

Morality on canvas, in Lancaster

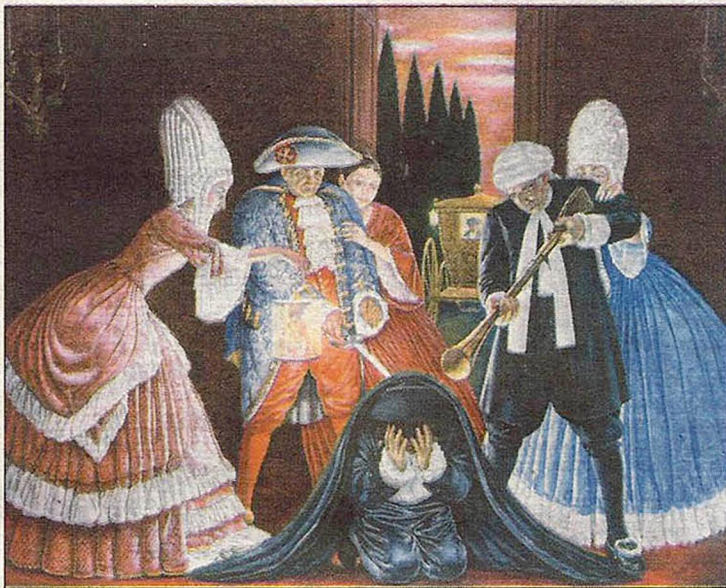
By Victoria Donohoe
FOR THE INQUIRER

Don Perlis' Narrative Reborn" is a truly amazing exhibition at Lancaster Museum of Art, one that convincingly suggests painting today is a moral endeavor.

It features 33 canvases painted by Perlis from the 1980s to the present and ranging in size from about 10 inches square to 18 feet long. Apart from two key self-portraits done at turning points in Perlis' life, and a fiercely theatrical portrayal of his Oscar-winning close friend F. Murray Abraham as King Lear, the show chiefly emphasizes narrative subject matter about city life, history, and, more recently, opera.

This lifelong New Yorker got an early start in narrative painting, but it takes years to learn the full complement of necessary skills — figure painting, making a constructed painting able to convey drama, depth replacing flatness, and choosing a significant and worthy subject.

Already well advanced in these abilities by the late 1980s, he produced large narrative paintings about the urban threats of incivility, lawlessness, racial strife, and homelessness. Included here are three famous factual episodes. The most unforgettable, shown in



"Don Giovanni" (2005) from the exhibition "Don Perlis: Narrative Reborn" at the Lancaster Museum of Art.

the triptych *Incident*, was the 1984 case in which "subway vigilante" Bernard Goetz opened fire with an unlicensed handgun on three youths who confronted him in a New York subway car, then disappeared into the darkness. An epic 7 by 18 feet, the three-painting suite conveys Perlis' understanding that myth is history writ large.

The obvious question arises,

since Perlis' mayhem oils were all done in the late '80s, when a traveling exhibition of works by German artist Anselm Kiefer was being seen across the United States (including at the Philadelphia Museum of Art): Did Kiefer's large-scale paintings, which revived history as a subject, influence Perlis?

Hardly. Kiefer was examining

cultural politics relating to the Third Reich legacy, and exhibiting work in a tortured heroic style based on expressionism and abstract expressionism. By contrast, Perlis' realistic mayhem images point out the dangers of public indifference, prejudice, and bitterness toward our fellow human beings; they raise none of the unanswered questions Kiefer's art did.

By the 1990s, Perlis had entered a quieter time of focusing on his studio, on literature and the stage, producing a number of fine views from his studio window. His street scene *September Morn* includes a skateboarder and a child reaching for a lost balloon who draws our attention upward to smoke pouring from a tower just struck nearby. It's 9/11, but nobody we see below, entering the subway or talking on a cellphone, is yet aware of what the day has become.

And then, in this stunning show, the artist's latest strikingly dramatic scenes of opera performances declare his genuine high spirits. Yes, narrative is truly reborn on his watch.

Lancaster Museum of Art, 135 N. Lime St., Lancaster. To Nov. 20. Tue-Sat 10-4, Sun 12-4. Admission by donation. 717-394-3497.