

45
YEARS
PAINTINGS
DRAWINGS
and PRINTS

Written by New York writer Cody Upton, as the introduction to Peri Schwartz's latest catalog. He is the executive director of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

THE FREEDOM OF THE GRID

For the last twenty years, Peri Schwartz has worked in a corner studio on the tenth floor of the K Building in downtown New Rochelle. The tall windows drew her to the space, where she works only by natural light. To the north, she can see all the way to White Plains; to the south, Co-op City. If a storm rolls in off Long Island Sound and the sky becomes too dark, she must stop working for the day and go home.

While she paints, Peri listens to Beethoven, to Shostakovich, to Bach. Of popular musicians, only Leonard Cohen joins their ranks—his song “You Want it Darker” supplied the title for a recent aquatint. She packs lunch. She works in solitude. Her neighbors are lawyers, accountants, dentists. She is the only artist in the building.

Peri considers herself an abstract painter who must work faithfully from life. For eighteen years her subject has been the inside of her studio where she meticulously arranges and rearranges large-scale still lifes. She alternates between drawings, paintings, and prints, sometimes focusing on a large swath of the room—the window, the hand-cranked printing press, the mirror and table and pile of books—other times honing in on a grouping of bottles and jars that she has filled with luminous tinctures.

Her groupings have a relaxed, almost spontaneous feeling, but each has been carefully considered against a grid of charcoal and black tape that Peri draws onto her arrangements, running across the books and table, over the windows and walls. From her vantage point, these lines converge into an uninterrupted grid.

For Peri, the grid is not only a tool, but part of the composition. She will paint or draw some of its vertical and horizontal lines into the finished piece. “When I put the grid into a work, everything seems more interesting. Objects take on more weight. If I was going to work on a setup and the grid were not in it, it wouldn't hold any interest for me. I like seeing the intervals of blank space. You have the quiet of a white shape and then you have sound.”

Peri always begins her studio paintings with a drawing, developing the setup and grid as she goes. Adjustments are made. Accidents happen—some happy, some not. This can take several weeks, and her work becomes a palimpsest with erasures and remnants of prior compositions showing through. “I think a lot of my painting is about what's underneath. Nine times out of ten, when a painting is done, it does not look like the final setup. It looks different. It has seven paintings in one.”

It was after art school that Peri realized she needed to work directly from life. Creating paintings from earlier drawings failed to congeal; fabricating images held little interest for her. She sometimes painted outdoors, but the studio, the things inside it, and her own body were the subjects she engaged with most.

In 1976 Peri began what would become a twenty-five-year series of self-portraits. She looked to Rembrandt, Velazquez, and Goya. Her gaze, direct and unflinching, is that of an artist working beyond the demands of marriage and motherhood and the confusion of neighbors. “They were going to work and making money, and I was going to work and not making money, but taking myself just as seriously.”

While making self-portraits Peri placed grid marks on the wall behind her so that she could over the course of many sittings line up her elbow just so, tilt her head at the proper angle. Peri is captivated by the process of creation, the decisions artists make, and so it seemed natural to her to include these grid marks in the self-portrait itself. “I like it when I know that the painter has got her hand in it. I don't like work that feels slick.”

For the next two decades Peri alternated between self-portraits and still lifes. There were the critically successful *Wrapped Objects*—children's blocks, dolls, chairs, and paint cans concealed beneath bulky clothes that Peri considered headless portraits. There were the arrangements of porcelain pots and fruits. Over time her hand loosened. In her *Woman Seated* series from the late 90s, her face is almost entirely obfuscated, the body notional. The figure had become too confining for Peri's emerging interest in pure shape and color, and in 2000 she turned her attention almost exclusively to her studio.

The tension between realism and abstraction animates Peri's work. She spends weeks on a setup, but eschews many of its details in the finished piece. Richard Diebenkorn and Piet Mondrian are more influential now than the old masters. Yet the compositions still come entirely from life. If Peri wants to make a bottle bigger, she gets a bigger bottle. If she does not like the shade of raspberry vinegar she has poured into it, she dilutes it with apple cider vinegar. She is fond of citing a particular quote by the novelist Willa Cather: “Every artist knows there's no such thing as freedom in art.” The grid, the mandate to work from life, are the strictures that paradoxically create the possibility for surprising juxtapositions of color and shape. “The one thing I don't want a painting to look like when it's finished, is finished. I want it to be an open question.”