

studio visit: alix pearlstein

by Elisabeth Kley



Alix Pearlstein in her studio.

Armed with a wacky list of topical questions supplied by my editor, I recently visited Alix Pearlstein at her new studio. Her solo exhibition at Postmasters, called "Interiors," had just closed, and she was getting ready for a vacation in Oregon. Intensely dark-eyed and extremely articulate, Pearlstein was working on a new set of collages that will be used as storyboards for her next video project, *Still*, which will have its premiere in "Video Viewpoints" at MOMA this January. For someone who likes to perform in crazy costumes, Pearlstein is surprisingly quiet and calm. She was a bit fazed by Walter's editorial questions (things like "Earliest art memory," "Pet peeve" and "Best time of the day"), but she had plenty of intelligent things to say about her work, and I was happy to listen and to ask a few questions of my own.



Still from *Egg Yang*.

I became an instant Pearlstein fan last year, when I saw her video *Egg Yang* at Lauren Wittels Gallery. Brilliantly combining deadpan satire with intensely saturated color, the video has a palette that is limited to red, black and, most beautifully, yellow and white. Gorgeous as a painting, hilarious and sometimes creepy as a cartoon, the video features Pearlstein dressed all in white, her head covered with a plastic egglike helmet, twirling a hula hoop and squatting to lay eggs through a hole in her jeans.



Interior with Artist and Ceramic Vase in the Studio, 1996, collage.

"Interiors," the installation at Postmasters, included 17 collages, combining tiny images of famous paintings, elegant modern furniture and animal and human characters, including Jackie O, Woody Allen and the Kissingers. Six of the collages were used as storyboards for a video shown in an elegant viewing area (also modeled on a collage). Pearlstein appears onscreen as a real kitten, a sex kitten and the Energizer Bunny, among other roles, in narratives exploring the bizarre ways modernist esthetics translate from art to interior decoration and advertising.

In our conversation, Pearlstein revealed a tenacious desire to reduce her art to essentials. She has, appropriately, moved her work into two narrow rooms, one furnished with filing cabinets and a few tables, and the other with monitor, tripod, camera and a few plastic chairs. Like an empty office, windowless and bare, the studio is a blank slate, ready for future transformations.



Video still, Interiors, based on Interior with Artist... collage.

If her plans don't change, the delicious colors in *Egg Yang* and the art in *Interiors* will be replaced in *Still* by pure black and white. In the collages, simply dressed figures, alone or in groups, move within boxlike spaces -- floors, ceilings and walls indicated in exaggerated perspective. Filmed as simply as possible, the new video will be concerned, Pearlstein says, "with actions in which there is an inherent stillness or wherein an action must abruptly come to a halt or pause, physically or psychologically." She is especially pleased that the new studio will allow her to film the ceiling and floor in one frame, just as was planned in the collages. A simple environment, easy to control, the studio is an ideal working space for the many takes and extensive editing Pearlstein requires to reach the intrinsically flat and artificial beauty of video space.

Pearlstein's mother is an interior



Installation view,
"Interiors," 1996,
at Postmasters.



Pearlstein's studio.



Paradise Syndrome,
1989, chrome,
flocking, mirror,
rubber.

decorator and her grandfather was an architect. As a sensible undergraduate, Pearlstein majored in design, although she had always wanted to be an artist. During childhood, she often visited the permanent collection at the Whitney Museum. Her earliest art memories are of a live bird in a sculpture by Edward Kienholz and of Pop art, especially the George Segal sculpture, apt recollections for the future video and performance artist. Combined with an MFA in sculpture from SUNY Purchase, N.Y., Pearlstein's design background may have helped her develop the analytic ability to discover and solve new problems in each successive body of work.

In one of her first solo exhibitions, at Laurie Rubin Gallery in 1990, Pearlstein transformed assorted toys, accessories and design items into eccentric sculptural objects. Very soon thereafter, she made a decision of obvious brilliance -- that making art should be fun, not boring. Moving in a more conceptual, less material direction, she decided to make her working techniques reflect the activities she enjoys. Out went the gluing and sawing, which gave no particular pleasure. Shopping remained. Shifting her emphasis from object to narrative, Pearlstein began to dissolve her previous methods. *Untitled (Floor Crack Fuzz)* (1991), flirting with invisibility, consisted only of cotton fluff placed in the cracks of the gallery floor. In *Suspended Fly* (1992), by stretching an invisible nylon thread between three bricks to hold up a plastic fly, she created the suspended image of an instant in time.

Video, the next logical step, is a delightfully straightforward medium. The natural impulse, for Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneemann and other video pioneers, was to "set up the camera, strip and perform," she said. For Pearlstein, a lifelong dancer, moving her body has always been an instinctively satisfying form of communication, and video has brought dance into her work. Future plans for additional

performers will make movement and choreography even more significant. Pearlstein enjoys giving orders, she claimed, and she is looking forward to directing, and even jokingly confessed to being a bit of a megalomaniac.



Eggs, 1994,
string, plastic,
2 x 32 x 42 in.

As she described her artistic development, Pearlstein spoke of "finding a rigorous formal means, by a process of exclusion, to achieve narrative and representation, and bring minimalism into a totally different psychological and cultural context." Using her design background and astute conceptual thinking, she has inverted minimal strategies to generate weirdly austere yet outrageous arenas for lucidly enigmatic events. Pearlstein's intention is, she reiterated, through "working with physical, visual, and perceptual issues, to create situations that will trigger the viewer's imagination."

ELISABETH KLEY is a New York artist who writes on art.



Pearlstein as
a cat in
Interiors, 1996.

[Price Database](#) [Market Alerts](#) [Analytics Reports](#) [Gallery Network](#) [Auction House Partnerships](#)

[About](#) [Contact](#) [Jobs](#) [FAQ](#) [Site Map](#) [Advertise](#) [Terms](#) [Privacy](#) [Cookies](#)



English (US) ▼

©2017 Artnet Worldwide Corporation. All rights reserved.