

## **Robert Perlman at Prographica**

By Sean Hurley

It's becoming increasingly rare to find someone who directly observed the high point of American Modernism, a particular period of Art in which the pursuit of timelessness and excellence had yet to be eroded by irony and careerism. The Art life calls to many people, but there are points where the Art Life (a point of view) and the art world (a market) overlap briefly, and Prographica Gallery is currently showing an small, exquisite exhibition by an artist who was on the scene when one could literally rub shoulders with titans of art history, and who has privately lived the Art life since then.

Robert Perlman entered the Art Life at a tumultuous, strident point and place. Born in 1942 in New York City, he came of age in the Center of It All with regards to the fine arts. The post-war boom made Manhattan the capitol of the western world concerning painting and sculpture. Although Jackson Pollock had driven into a tree in 1956, others of his generation — DeKooning, Rothko, Still, Guston, Newman — were blue chips in the art market. Second-generation abstractionists, post-painterly artists like Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, and Frank Stella, brought an academic resolve and institutionalism to the Abstract Expressionist movement, inviting another generation of brash upstarts like Rauschenberg, Johns, and the emerging Pop sensibility to upend the heroic character the prior generation had cultivated. All of this was available to Perlman right as he emerged into adulthood, and the impressions that were left upon him, particularly by the AbEx and Color Field painters, were to be deep and lasting.

He took his education in graphic design at City College of New York. His fastidious and elegant nature was well suited to design, and an innate sensitivity to the vertical, geometric, urban environment in which he lived gave his natural facility the necessary depth to excel at his chosen vocation.

After gaining his BA, Perlman studied at the School of Visual Arts with Milton Glaser, one of the most significant designers and teachers of post-war America. Glaser had spent a fellowship studying with the painter and printmaker Giorgio Morandi, so he is a rare perspective into the subtle differences between fine and applied arts. Perlman recalls that time, "Milton shared teaching duties with Henry Wolf, also a noted designer. They both had a broad understanding of

the design process, the common thread being a thoughtful, conceptually cogent and visually succinct approach to problems. They were not only conversant with design as a profession, but were also tuned in to the fine art world. One could have an exchange that tipped into the fine art realm; I remember an exchange with Milton about who would be more significant to art history, Pablo Picasso or Marcel Duchamp. I believe he was leaning toward Duchamp; I know I was enthusiastically in the Picasso camp.”

In 1963, Midtown Manhattan was an enormous hothouse of abstraction; one could bumble from one space to another and bask in fields of color and tone. The young Robert Perlman studied and worked here, strolling to the Whitney Museum during his lunch breaks, or to the leading galleries, which had yet to migrate south below Houston Street, “I’d go to Sidney Janis, Marlborough, Pace, Knoedler, or Poindexter galleries . . . I didn’t frequent Castelli as much. They were near the MOMA and the Whitney; it was the concentration of art in the neighborhood that was convenient.”

And also a concentration of people: Saturdays found midtown crawling with artists and scenesters out to keep up with the new work on view. Perlman was doing so one afternoon, when he was hit up for a match. Unfortunately, he had none to offer, and so Mark Rothko had to turn elsewhere to have his cigarette lit.

Perlman had already encountered Rothko in a much more poignant way, “I first saw one of his very large maroon paintings at the Museum of Modern Art some time earlier. That moment has etched itself into my memory as one of the early, unforgettable museum experiences. I really didn’t know what I was looking at, I just knew it was thrilling standing in front of that enigmatic, dark painting. As a lot of people are likely to tell you, it felt awesome . . . perhaps even a bit religious.”

Today, Perlman’s Madison Park home is filled with his art. A grand piano dominates the living room, and filling virtually every vertical and horizontal space around the piano — “It’s my horror vacui,” he laughs — is art. He has collected figurative drawings by Bay area artists — Perlman reveres Richard Diebenkorn particularly. But most of the work on display is Robert’s own. His paintings hang in agreeable conversation with one another, while the horizontal surfaces of the room are covered, sometimes three-deep, with his sculptures. These works are in every way complementary to his paintings, which evoke but never (or rarely) depict any literal sense. He constructs the fetishes from urban debris, implements, tools and fragments, mostly iron and steel, always decayed. Even the slickest and most geometric aspects of these are flaked and dark with

carbon and iron oxide. His sculpture is fundamentally closer in nature to his graphic work: tight, elegant, perfectly solved problems.

On the other hand, Perlman's paintings are clean and his palette tranquil, colors bright, even when their subtlety occasionally renders them difficult to place on the color wheel. His palette is as cool and thoughtful as the artist himself; even oranges and reds are tepid, although he rarely allows the chroma to fall into mere pastel. Coupled with the brilliant responsiveness of his drawing hand, Perlman's color sense is an ongoing dialogue that is as rich as a fifty-plus year conversation ought to be. His sensibility is so refined it literally belongs in another time and place.

Perlman's studio is at the top of a staircase, the entrance of which is tucked off a guest bedroom; the space is a rigidly organized panoply of aesthetic explorations, and the years and generations of work that Bob has methodically filed vertically between the exposed studs of the steeple-top ceiling, have the dignity of old comrades lined up in tuxedos. He has wrestled with problems in form using pencil, paint, charcoal — our simplest, oldest tools of expression. He generally works using matte, liquid acrylic paint upon Arches cold-pressed watercolor paper, which serves both his tactile preference — he prefers the clean surface of the paper, its drag and crispness giving him more control than the weave of canvas — as well as his storage capacity. There are, in addition to the paintings stored vertically, flat-files brimming with drawings, sketches that evolve into paintings or commercial work, depending on the drawer. The other end of the studio is crowded with the flotsam and jetsam of the Industrial Age, corroded nuggets he gathers on routine treasure hunts, steel and iron fixtures and bits, some complete sets of obscure instruments, some rusty, some galvanized, but all of a kind in their evocation of something, besides their own form, a bone for a new skeleton. These materials are sorted and boxed, with choice chunks of wood stacked up nearby, waiting to become pedestals.

Robert Perlman is a genius of painted color. He uses matte acrylic on a paper substrate. Rectangles are subdivided into evocative geometric shapes; some of the paintings suggest landscapes, others figures, occasionally figures in landscapes seem to appear; the ogee curve of a grand piano is a regular presence. His compositions fibrillate with gentle, asymmetric tensions he sets up diagonally across a ground that shifts fore and aft; the even, effortless curves speeding and slowing to reveal the hint of a hip, the bluff of a shoulder. The drawings from which his paintings emerge are as delightful in their modesty as the finished pieces are. But his use of color adds a depth of immersion, making the pieces into well-solved, beautifully proportioned puzzles of his own invention. Hues are built up, stroke by stroke, often layered up from an acidic, intensely hued

base. As surface falls upon surface, the initial glare is subdued by chromatic chemistries: a bright yellow will wilt back under a bright blue laid upon it, while the blue's failure to completely obscure the yellow beneath softens it to a delicate, complex green. Other works play with chromatic parallels and asymmetries, as rich purples and burgundies cast shadows upon violet and diffused maroons; Kermit greens echo with scumbled lime.

Prographica Gallery is currently exhibiting a small but representative sampling from the last thirty years of Perlman's work, alongside two other geometric abstractionists, David Brody and Chris Watts. The younger artists' work, angular and sharp — Brody's pieces are printed from digital sources — offer an interesting counterpoint to Perlman's. While theirs are unambiguously contemporary, the oldest work of his on display, a collage from the '70s, could comfortably hang alongside any of the works by lions of late abstract expressionism. Perlman's palette in these formative works is distinctly New York in flavor, and the forms he chooses are ones of well-digested modernism. But one can see with little trouble the thru-line that leads to his most recent work, which has evolved into a syntax distinctly his own. The colors have become more saturated, the compositions more dynamic. They look like work done by an artist at the height of his powers, one who deserves to emerge from the decades-long isolation of his studio. Robert Perlman has dedicated himself for a half-century to the Art Life, and now he is beginning to enjoy a place in the art world.