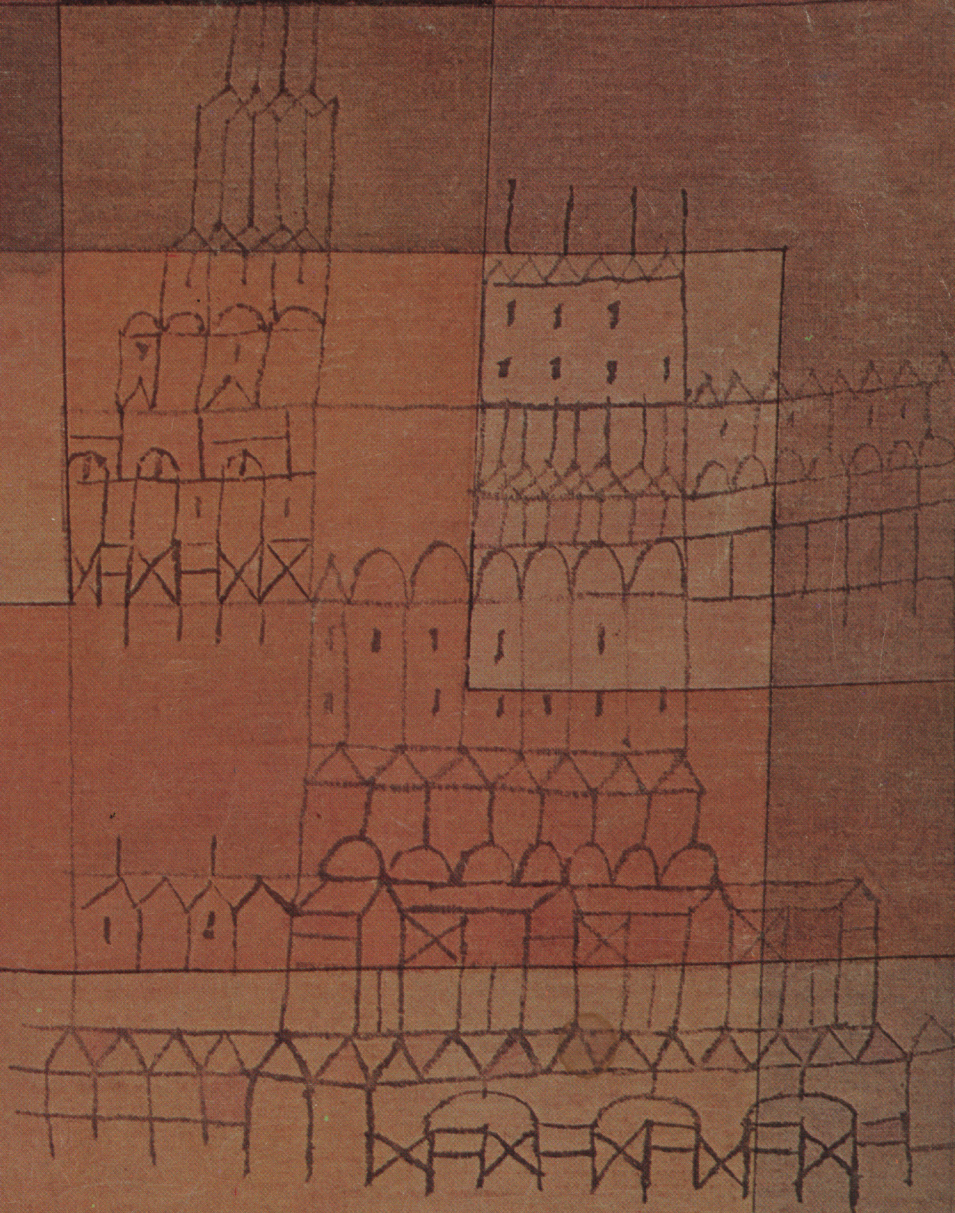


# arts

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Klee

## DONALD PERLIS

Realism has become an increasingly important force in contemporary art over the last ten to fifteen years, and Perlis' paintings are an important part of that movement. His only real subject is women, or rather women and little girls, particularly his own wife and daughter. Though he

handles other genres—landscape, still life, male figures—with equal skill, ultimately these concerns are related to his major interest: the female alone or together with other females.

A fresh, brushy Long Island landscape, ravishing in its own right, may also serve as a

study which will be transmuted into an integral part of a portrait or reclining nude. A still life may contain a graceful, pensive head of Aphrodite placed near a simple elegant pitcher and vase. The homage is not only to the goddess of love and the female form, but to the abiding values of classical art. Indeed, his linear control, firm-edged forms, shallow modeling, spatial clarity, and essentially loving vision contribute to the sense of classicism which pervades all of this work.

Perlis is not afraid of beauty in his choice of models and settings or in the paintings themselves. There is no sense that art must be ugly to be modern or that a realist artist must choose ugly motifs. His models, though young and attractive, are never bland. Even when placed in idyllic landscapes, each is a contemporary woman with a strong will and definite sense of self.

In *Elaine*, for instance, the life-sized figure, cropped at the thighs, seems to be almost walking out of the painting. Her clear face, honey-colored hair, and warm yellow shirt form a blaze of light in the center of an otherwise dark painting. Yet the dark areas with their bravura brushwork—blue-black pants, viridian blazer, and dark brown background—are just as exciting as the light. Just as the lights contrast with darks, finished smooth areas contrast with areas purposely left crude and brushy. An example is the three gold buttons on the blazer: the top one perfectly finished; the next, just a blob of pigment; and last half illusionist, half paint. Likewise the reddish-brown brushwork of the lower right background cuts into the blazer sleeve, destroying contour and illusion just enough to reaffirm artistic process without detracting from the apparent realism of the whole.

Such brilliant manipulation of paint and line is, perhaps, the most exciting quality of Perlis' art. An expert draftsman, he also makes his own mediums based on the controversial theories of Jacques Maroger. A wax-based medium is used for the build-up of elegant, complex textures, while a mastic medium is used for glazing. Tonal variation is developed with a classical Venetian underpainting—burnt sienna model-

ing with lead white highlights—a technique he learned by studying the writings of Sir Charles Eastlake. Thus his work is rooted firmly in the past even as it looks forward to the future.

One of Perlis' greatest strengths is his ability to integrate the linear and painterly, the classical and sensuous in a single work. This virtuosity of treatment combined with an exquisitely personal sensibility may be seen in the monumental *July, 1978*. Five women and a little girl are grouped around an umbrella table on a narrow deck, with a young girl riding in on horseback to the right. The figures are kept close to the picture plane by a thickly painted opaque sky that glows with color reflected from their clothing. The interweaving of figures through gestures, eye contact, and turning heads suggests the classical calm and unity of a Renaissance "sacred conversation."

Unlike Renaissance painting, however, there is no central figure or bilateral symmetry. Instead, the eye is kept in the center by the colors of the women's clothes which present the whole range of primary colors—red, pink, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet—glowing against the more neutral colors at each end of the long horizontal canvas. Instead of a single focal point there is a musical rhythm set up by the vibrating hues, and each hue is reflected in the form next to it. Thus foliage green is reflected on the upper sleeve of a cherry-red T-shirt worn by the woman standing in the foreground, and the sky above her is filled with streaks of pink. While the upper part of her body is convincingly modeled, parts of her blue jeans and feet go almost transparent so that the leg of a figure behind her actually shows through!

The painting is full of breathtaking contradictions like this. Elegant, shallow modeling against areas of purposeful distortion, fine finish against purposely crude brushwork: all this could only be achieved at a particular moment in time, in a statement that is both extremely contemporary and highly personal as well. (Tomasulo, Union College, Cranford, N.J., November 30-December 24)



Donald Perlis, *Linda with Birch Tree*, 1979. Oil on canvas, 90 x 54".  
Photograph Jacob Burckhardt.