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A Flesh Perspective: John Currin Talks Sex, Age and 'the Ridiculousness of Painting'

By Paul Laster

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When John Currin was 10 years old, his family moved from Santa Cruz, Calif., to Stamford, Conn. "My early childhood is a California beach town," said the artist, 48, "and *The Ice Storm* was a pretty accurate picture of where I spent my adolescence." After earning an M.F.A. at Yale, he shot to prominence with a show at the Andrea Rosen gallery nearly two decades ago. Since then, his work has been variously called sexist, offensive, repetitive—and genius. His technically skillful, art-historically rich paintings of spaniel-eyed women skate an edge of pornography and mannerism that he invented himself.

Recently, Mr. Currin opened a show of new paintings at Larry Gagosian's uptown gallery that once again puts sex front and center, particularly in the voyeuristic, explicit lesbian scene *The Women of Franklin Street*.

The Observer talked to him about his life, his art and how growing up is changing both.

The Observer: It's been said you enjoy making your viewers uncomfortable.

John Currin: I think when I was younger, I did enjoy it. I think one aspect of getting older is that I don't like the idea anymore of people being upset or being uncomfortable or being offended. I may still do it, but it doesn't give me glee anymore.

But you have a fascination with the grotesque?

I like the painting to start out handicapped in a way. I think I enjoy that situation a bit, of it sort of being hampered by strangeness. I don't think it's the goal in the end, but I suppose I'm interested in grotesqueness as a beginning, because it keeps popping up. In that sense, yes, I think I do like to overcome it. I like when things begin grotesque and end beautiful.

You've been working on this show for years?

Altogether, for six years. In the current show, one [painting] took six years; another one took three years; one was two years in the making; and the others took around a year. ... I make about 8 to 10 paintings a year.

**That's pretty much ever since your 2003 mid-career survey at the Whitney Museum.
How has your work changed?**

In a good way—and a bad way. I think I've become much more of a perfectionist since then. I know I've gotten better, and I know I've gotten slower and a little bit less impulsive as an artist. I think my work is a little less funny, which has good and bad aspects, but I think it's a little more solemn.

So have you found the recipe for a John Currin painting?

I wish there was one. Every time I think there is one, I make the worst painting I've ever made. That's not to say I don't make paintings that are similar to one another, but it's weird that the same methods don't generally work from painting to painting.

The Women of Franklin Street is quite provocative. What was the inspiration?

It's going to sound ridiculous, but the inspiration is Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, which is partly why the title is *The Women of Franklin Street*. It's a bunch of women in a setting, just like the women of Avignon. The other thing about Franklin Street is that the scenario came from a still for a Danish porn movie from the 1970s.

In Big Hands, the head of the woman is so small and the hands so big, but her large breasts seem to be the emphasis.

That was actually from an ad for a breast cream on the back of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. I have recurring source materials from *Cosmopolitan*. I think it was called Beauty Breast Cream. I had this clipping of a woman in an extremely low-cut shirt around for years and years and years. As I was putting it on the canvas, I thought it would be funny to make the breasts really big, but then make the hands so big that the

breasts aren't so big anymore. It's like pouring more money into the slot machine as you go down the painting.

That brings up another question. A number of female critics call you a sexist and a misogynist. Are you?

Well, probably yes on the first one and no on the second one. They aren't the same thing. Whether I like it or not, I'm probably very sexist. I try not to be completely lazy about it. I don't think at all that I'm a misogynist, not in the slightest. Although I risk sounding like Nigel Tufnel in *Spinal Tap* when he says, "What's wrong with bein' sexy?"

If I worry about that—and I do worry about it, sometimes—it completely shuts me down as an artist. It's not helpful for me to worry about at all. For me to police myself in that regard, I think it would ruin my work.

Kitsch is a word that often comes up in the discussion of your work. Is that something you embrace?

It's something that I accept. As an American figurative painter, there's a kitsch aspect that's unavoidable; and it's Oedipal. Figuration is such a European mode, or at least the history is so long, that a sense of kitsch is kind of unavoidable. I think you have to learn how to not judge that when it shows up. You'll never make a Poussin. For that matter, when Poussin's were new, they were somewhat kitsch. Through the passage of time they become eternal and classical. I don't mean to compare myself to Poussin, but I think there's a kind of ridiculousness to painting that's unavoidable and therefore should be embraced.

Do you think your painting skills are old-fashioned?

No, not at all. I think my skills are whatever I've been able to throw together. My skill levels are nowhere near a third- or fourth-rate 18th-century painter. Extreme manual skills don't exist in modern life, except in sports.

We recognize your wife—the artist Rachel Feinstein—in some of your paintings, but have you ever made self-portraits?

I painted my own bald spot in one of the paintings in this show and posed in a mirror for some body parts; but there are no explicit self-portraits. I don't have the nerve to do that yet. On the other hand—more dramatically speaking—there's an aspect of self-portraiture in all of them.

What's the painting that you're most excited about people seeing in this show?

I was working on one called *Hot Pants* rather intensely, so I'm anxious for people to see [it]. Or this one called *Conservatory* that I'm excited about. It's pretty beautiful. Not many people have seen *The Women of Franklin Street*, but I don't know if there's any one. I'm pretty excited about all of them.

You've gotten quite famous. Are there downsides to fame?

Yes, I guess the pressure. Believe me, it's better than the alternative. It's something I've wanted my whole life, so I can't really complain. It makes you self-conscious and sometimes it's a little more difficult to maintain your sense of humor. It's a complex question, and I don't know if part of that is just being middle-aged and having children

and the pressure of that. The rest of your life doesn't stay the same when you get more successful, so it's hard to tell. Let me put it this way: It's not relaxing.