



Alix Pearlstein, *Interiors*, 1996, video still.

## ALIX PEARLSTEIN

### POSTMASTERS

In her recent solo show, Alix Pearlstein subjected the old white cube to some serious interior decorating. A black video monitor and white chair resting on a square of white carpet occupied the center of the gallery; uniformly framed collages hung on the walls. The pictures all showed the same room plan, but in each a different decorating scheme reigned—a unique artwork with matching carpet, furniture, and figure. From *contempo* to natural, the “look” of these plans was very ’70s. In representing the bourgeois tastes of the period, Pearlstein also invokes a particular art-historical moment. With performance art and

Conceptualism vying to dematerialize the art object at the same time that pattern and decoration and feminist theory were attempting to expand art’s parameters, this was a period whose avant-garde profoundly challenged the very notion of a specifically cultural space.

Paradoxically it’s by embracing the ethos of the “establishment” that Pearlstein demonstrates how easily, ultimately, popular taste and high art coexist: once-difficult artworks are shown to perform beautifully in even the tamest suburban settings. In one collage, the red, yellow, and blue of a painting by Piet Mondrian dictates the surrounding floor and wall treatments, creating precisely the kind of harmony Mondrian envisioned for his own studio. Works by (or in the styles of) contemporary masters ranging from Jasper Johns and Franz Kline to Sherrie Levine and Philip Taaffe appear elsewhere as both the subjects and subjugators of Pearlstein’s proposed environments. Though this work might seem like nothing more than a wry critique of art as mass-market product—with every artwork having potential for bed, bath, and beyond—the art shown here not only holds its own but lends its good looks and integrity to each tableau, giving one reason to suspect that Pearlstein has something more playful (and ultimately more persuasive) in mind.

Exactly what this is becomes evident in Pearlstein’s video piece—for which many of the collages act as studies—which is literally the installation’s centerpiece. Near the monitor, on the edge of the carpet, is a clear, plastic vase holding a real, fragrant flower. As this object also appears in one of the video vignettes, it gives us a hint of

Pearlstein’s purpose. Her work doesn’t toy with the border between art and life (Is the vase a prop? a sculpture? a found object?), it merges them (the Johns target does look beautiful over the living-room couch).

Each segment of *Interiors* stars Pearlstein, albeit in a different guise, including playful kitty, *Playboy* magazine party girl, and Energizer Bunny. As she changes, so do the settings, with the pictures on the walls and the music changing too, making each scene a total environment complete with matching “girl.” Because this girl inhabits environments of her own design, Pearlstein’s performance reaches beyond obvious commentaries on women as ornaments. In one scene she plays a peppy young mom who dashes around decorating her cube/living room in a yellow scheme, punctuated by a cool blue and an undeniably erotic reproduction of Ingres’ *Odalisque*. When she ushers her nuclear family (husband and two kids) into their newly done digs, there’s a momentary flash of mother as installation artist presenting her latest work to a bewildered but trusting audience. Conflating images of interiors from women’s magazines with issues raised in art magazines during her ’70s childhood, Pearlstein’s imagery and performances evoke the marriage of high and low evident in the work of artists as diverse as Jorge Pardo, Georgina Starr, and Jason Rhoades, rendering all but irrelevant those old battles between art and decoration, culture and kitsch, and masculine and feminine.

—Ingrid Schaffner

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