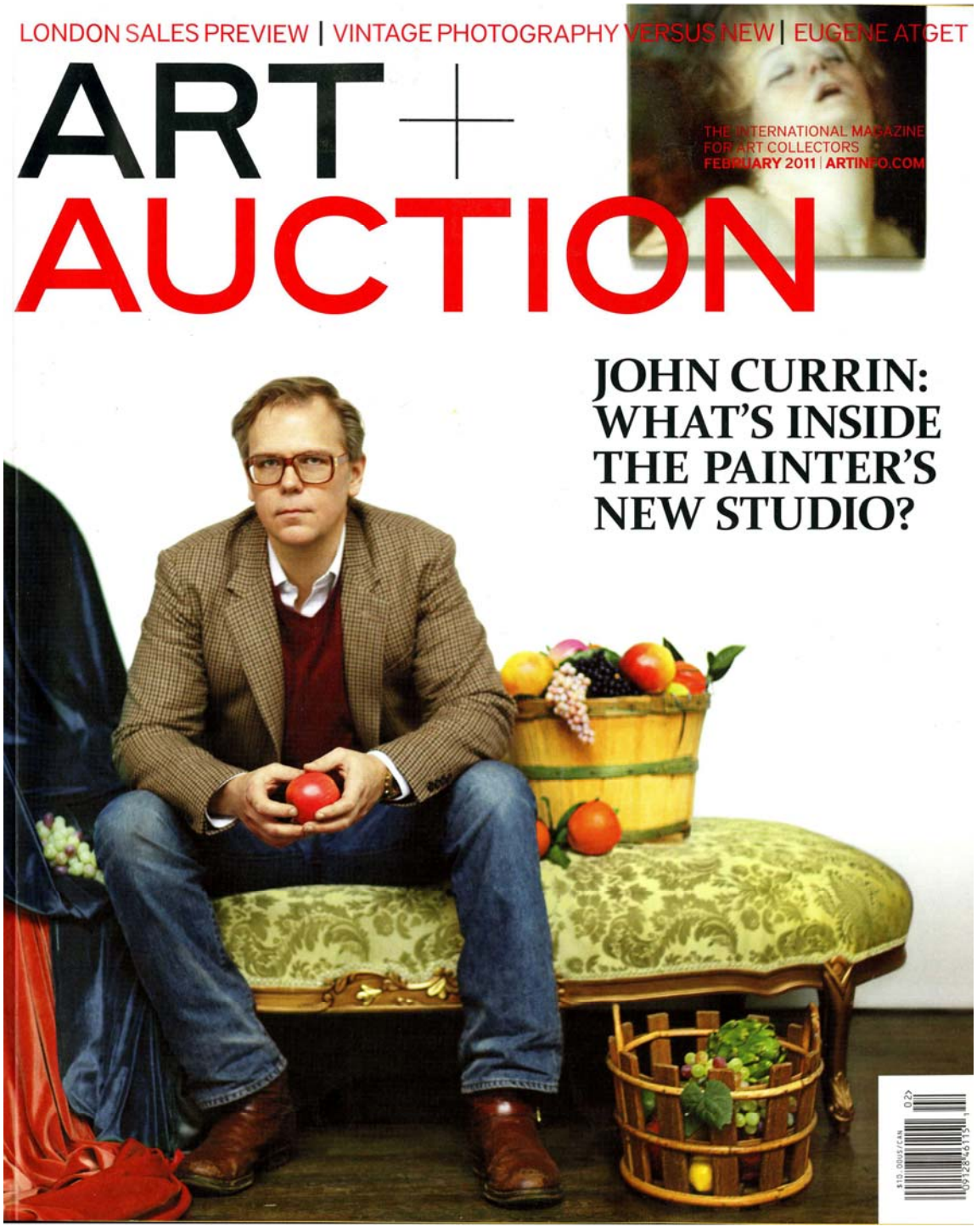
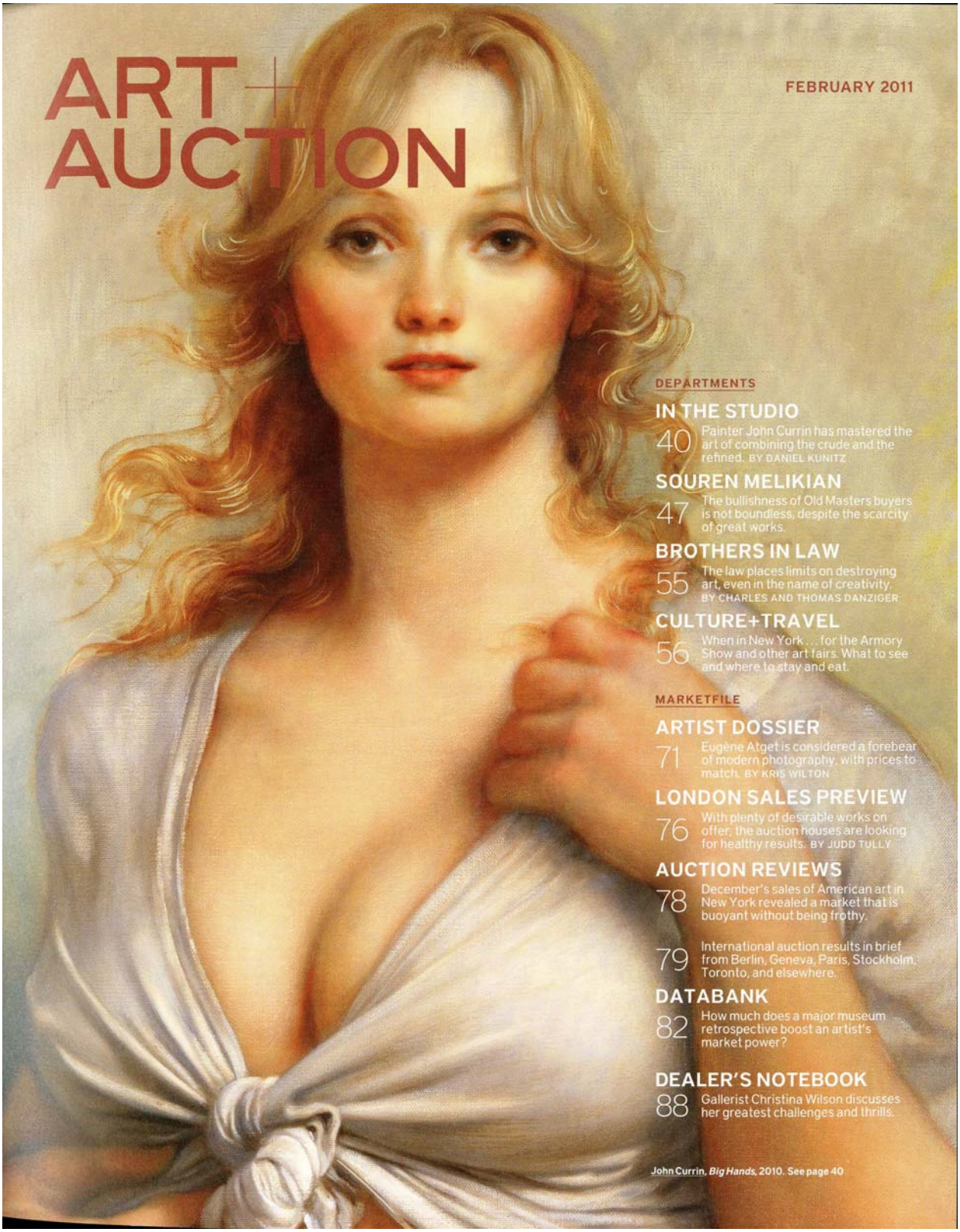
Art + Auction
February 2011

GAGOSIAN GALLERY





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FEBRUARY 2011

DEPARTMENTS

IN THE STUDIO
40 Painter John Currin has mastered the art of combining the crude and the refined. BY DANIEL KUNITZ

SOUREN MELIKIAN
47 The bullishness of Old Masters buyers is not boundless, despite the scarcity of great works.

BROTHERS IN LAW
55 The law places limits on destroying art, even in the name of creativity. BY CHARLES AND THOMAS DANZIGER

CULTURE+TRAVEL
56 When in New York . . . for the Armory Show and other art fairs. What to see and where to stay and eat.

MARKETFILE

ARTIST DOSSIER
71 Eugène Atget is considered a forebear of modern photography, with prices to match. BY KRIS WILTON

LONDON SALES PREVIEW
76 With plenty of desirable works on offer, the auction houses are looking for healthy results. BY JUDD TULLY

AUCTION REVIEWS
78 December's sales of American art in New York revealed a market that is buoyant without being frothy.

79 International auction results in brief from Berlin, Geneva, Paris, Stockholm, Toronto, and elsewhere.

DATABANK
82 How much does a major museum retrospective boost an artist's market power?

DEALER'S NOTEBOOK
88 Gallerist Christina Wilson discusses her greatest challenges and thrills.

John Currin, *Big Hands*, 2010. See page 40

IN THE STUDIO

John Currin in his studio with an untitled painting in progress. "Whenever I see the word *satire* in a review, my heart sinks," he says. "I think of my work as pretty solemn."

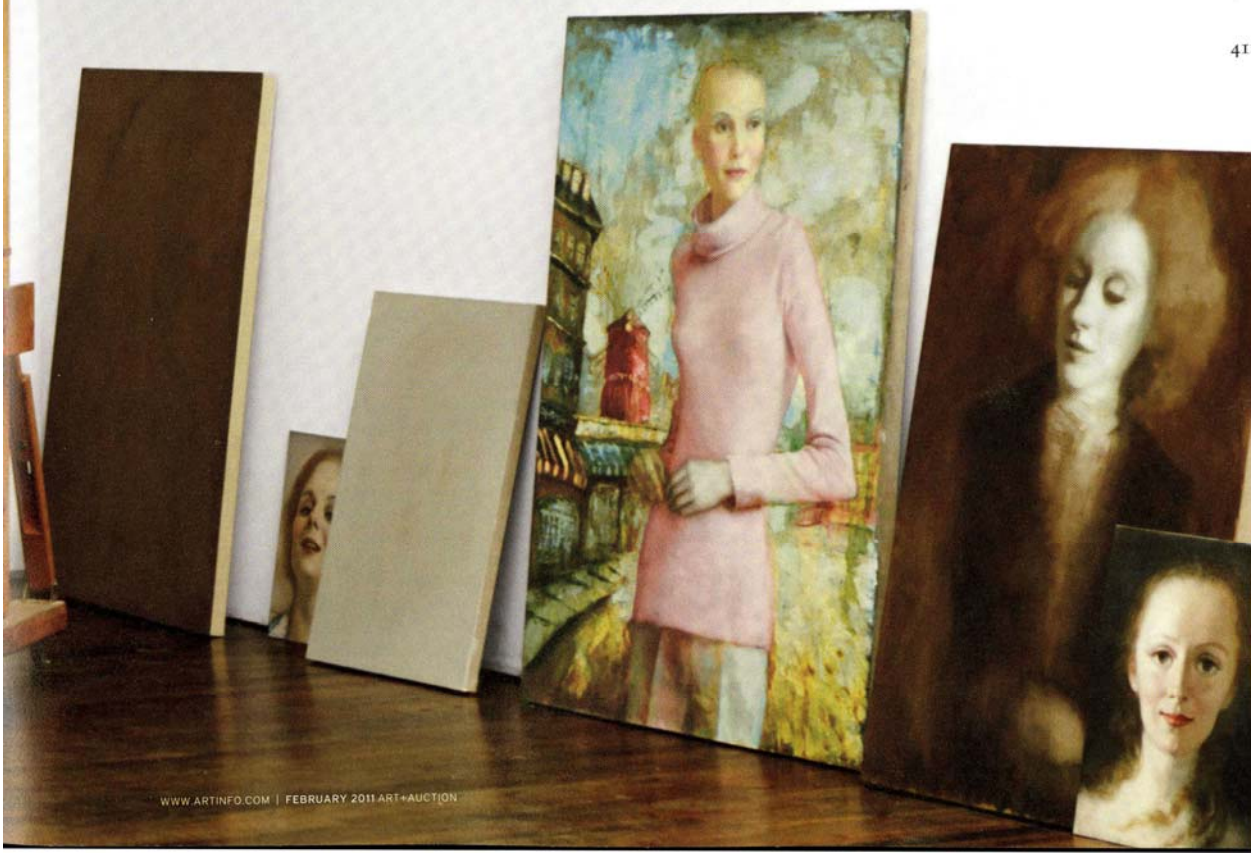
JOHN CURRIN

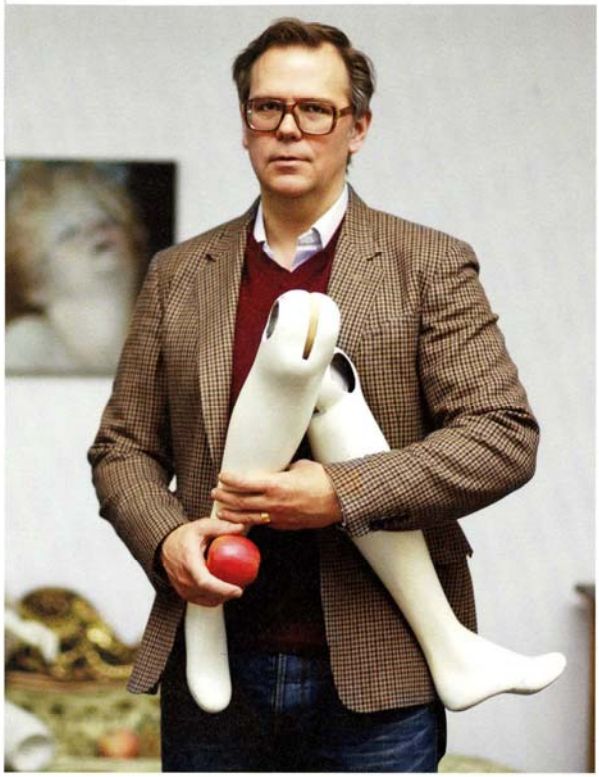
THE MIX OF REFINEMENT AND VULGARITY THAT HAS CHARACTERIZED THE PAINTER'S WORK SINCE THE EARLY 1990S BEFUDDLES HIS CRITICS AND INTRIGUES HIS ADMIRERS.

BY DANIEL KUNITZ
PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEZIBAN BARRY

IT'S SATURDAY AFTERNOON, and John Currin, arguably the most acclaimed American painter of his generation, is mopping his studio floor. He wears thick rectangular glasses, jeans, and an old blue T-shirt rather than one of the tailored three-piece suits he's often photographed in when out with his wife, the artist Rachel Feinstein. If, cleaning up and dressed down, Currin presents a far more casual persona than the visitor might expect, the setting, at least, is appropriately grand.

Airy, elegant, and enviably proportioned, the studio is located in Manhattan's flatiron district, a short walk from the town house Currin and Feinstein are renovating. A large peaked skylight with





sophisticated mechanical shades—"outrageously expensive," the artist admits—illuminates the primary work area. Near a desk with an iMac on it lurks a female mannequin sporting a dark blazer; on a window ledge behind a long work cabinet crowded with brushes and paints, two blond wigs with different hairstyles hang on stands; near an ornate settee with gilt edges, two thick easels, both empty, await the artist. In fact, the whole place is empty of art because Gagosian's Madison Avenue outpost has recently opened an exhibition of Currin's semipornographic nudes and other figurative oils, his second outing with the gallery.

Born in Boulder, Colorado, in 1962, Currin grew up in Connecticut, studied at Carnegie Mellon University, and received an MFA from Yale in 1986. He showed in New York with the Andrea Rosen Gallery from 1990 until moving to Gagosian in 2003, right before his midcareer retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art. He has also exhibited with Regen Projects, in Los Angeles, and Sadie Coles, in London. Ordinarily Currin would go back to work immediately after hanging a show, but the studio is relatively new—he moved in last winter—and he has just had the floors redone. Sitting in an alcove that holds a tall drafting table, a packed floor-to-ceiling bookcase, and two chairs flanking a small round table, Currin is affable but anxious to get back to painting—two weeks have passed since he has picked up a brush. "It's just a long time," he explains. "I start feeling nervous and unwell, like I'm playing *Call of Duty* too much."

Perhaps because he's something of a throwback, I've always imagined Currin painting in a tie, like Fairfield Porter, so it's tough to picture him hunkered over an Xbox playing video games. A somewhat mystifying combination of refinement and vulgarity has characterized Currin's work from the infamous early 1990s paintings of women with sweater-busting breasts through the latest images of middle-aged men in short shorts and women fondling each other. Annoying his critics while intriguing his fans, the mix is born of dueling impulses that are apparent in the way Currin works. He tends, for instance, to paint with music playing. Lately it's been by bands like Poison and Motley Crüe, "hair metal from the '80s," because, he explains, "it creates this totally moronic atmosphere I like. Then painting is like the holy virgin in the room."

Currin's virgins, graces, and vixens also spring from a mélange of the high-flown and the outré. He often uses live models—hence the wigs in the studio—but only to fill out compositions derived from the lowliest of sources: old porn, pinups, stock-photo catalogues, whose clichés Currin relishes. "There will be a muscular man holding a baby," he says, "or women working out, or old people using a computer. The girl with gigantic breasts with the Stars and Stripes. A lot of time, there'll be a scenario that just appeals to me." He is also fond of

From left: Currin, with props; pacing the studio; and standing in front of *Mourlin Rouge*. If he doesn't paint for a few weeks, he begins "feeling nervous and unwell," he says.

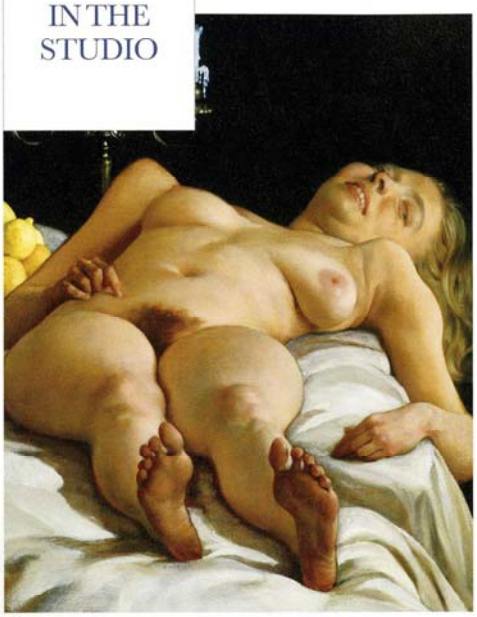
picking out scenes from movies. "I don't even watch them. I just fast-forward and then, if there's something interesting, I'll grab it from the screen." Most people assume Currin simply realizes his banal inspirations with a technique that, depending on who's looking, is either flawlessly Old Masterish or a flawed imitation thereof. The reality is far more interesting.

Having chosen an image, he'll "make a little drawing from it," then pin the drawing to the canvas as he paints a model posed to take the place of the person in the picture. It's the rendering of the figures that evokes perplexity and censure among his critics. Reviewing his last show, the *New York Times* critic Ken Johnson pointed out its "strangely proportioned women" and joined a small reactionary line of those who accuse Currin of never learning "to draw properly." It's a strange charge: To other eyes Currin's drawings rank among the finest of any living artist. When I ask him about this discrepancy in the perception of his work, Currin begins by acknowledging that anything he says in his defense will sound like a "cop-out." Still, he affirms his strong interest in draftsmanship: "I'm intentional about drawing," he says. The distortions in the paintings come from an idea he's had since the late 1980s and developed over the years: "I make very quick, small drawings, and then I work from those." Take his series of paintings of explicit sex scenes from 2006. The idea was that "they'd be laughably badly drawn but then painted in a Florentine style."

The journey from drawing to completed oil can take ages. Two or three years is the norm, but it can be longer. *The Dogwood Thieves*—a recent standout that depicts two blondes, one in a frilly bra with white fabric draped over her shoulders and her arm around the other, who has buck teeth and holds in front of her chest a straw hat with a brilliant red ribbon—gestated as a notion for six years and then required six more to execute.

"Sometimes I think that I paint too slowly and would get better results if I painted faster," Currin says. His approach hasn't changed, though. What has changed is that he no longer throws out "a tremendous number" of his works. "I don't abandon anything," he says. "That's why they're maybe odd, because things that should have been fatal to the painting, I'm just like, 'No, I'm not giving up.'"

The distortions from the rapid drawing and the flaws he leaves in conspire at times to give a painting a more satirical cast than Currin intends. "Whenever I see the word *satire* in a review, my heart sinks," the artist moans. "I think of my work as pretty solemn, but it comes out as satire, I guess." It's difficult not to hear in his protestations the voice of a canny operator who understands how to exploit a picture's ambiguity. Consider the amusing *Hot Pants*, 2010, in which a tailor wearing a red shirt, white cravat, shorts, and knee socks fusses over another man, also clad in shorts and knee socks. Both peacock absurdly,



Currin's figures spring from a somewhat mystifying combination of highbrow art-historical references and the lowliest of pop-culture sources. Clockwise from top left: *Nude on a Table*, 2001; *The Women of Franklin Street*, 2009; *Hot Pants*, 2010; and *The Dogwood Thieves*, 2010.

as if unaware of their shared male-pattern baldness and suburban spectacles. The picture befuddled Johnson in the *Times*, who asked if it represented the artist's "own prurient fantasies, or is he satirizing 'the male gaze'?" Both these arrows fly wide of the mark. What makes it such a successful picture is the way it slips free of any attempt at nailing down its meaning or Currin's intention. Yet it remains a legible commentary on male vanity and our discomfort with it. Men, it suggests, yearn for a measure of beauty, of refinement even, but never manage to escape their vulgarity. And so, one might argue, Currin has painted a sly self-portrait. ⊞