

Philip Pearlstein at Betty Cuningham

Surely Philip Pearlstein is pulling our leg in continuing to disavow the possibility of allegory in these allegedly realist renderings of elaborate studio set-ups (all in oil on canvas, from 2004 and '05). His just-the-facts approach confers plausible deniability, but symbolic freight weighs heavily.

In *Model with Two Cement Flamingoes* (26 by 34 inches), a grumpy, dreadlocked model slouches in an inflatable arm-chair, which cannot but symbolize disposable industrial culture; the dumb, crumpling flamingoes seem vestiges of the *tristes tropiques*. In *Model with Legs Crossed over African Drum*, a white model's red-nailed feet caress the instrument's phallic ornaments, which arch like little hounds.

Propelled by churning, clanging compositions that depict scenes of stillness and boredom, these paintings have tremendous pictorial activity but no "action." For some years, the languid models in Pearlstein's paintings have seemed like backdrops for the props. But the artist now traps

the viewer in a room without windows, mirrors, or even the chrome or shiny plastic surfaces that previously complicated the space and offered some visual escape. This foregrounds the relation of players in these tableaux, as in the 6-by-5-foot *Two Models with Chinese Kite*. Suspended between two seated female models is an eye-grabbing kite in the form of a sailing ship. The shadow of one model's head falls squarely on the kite's magenta jib, which happens to align with the other model's groin, over which her hands are primly folded. Thus a spatial barrier provides a dangerous visual liaison.

Compared to Lucian Freud, that other painter of deadpan studio contrivance, Pearlstein's touch is bland. He is not particularly interested in rendering surfaces (although he excels at bamboo furniture and the puffy wrinkle of bed linens). His drawing is sometimes wrong, and the wash of multiple light sources that engenders complex cast shadows can also defeat explanation of spatial relationships. His apologists cite his affinity with such great activators of the picture plane as Mondrian and Kline, and although he

claims a remove from the European tradition, his flattening and piling-up of folds and furrows, of flesh and fabric, recall the early Italians, whose work he saw as a GI in Europe. Pearlstein can even be linked to Process Art, dodging as he does the responsibilities of form (and denying that he "crops") by starting at an area of visual complication and advancing outward, letting the compositional chips fall where they may. He has recently said that he uses the figure because "it is the most interesting object that is available." Pearlstein purports to approach the figure as an object, but as he knows from Duchamp and Picaabia, machines have secret lives.

—Stephen Maine

Zebedee Jones at Danese

Although painters have long maintained a fervent dialogue on the matter of monochrome painting, no single standard emerges for the long history of the practice, and considerable variety can be seen in choices such as medium, facture and support. One fundamental difference between the monochromes of the



Philip Pearlstein: *Two Models with Chinese Kite*, 2005, oil on canvas, 72 by 60 inches; at Betty Cuningham.