

Perlis: the Merits of Reality



Donald Perlis' *RECLINING NUDE ON STRIPED SHEET*

By JED PERL

At thirty, Don Perlis is one of the more important figurative painters at work in New York. Perlis' new paintings (Graham Gallery, to Oct. 16) present female nudes in a bright, natural light. The pictures are filled with colorful patterns—a striped mattress cover, a flowered couch and rug—painted in loose, bravura brush strokes.

Like other recent figurative painters, Perlis reasserts the validity of observed reality as subject matter for painting. At the same time he approaches this observed world with a consciousness of the formal problems involved in picture making.

The figures in Perlis' paintings are endowed with an admirable sense of weight and three-dimensional form, but the sharply-angled perspective, arbitrary cut-offs and flat arabesques in the

pictures make it hard to appreciate the virtuosity of the figure painting.

In the large roundel—*Theresa in Circular Interior*—the figure is surrounded by shapes and spaces that relate neither to the round format nor to the curves of the body. This large picture is being advertised as the *piece de resistance* of the show, but a picture with the same model in a similar pose more successfully integrates the figure in space. Since Perlis is better able to handle the fewer and simpler compositional elements in *Nude on Striped Sheet*, he can give fuller sway to the intelligence and warmth of his figure painting.

Perlis has a felicitous talent for placing the right brush mark in the right place. In figurative painting (as opposed to abstract ex-

pressionist painting, for instance) a brush stroke has no intrinsic merit: it is only successful insofar as it describes form. Because they want to describe form with the utmost precision, many current figurative painters—Pearlstein, Beal, Laderman—have broken down their brush strokes into smaller and smaller units.

Perlis takes another route. By letting large brush strokes sit right on the picture surface, he is often able to describe a shadow, a bit of pattern or the edge of a form in one rapid stroke.

Like Reynolds or Delacroix in his time, Perlis is trying to revive the loose brushwork of the seventeenth century masters. He is a long way from his goal, but his kind of painterly performance is good to see in the work of a figurative painter.