

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

VANITY FAIR

V.F. Portrait: John Currin

Renowned for his hypersexualized mashups of high and low culture, John Currin has thrived as the bad boy of American painting, with a new book and two exhibitions this fall. A. M. Homes applauds his decision to grow up.

By A. M. Homes Photograph by Annie Leibovitz



PORTRAIT OF THE WIFE AS A YOUNG ARTIST John Currin at work on a portrait of his wife, artist Rachel Feinstein, in his studio in New York City's Flatiron District.

John Currin may be the only painter in whose work one sees inspiration that ranges from Fragonard and Boucher to Norman Rockwell and R. Crumb. Currin's delightfully perverse, inexorably American paintings are the sexualized mashup of art and culture from low/ridiculous to high/sublime, from Middle America to Versailles, Love American-Style meets the Louis (i.e., XIV, XV, et al.). Currin lives in an oversize SoHo loft, in New York City, a glamorous celebration of rococo Hefner-esque opulence, with his wife and muse, artist Rachel Feinstein, and their three children. With an exhibition on view at the DHC/Art Foundation for Contemporary Art, in Montreal, another opening at the Frans Hals Museum, in the Netherlands, and a book of paintings with short stories by Wells Tower (*John Currin: New Paintings*) just published by Rizzoli, Currin is living the dream.

We sit down and are instantly in deep, talking about the evolution of life, the dimming of the ironic, snotty youth, and the embrace of a more serious self: growing up, going bald, losing one's sense of humor. What caused his humor to go? "Kids," he says definitively. "When you have children, you're thrust back into that feeling of being in church or at a funeral and thinking, What if I burped right now? All the funny things that come into my head are basically offensive to everyone around me and inappropriate and extreme. It was crucial for me to really become a man and stop being just a balding adolescent."

The shift into a darker state of mind is evident as Currin goes into layered digressions on the works of his artistic heroes—he's fixated on a Poussin painting he recently saw, "a crucifixion so complex, dense without being overworked. . . . I would like to make a painting as serious as that and give up some of my habits of joke-making." As he elaborates, Currin cuts closer to the bone. "There's a sense of dissatisfaction with the irony of the present day, that's always been a sensation that artists have had to cope with, hoping to make something beautiful out of it. And the artificiality of painting actually combines with that to make something really magic."

Our conversation careens from paint quality—he's moving from slippery and opaque to sticky and transparent—to the complexities of painting genitalia in all their pinkish-purple glory. Currin likens his artful spread eagles to a moment in contemporary filmmaking when "they started having nuclear bombs go off as part of the plot; it's the same thing with a painting—once you show it a couple of times, you can't just keep having it go off."

What I'm loving about Currin is that his work is only getting better; his expectations for himself are becoming more substantial—it's no longer just about technique; he's going for something more. "I want to reveal myself in my work," he says. "I think I do, but there's also a gigantic inhibition at the same time that touches on a part of masculinity which is modesty mixed with a kind of stinginess My paintings are, if not self-portraits, a quest for masculinity."

But Currin's notion of masculinity defies gender norms. For the artist, "the mystique of painting is both very macho and of course as elegant as bubble bath—it can be as luxuriating as you care to be. The studio really is my boudoir; that's something I've always cherished about painting—it's a completely ambisexual atmosphere I think you're right if there's a reverse logic to my work It's that the pictures of men are about men and the pictures of women are about me."