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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

PERVERSE BEAUTY

An interview with
John Currin
by David Coggins

What is there left to say about John Currin? He's talented, savvy, and not averse to a bit of controversy. Yet he continues to surprise in a way that's specifically his own. In Currin's world art history and soft porn share a bed with varying degrees of comfort. With his relentless approach to the history of painting, his attraction to women and his conflation of high and low, even though we're prepared, he continually keeps us off balance.

socks, one of the stranger images from his new exhibition at Gagolian Gallery on Madison Avenue in New York? It's an image unlike any other, strangely perverse and oddly hysterical. The new show features the usual array of women in various stages of undress, the best of which might have stepped out of a Dutch master painting or perhaps one from a Greenpoint thrift store, at once recognizable but out of time.

We spoke recently at Currin's studio in the Flatiron district over a couple cans of Coors Light.

David Coggins: When you're preparing a show is it a reaction against your previous show or do you simply start painting and realize there's a theme to the work?

John Currin: Well it starts out being involuntary, a reaction to what I didn't like or didn't finish in the last show. Then you angle for a theme at a certain point because it makes it easier, and it's good to have a justification for making up your mind and finishing a painting, and a theme is as good as any. On the other hand, it's almost like hypnotizing

yourself. I don't think that themes are really important, in a philosophical sense, as a way of interpreting my paintings.

DC: When you see the body of work in the gallery do you see themes that you weren't aware of at the time?

JC: Definitely. Especially the shows where I was really serious about the theme. It always turned out that that was the least important, that there's an unconscious trigger for work. Like the porno things, I had a superego explanation to myself, but as time passes I realize it was something completely different, and much more personal.

DC: I read in an old interview that you said painting was mysterious to you. Now, almost ten years later, do you think you have more control or does it remain a mystery to you on some level?

JC: I don't know if I have more control, but I have a lot more skill and a lot more competence. Sometimes that translates to more control, sometimes less because you have more options and you have more ways to get lost and to take wrong turns. It makes painting less direct. On the other hand, when you get something wonderful, it's easier to do it again. Finishing paintings becomes more difficult, and there is a funny way of accepting them as finished when you could keep going.

DC: How do you reach that point?

JC: You reach that by having a deadline! But some of these paintings have been going on for many years, so if I wanted to finish them, they could have been finished. It's not going to take three hundred hours of work to finish, it may take an hour of work, but for good or bad I have a fear of finishing something, of closing something off in a superficial way, simply by hardening edges.

DC: So many people talk about references in your work, then I read that you said there's no deeper meaning to be found in those references. Can you talk about art historical references in your work?

JC: There are things to be found. When I look at somebody else's paintings, like Courbet, whose work I love, it allows you to start imposing meanings on it. That's a wonderful way to look at paintings, and it's probably not at all what the painter intended. Paintings that are good tend to invite those types of things, and can withstand them -- they can suggest meanings that way. If people do that to my work I think it's a good thing. But it's not a rebus where it's like The Da Vinci Code, where you're going to find some symbolic structure. And you can't exclude what happens to be going on in your life when you're making a painting, and in some cases in this show it became the dominant thing.

DC: Personal relationships, family, things like that?

JC: My family, my children, things going on that I don't control that are affecting my mood and where the painting's going. If I can't speak to that then why am I painting?

DC: Within a given canvas you often incorporate different types of beauty or the grotesque, the high and the low. Can you talk about contrasting themes within your work?

JC: David Levine died recently and there were reproductions of his work in my house growing up. He had a quote, which is real 1930s: "My work is about the condition of man." I could never say something like that. I think my work's a fantasy of happiness and beauty and harmony.

DC: Could we say that it's a fantasy from a man's point of view?

JC: I always find myself in this position of Spinal Tap guitarist Nigel Tufnel. People say, "Do you think you're sexist?" and he says, "What's wrong with sexy?" Obviously, I have a pretty sexist effect, I don't know if it's an intention, but it's what happens and I guess I am that way. I don't say it's a good thing to be, but it's not controllable. If I shut that down I would shut down a whole bunch of other stuff. If I became very concerned about sexist imagery I would have no source of energy anymore.

DC: How does your older work look to you now -- is it less controversial after 10 years?

JC: I don't think I would be able to be as nasty or as funny as I was then. Both urges have left me. I find the whole thing more solemn than I used to. I don't think I'm as witty in painting as I used to be, partly because I don't have to be, because I can do more things just with light, color, and form. I'm less beholden to games with metaphors. Figurative painting does not seem as doomed to failure as it did then, so I'm painting less about that.

DC: Were those fights about political correctness worth having?

JC: I think it was easy because of the context then. It was much easier to have your work get noticed, not even if you *did* something, if you just *didn't* do the stupid things that everyone was doing. It was noticeable if you didn't make the salutes that you had to make. It was a special period where a certain kind of humor, and ill manners could get you a lot of attention, way out of proportion to my skills, or my intelligence.

DC: Do you look back on that and say 'I was ready for that fight,' or 'I didn't realize exactly what I was doing'?

JC: Well, I knew more what I was doing then than I do now. And it was clearer then, I had more of an appetite for the un-PC. Things looked startling in an oil painting just because of the context. To put mundane, conservative things in a context where they look new. There's not always an opportunity for that, but it just rolled up to my feet and made it possible to do difficult work.

DC: Because of what you were doing and because of the facts on the ground.

JC: I didn't have to read stuff, I didn't have to get serious about being a leftist, I didn't have to be an avant-gardist. I could be completely retrograde and do the exact same thing.

DC: Was it something you'd thought about for a long time?

JC: There were a few things that gave me the idea. You shouldn't believe it when an artist says 'I read something and it made me do something,' but in this case it did. I read the novel *Tarr* by Wyndham Lewis. I had a class at Carnegie Mellon, and the professor made us read a lot of left-wing stuff, some of it good, some of it really boring. But then he said, "I'm going to give you a right wing thing," and it was *Tarr*, which dates from around 1918. There was something so bristling and offensive about the style. It was like a right wing, avant-garde, modernist style. The way he would describe a guy's face, or the way they sat in a chair, or the way he got up and walked across the room, was just so weird and mechanical, and he didn't like his characters. He made no attempts to make his characters human beings. He'd literally describe them as machines.

DC: You liked the friction in that?

JC: It didn't affirm the bond between the author and the reader. It wasn't like, "We're both in this together, we're going to explore," it was a real opposition. I like the idea that the enemy is the viewer, and it made that seem like a really interesting way to think about painting. I liked the idea of making difficult paintings that were figurative, that had no visual aura of refinement, or difficulty, or academia.

DC: Does that make the viewers unsure of where they stand in relationship to you?

JC: At the time the PC-attitude had been so ascendant that there was an idea that you have to always be doing social good in art. As soon as that becomes an unspoken rule, it's a very easy thing to violate, and you can burp in the funeral and make a scene. It's like those Merchant Ivory movies, there'd be the uptight rich guy, and the Julian Sands character would be the rogue, and it was easy to be the rogue in the situation.

DC: The writer William Boyd said, "The biggest lie is that the protagonist has to be likable." You can thrive with an unlikable hero.

JC: I remember thinking the moment was over when I saw *Jerry Maguire*. I saw it in England, I think it's the only movie I've seen in another country. There was a satire of

PC attitudes, in what was nevertheless a larger PC message. It's developed antibodies and my shtick isn't going to work anymore.

DC: It's interesting about Europe and European attitudes. Tuymans and Richter react to a different scope of history. You've always admired Richter.

JC: Richter is a really, really great artist. I didn't have as much to rip off from him, as Polke. There was a big show of Polke at the Brooklyn Museum or somewhere like that around 1990 and there was a lot to take away from his earlier work, his versions of American pop painting. I never got as much from Richter, although I think Richter is ultimately is the greater artist.

DC: I walked through the Tuymans show with the artist, and he's talking about the East India Company and hundreds of years of continental discontent. He's dealing with different history in a way that's different than an American artist.

JC: I've always been interested in politics and history but it didn't feel like we were drawn into history, especially in the 90s, until September 11th. There's a stock American character, like the Quiet American, or Holly Martins [Joseph Cotton] in *The Third Man*, who thinks that he's not a protagonist, and doesn't have a specific political spot, when in fact of course he does. The way I interpret Luc Tuymans, he's a European who knows that his position is morally and politically unstable, whereas I would be much more certain about the rightness of the American thing. I know a lot of people in the art world don't share that view, but if I have a limitation, in the context of nuanced political art, that would be my limitation. I think I'm just afflicted with the idea that we're sort of right, and neutral, and we don't have selfish interests in the world, which of course I know is not true, but I'm very American-centric when it comes to politics.

I think it's a very important difference whether someone's an American or a European painter. I work from this idea that it's odd for me to paint as an American, and that I'm like Steve Martin in *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*. Michael Caine is showing Steve Martin how to be continental, and I think I'm more like Ruprecht, Martin's character. There's a

sort of buffoonery that you can't get rid of as an American.

I remember seeing a big show of Picabia in Brussels a long time ago, when I was really worshipping Picabia. I was shocked because he's gluing straws to the canvas, but he could never get rid of this elegance. He tried to be vulgar and he never could be. There's a European elegance that he couldn't get rid of. And of course European elegance is laughable when you see people in SoHo with ironed jeans, but in the context of painting it's something that I envy a great deal, and I find I can't get rid of my trashiness as an artist. A lot of my themes in painting, to the extent that there are intentional themes, are meant to bring that conundrum into high relief.

DC: Just dealing with the trashy theme for a second. Apparently an entire generation of men associate the yellow of *National Geographic* with seeing naked women for the first time.

JC: Pendulous breasts on Africans?

DC: Right.

JC: Now it would be a certain style of keyboards that makes you think of sex.

DC: Exactly. You use images pornographic images in your work. How has the easy access of the internet changed our relationship to the erotic?

JC: Yes, there's less of a feeling of serendipity. On the other hand, you can find everything. I had a dim memory of this ad I saw when I was a kid, of a guy in hot pants. It was a cigarette ad, and I thought, "I ought to make a painting of that." And it took me less than a half hour to find it. Harder than I thought it would be, by the way, but I found a grainy little picture and that was enough. But it's not like going to the Strand bookstore and looking through stuff. I used to look through a lot of movie magazines, and the internet is just so big and vast there's nothing limiting you, so it's harder.

DC: But do you think that the internet has changed the nature of our relationship to desire?

JC: Well that was originally why I got interested in painting nudes, partly because it was the guaranteed failure, in terms of arousal -- it was the worst option. The metaphor I always use is a telephoto shot of your neighbor naked across the street would be more interesting than a Leonardo painting of a nude. At first you'd say, "Yeah Leonardo's great, but holy cow, look at her!" That kind of failure of painting seemed interesting.

DC: The difficulty of conveying desire through painting?

JC: The male gaze has been so accustomed to vicariousness as a kind of virtue, the lack of directness to something actually existing makes it more transparent and more able to be enjoyed as a sort of sexual experience.

DC: So it's not that painting is inherently a difficult medium to represent desire, it's just that people had neglected it for years?

JC: Right, and also they weren't so good at it. And photographs have that quality that the camera was really there. It's like the Japanese guys that buy the panties in the vending machines. Rachel and I were watching a nature show, and it showed like a dragonfly or something like that, and they have of course some awful sexual practice that they do, but the way that the dragonfly got turned on was like a clicking sound that the other one would make. I said, "That's so pathetic, how crazy is that?" And then I thought, well what about a matrix of flashing lights on a screen? You realize sexual desire can be symbolized in so many ways. So I was interested in painting's guaranteed failure as pornography, that's what initially got me interested in painting pornography. By virtue of being physical it would fail in its usual task.

DC: Your paintings often deal with the tropes of a given genre. When it's transferred to a painting, like pornography, we see all those conventions brought into relief.

JC: A lot of art will be like something that you recognize made out of some other inappropriate material. Somebody's crocheted an airplane or something like that. It's kind of stupid, I never know what it's supposed to mean. But maybe I'm actually doing that with painting, painting something that ought to be a photograph and "Look, it's not a photograph."