of your friends were abstract expressionists. Did they influence your painting at all?

A: The abstract expressionists — like [Willem] de Kooning or Franz Kline — came up with picture structures that were totally removed from any other tradition, and I loved that about them.

Q: Several pieces in the exhibit were made here in Florida. Could you talk about that a little?

A: When I was in the Army, I was sent to Camp Blanding [near Starke] to work at a graphic work shop, where we did charts on how to use your weapon, how to use a compass, that sort of thing. That compass chart [in the show] is typical of what we did. Now it looks like Pop Art. (laughs)

Q: What about the watercolors from that period?

A: The watercolors I did on my own time. I was sort of documenting basic training. [Three watercolors from this period are in the show]

Q: You are noted as being the first artist to participate at Graphicstudio at the University of South Florida. How did that happen?

A: The man who established Graphicstudio, Donald Saff... invited me down when he set up this workshop. The first I visited I did two or three drawings directly from models on stone. Then they were printed. It was a teaching demonstration. But he really went into full-swing after that, and worked with many artists. I came down a number of times after that. I must have a dozen prints done with the workshop here ...

Q: What was your biggest project at Graphicstudio?

A: The biggest project was that view of Jerusalem, which was a woodcut, done from 18 blocks. Each one had a separate color. I did the original watercolor on site in Jerusalem and worked with the Jerusalem print shop there. I did three prints on site there, directly onto two aluminum plates and one copper plate. I came here to make corrections. To correct the color. It was 10 feet long. It was an enormous project.

Q: Do you ever tire of painting nudes?

A: You know, I never expected to live this long. It's one of the wonderful things of a longer life generally; we've been able to develop the problems we set for ourselves.

Q: Do you still paint every day?

A: I work with models three days a week and I do portraits of my friends. The models contribute a great deal to the set-up, but I look for what I'm looking for, like the way a certain shadow falls. And I can always yell "stop."

Q: Any thoughts about this show?

A: I think it's fantastic. The last show this big was in 1983, and I retired from teaching in 1987. So I had a lot more time to spend on my paintings. And a good deal of these paintings were done after that.

Q: How does it make you feel looking at them in this setting?

A: It's interesting, because some of them I haven't seen for 50 years.

"Philip Pearlstein's People, Places, Things," a retrospective featuring 62 paintings, drawings and prints, is on exhibit through June 16 at Museum of Fine Arts, 255 Beach Drive NE, St. Petersburg; tickets are \$17 adults, \$15 seniors, \$10 students age and older; (727) 822-1032 and www.fine-arts.org