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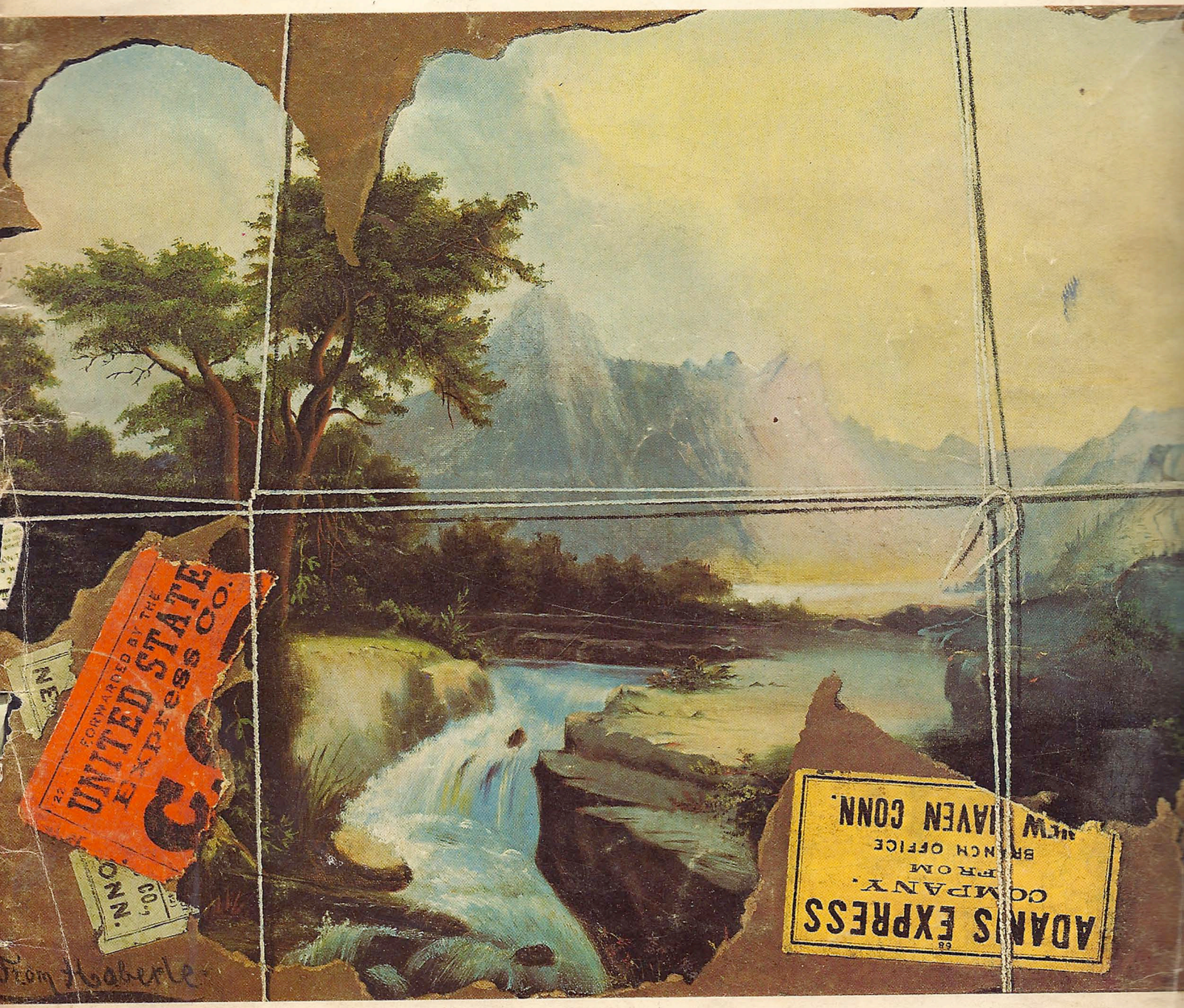
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Monique, painted in August, 1966, by Don Perlis, young New York realist whose paintings are shown for the first time at the Whitney Museum this month.

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By Stephen A. Kurtz

Can You Still Become an Old Master at 28?

Don Perlis answers in the affirmative and shows the results of his studies in Pollaiuolo, Correggio, van Dyck et al among the Whitney's realists this month

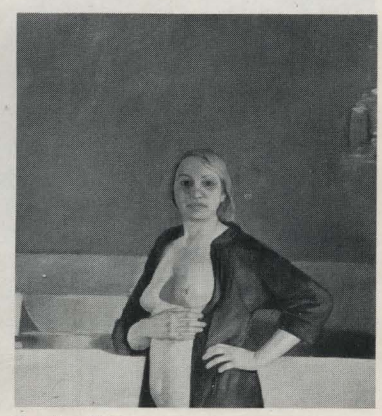
Although it is barely 60 years since the first abstraction was executed, figure painting has become for many a dubious backwater in the modern mainstream. This is an eternal and perhaps unavoidable pattern, for when one mode of painting is in the ascendancy, those talented in an alternative manner retreat into obscurity, unnoticed, unsupported and often, consequently, unsuccessful. Critical interest in figure painting, although renewed every few years, has been oddly undiscriminating. Our eyes, accustomed to making fine distinctions in an extraordinary range of abstract styles, perceive in paintings of the human form only the subject matter. Yet there is at least as wide a range of current figure styles as there is in the entire corpus of abstraction. Perhaps because they have been largely ignored in recent years, contemporary painters of the figure are even more fiercely individualistic than their more accepted brethren. Consequently, a great profusion of work, varying widely both in approach and quality, now awaits us. To appreciate its delights, however, a new and peculiar battle must be waged for it to receive attention on its own terms. Although the genre enjoys an ancient heritage, it has clearly been dethroned in this century and its ability to express a contemporary vision must be re-established.

The work of Don Perlis, a 28-year-old native New York painter who shows at the Graham Gallery and is well represented in the Whitney's current "Realism" show, should dispel any doubts on this question. Curiously, in his concern with traditional techniques and principles of composition, he succeeds in establishing a completely modern ambiance. And in his exclusive involvement with the formal problems of three-dimensional space he establishes, perhaps unwittingly, a highly forceful human insight.

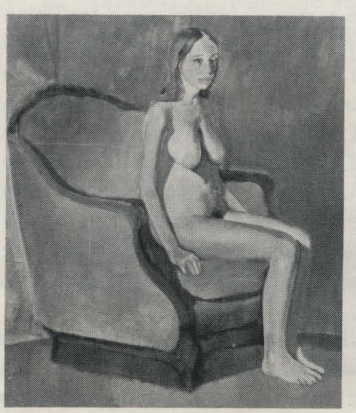
Perlis' development over the past four years may be traced in two concomitant evolutions: first, a growing surety in the mastery of difficult and often lost techniques, and second, a slow but perceptible change in his attitude toward the model. His paintings of 1966 through mid-1967 have a classicizing frontality. Shadows and edges are sharply defined and a minimum of diagonals are employed within a vertical but nearly square rectangular format. In *Judy,* 1966, spotlights were used to place the face in greatest shadow while the torso is comparatively bright. The lighting is combined with inflamed genitals and an air of apparent bravado in an extremly youthful subject to lend the model a certain pathos that Perlis likens to a Pollaiuolo portrait of a beautiful girl with a deformed, ectoplasmic ear. The model, although demanding an emotional response, remains an encapsulated object, failing to interact directly with the artist or the viewer. Even though the still unrefined technique leaves the flesh tones opaque, the forms not fully realized, and the surface somewhat overworked, the image retains its moving force.

The cool, muted colors of this painting become more intense in *Sandy,* painted in the spring of 1967, although Perlis' palette has remained in this range of muted blues, browns, greys and reds until quite recently. The figure, placed far down on the canvas, has an heroic, timeless quality, the result of carefully considered internal harmonies. Nevertheless, certain disharmonies begin to appear here that, developed more fully if unconsciously, become the hallmark of Perlis' work. The figure, however solidly established, is somehow slightly at odds with its environment and, to a lesser extent, with itself since the subtle modeling of the face is not carried through to the harder edges of the torso. More important, the verticals and

Judy, 1966.



Sandy, 1967.



Laura, 1967.

Jane, 1967.

Ginger, March, 1969.

- diagonals of the subject contradict the calm, horizontal neutrality of the background. Yet the figure is well realized as an object in space. Its solidity is not in doubt, but it remains more heroic than sensual since a genuine sense of contact is absent.

Laura (summer, 1967) clearly initiates a set of qualities peculiar to Perlis' work and far removed from the Italianate heroicism of his previous efforts. The *belle laideur* of the face (reminiscent of Bellows) is extremely affecting and the body is even more obviously at odds with its situation since she sits uncomfortably on the edge of a chair, describing an angle that actively contradicts its curves. The chair, itself an ugly piece of furniture, is somehow rendered elegant by Perlis' treatment and the simplicity of the composition makes these contradictions all the more obvious.

This simplicity yields in *Jane* (winter, 1967) to far more complex directionalities. Indeed, the composition can be described as a set of contradictions. The markedly foreshortened frontal pose (a Titian attitude viewed from the side) contradicts the direction of the angled shadows and of a *nearly* horizontal chair. The airy colors, although muted and of similar intensity, are oddly combined, with warm objects throwing cooler shadows. The freedom of the legs belies the tightness of the torso so that the disharmonies obtaining among the objects, and between the objects and the figure, are contained within the figure itself. The almost mannerist tensions and conflicts of this painting so dilute its sensuality that one marvels that it was once rejected by the Harlem Studio Museum because of its "provocative pose."

The tiny portrait of *Terry on a Green Couch* (February, 1968) is the most clearly Balthusian of all, with the angles of a doll-like figure strongly contradicting the eccentric curves of an (again) ugly brocade seat. The space is highly compressed, described with an almost primitive stiffness and obsession with detail. It marks the beginning of Perlis' experiments with glazing — one of several traditional techniques the artist has researched and revived — that were continued in a group of elegant little interiors.

These experiments culminated one year later in a series of three remarkable portraits. *Ginger* (March, 1969) retains many of the affective qualities of his earlier work with a very lovely model in an attitude of exquisite vulnerability, again perched hesitantly on the edge of a chair whose direction is contradicted by the lines of her body. Although the figure, placed in the middle distance, retains its object status, there is a new surety in the modeling of the flesh whose luminosity is unparalled in the work of any contemporary figure painter. This is indeed the fruit of Perlis' technical research obtained, in this case, from Correggio as described by Eastlake in *Methods and Materials of Painting of the Great Schools and Masters* (1869). First an underpainting is made using only three colors: black for the cool tones, Venetian red for the warm, and a mixture of black, red and white for the neutral areas. The entire surface is then scumbled with a thick glazing varnish and a coat of lead white, which dries translucently. Using the same three colors, the process is repeated with enough varnish to yield a thick glaze and, most important, a highly luminous, transparent flesh. Several compositional problems remain unsolved in this painting since the complex patterns of an Oriental rug confuse the direction of the floor, and a drape on the upper left-hand wall retains an unwonted heaviness, although oddly broken by the almost abstract pattern of a lampshade. However, for its technical and emotive values, this painting remains one of his most successful.

The technique with which he struggled here becomes mastered in

Lise, November, 1969.

Monique (August, 1969) — not an end in itself but a means. The model, for the first time, is fully clothed and again, for the first time, has established a very active relationship with the viewer. Having ceased to be an object, she can no longer be seen as pathetic. The pose has the intense quality of a movie-still, as if the girl were caught in a moment of animated conversation. Although the Correggioesque technique had been abandoned to gain greater freedom of execution, the object of this technique has been attained in a relaxed understanding of the effects of light on flesh. The flesh is a mixture of cool and warm translucent colors set off, in the manner of Manet, against a wall of solid color with the distance between the two indicated through tonal modulations.

The painting is equally a study in the complication of space through the adjustment of simple devices. The slightly jarring directional contradictions are still present but the total effect, accomplished through crisp edges in cool blues and browns, yields a Neo-Classical clarity (Ingres is one of Perlis' ideals). The sense of a battle already won pervades this painting. The technical imperfections that, because of their other qualities, were noted but easily accepted in his earlier work, are absent here. One feels that now, anything is possible.

The sense of a forceful personality, equally strong if less sympathetic, is present also in *Lise* (November, 1969). The objects continue to be placed at oddly different angles, producing between the figure and the chair in which she sits, a subtle *contrapposto* that lends them both a greater solidity and a van Dyckian elegance. Although Lise's expression connotes a kind of icy, aristocratic pride, the colors are considerably warmer and more intense than those of the previous painting. Indeed, the use of color to indicate spatial configurations and transitions is this work's most important innovation. The emphasis, as in the old masters, is not on hue but on value, of which the full range appears both in each individual element and in the total scheme. The light, bright and transparent in the flesh tones, is used to establish priorities, especially in the upper torso and in the space between the two chairs. The latter is typical of the minor, almost accidental areas in which Perlis delights since through them the reality of the total space is established. Ultimately, the problems of this recent painting are those of refinement on a technique and spatial structure that have already attained an undoubted solidity.

It is not accidental that the two paths of evolution — in attitude toward the model, and surety of technique — should have culminated dramatically and simultaneously in *Monique*. The personal confidence needed to view another individual as subject rather than object and the artistic confidence that renders the technique of one's craft a means rather than an end are not unrelated. Moreover, Perlis' professional relation to the world had changed, and that alteration could not help but affect his work. The fact that most of his painting had been done in relative isolation and with a sense of alienation from an unsympathetic public is reflected in the poses of his earlier models. Those discomforting attitudes and subtle directional contradictions capture the artist's own sense of being "out of place." Since to one degree or another, this sense (so reminiscent of Degas' portraits) is shared by everyone, those paintings make a very direct and universal statement. The interest expressed by several critics and dealers shortly before the painting of *Monique* is similarly reflected in the work. One senses the artist existing *within* the space he describes, not removed at a safe if embarrassed distance. The meeting of artist and model is a meeting of persons, each enriching the other, from which the notion of observer and observed is excluded. Consequently, the image is invested with a new reality, an unconstructed quality that pervades both figure and space. If certain disharmonies are attained, they are to be valued as part of a universal contemporary vocabulary. But equally to be valued is a fresh confrontation with the world.

Illus.: Victor Dubreuil, *Don't Make a Move*