

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTnews

John Currin

Gagosian

Paris

For his first exhibition in Paris, John Currin presented nine small-format paintings of women (all from 2013) that are both seductive and grotesque. With their sometimes lewd frontal positions and direct, often sensual gazes, the women exist between coquettish pinup and lascivious porn star. Currin is above all a gifted provocateur, and these recent works skillfully combine motifs drawn from the old and the new, the high and the low: girlie magazines by way of Pontormo, Hogarth, Picabia, Fragonard, Cranach, Christian Schad, and, at times, Norman Rockwell.

In several images on view, Currin distinctly contrasts polar sensibilities by juxtaposing foreground and background. Lusty, daintily painted sirens in outfits composed of both historical and contemporary items—ripped jeans or hot pants paired with bonnets and peasant blouses—pose in front of explicit or pornographic scenes. *Tapestry*, for instance, depicts a slender, Pre-Raphaelite beauty with glowing skin sitting demurely in front of a blurry, flesh-toned backdrop of entwined naked figures. In *Chateau Meyney*, a buxom brunette spilling out of her loose, cottony top holds a glass of red wine whose color resonates with the fresco, painted on the

wall behind her, of an erotic coupling in a burgundy room.

While Currin's handling of paint in these works falls short of virtuosic, he remains a deft, meticulous artist who is clearly comfortable with classical techniques. He uses these with aplomb, shifting within each painting from thin, smooth, opaque brushstrokes to a thick, chalky impasto or translucent layers of luminous color. But what makes these pictures so disturbing, and compelling, is less the artist's technical skill than the intense strangeness of his imagery: his women's oddly proportioned bodies—too-long necks, drooping breasts, and soft, bulging bellies—depicted against idealized and sometimes shocking images of lust, passion, and love.

—Laurie Hurwitz



John Currin, *San Remo*, 2013,
oil on canvas, 48" x 32". Gagosian.