

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTNEWS



"I'M CERTAINLY NOT AN IDEALIST":  
A TALK WITH JOHN CURRIN

BY BILL POWERS



BILL POWERS: YOU DIDN'T WANT TO START THIS INTERVIEW UNTIL IT GOT DARK OUT. WHY IS THAT?

John Currin: Everything is better to paint in daylight. Sometimes I have a little more vigor at night though, because I feel the ticking clock. You know, the lemons in that new painting, I was too panicky to run down to Duane Reade and get *actual* lemons so I just mixed up some color in the studio and went at it. Or I'm too lazy to drag the marble slab from that corner to paint from life. I get so impatient that I don't even want to walk across my studio.

BP: WHAT PERCENTAGE OF YOUR WORK DO YOU PAINT OVER THESE DAYS? I WAS ALWAYS SURPRISED AT WHAT I THOUGHT WERE AMAZING MOMENTS IN PICTURES THAT YOU DECIDED TO BLOT OUT.

JC: I don't really do that anymore. I had this idea that I have to finish everything I start now. Part of it is that I can afford new canvases where that wasn't always the case.

BP: MORE AND MORE, THE PORNOGRAPHY IN YOUR PAINTINGS SEEMS TO BE FADING INTO THE BACKGROUND. IS THAT A FAIR ASSESSMENT?

JC: I think I got sick of hiding paintings from my children. So I thought it would be funny to have those elements disguised, almost like that bit in *Austin Powers* where he's holding up the cantaloupes rather conveniently in place.

BP: FOR A LONG TIME THOUGH, YOU HAD A PRETTY GRAPHIC PORN PAINTING IN YOUR BEDROOM, RIGHT?

JC: Yeah, we still have that up. And, actually, I bought a very nice Old Master painting that is quite overt, which we hung in our living room. It's a Cornelis van Haarlem painting of a prostitute with two procuresses and the one guy is pointing to a huge, long sausage he's holding, a big crazy-looking sausage. The kids know it's a sex joke.

BP: THE LAST TIME I INTERVIEWED YOU THERE WAS A CONCERN ON YOUR PART ABOUT NOT WANTING TO BE A SEXIST BECAUSE YOU HAVE A DAUGHTER NOW.

JC: I don't think I was being completely honest with you, because Flora wasn't really the issue. Probably it was more a function of my own confidence or lack thereof. I got more self-conscious about provoking people. I enjoy making the paintings, but I do worry about someone at, like, Gawker getting upset.

OPPOSITE John Currin at work on a portrait of his wife, artist Rachel Feinstein, in his studio in New York City's Flatiron District, photographed in June 2011.

BP: IS THERE ONE PARTICULAR FILM THAT HAD A BIG IMPACT ON YOU?

JC: Fassbinder's *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* changed my life—these women acting out this drama on a white shag carpet with a giant Poussin painting of Midas and Bacchus behind them. I saw that movie at the Bleecker Street Cinema in the late 1980s, maybe early '90s. When I was making these new paintings I thought about the scene where Petra von Kant is dancing around with her assistant. But then I'm also thinking about David Salle and Picabia.

BP: SO BEYOND SHIELDING YOUR KIDS, THERE'S A CINEMATIC INFLUENCE THAT HELPS EXPLAIN THE SEXUALIZED CONTENT'S DISSIPATION.

JC: Also, I got on a self-improvement kick when I realized how corrosively critical I can be while I'm painting, to the point where I'm cursing myself out loud for what a shitty job I'm doing, really belittling myself. So in part, the porn paintings underneath—the backgrounds—are places I can give myself a break and not feel like I have to be so perfect. I find it very liberating. It's almost akin to when you're joke dancing, you never worry about how well you're dancing . . . if that makes sense.

BP: IS THE ONLY REAL SELF-PORTRAIT OF YOU TO DATE THE PAINTING OF YOU AND SEAN LANDERS FROM 2002, *FISHERMEN*?

JC: That isn't an allegorical self-portrait. So yes, I think so. I did it from a mirror and even got my then-incipient, now ISIS-level, bald spot.

BP: DO YOU EVER EMPLOY THE OLD MASTERS' TRICK WHERE YOU TAKE A HAND MIRROR TO LOOK BACKWARD OVER YOUR SHOULDER AT PAINTINGS IN THE STUDIO?

JC: Oh, sure. Here's my mirror and there's the Windex I use to clean it. The mirror helps me to see tone—rather than color—and the shapes and drawing irregularities. And I sometimes paint upside down to see color.

BP: THE MODEL THAT'S IN MANY OF YOUR PAINTINGS NOW IS NAMED INDIA MENEZES. I REMEMBER SEEING HER LAST SUMMER AT YOUR WIFE, RACHEL FEINSTEIN'S, ART INSTALLATION IN MADISON SQUARE PARK. SHE'S QUITE STRIKING.

JC: She has one of those faces, like Rachel, that falls easily under the brush. I think she's Icelandic, but it's an ambiguous ethnicity. Her face lends itself to the distortions I do naturally. Part of my initial idea for these convex mirror paintings was that I would use these Sears-model



faces, which I've always liked so much. I thought of those source images as being like Syrian sculptures. They look like destroying goddesses, the remoteness of the faces.

BP: WHICH IS FUNNY BECAUSE I DON'T THINK OF YOU AS AN APPROPRIATION ARTIST.

JC: It's not appropriation, it's just scrounging for material. Appropriation is to use something with the idea that people will identify the static between its former social presence and the way you're presenting it now. Richard Prince is the perfect example. I used to use some stock photography, because I liked the scenarios or the way the figures related to each other. Because they came from advertising, they had a mythical power. Even the Old Masters would take poses from medieval engravings, so it's not really a modern phenomenon.

BP: YOU RECENTLY POSTED A GHIRLANDAIO IMAGE ON YOUR TWITTER ACCOUNT, THE FAMOUS ONE OF THE OLD MAN WITH HIS GRANDSON WHERE HIS NOSE IS ALL PIMPLY.

JC: My dad used to get *Scientific American* when I was a kid and that image was on the cover once. I only ever read two articles during the entire time he had his subscription. One was on Nixie tubes, which is a helpful term to remember when playing Scrabble, and the other article was about the guy's skin condition in that painting. The look on the little boy's face has always been heartbreaking, and the man's face, his expression, with the looming blue mountain out the window—it's an absolute masterpiece!

BP: IF WE WERE IN 19TH-CENTURY FRANCE WOULD YOU BE IN THE CLASSICIST CAMP OR THE ROMANTIC?

JC: I'm a romantic, but more than that I'm an expressionist. I have no method. I have no principles.

BP: I MENTION IT BECAUSE I KNOW YOU'RE A FAN OF POUSSIN, WHO WAS A CLASSICIST WHEN THAT WASN'T A FASHIONABLE THING TO BE.

JC: I think of Poussin as an expressionist. His art is about nostalgia and disappointment and dissatisfaction with the era that he lived in. But all artists think their time sucks... except for maybe the Greeks. I pine for another world, but I'm not sure what it would be. I'm certainly not an idealist.

BP: I'VE ALWAYS THOUGHT IT'S FUNNY THAT YOUR STUDIO LOOKS OUT ON A BALLET SCHOOL. IT'S THE SOPHISTICATION OF DEGAS AND THE CREEP FACTOR OF BUKOWSKI.

JC: I still feel like I can only watch them for 20 seconds before I turn into Quasimodo.

BP: DO YOU DRAW ENERGY FROM THE DANCERS, KNOWING THAT OTHER PEOPLE ARE PRACTICING THEIR ART WHILE YOU TOIL AWAY IN YOUR STUDIO?

JC: Yes, and when I had my old studio on 14th Street, I used to be inspired by the guys on the meat trucks, I mean, working their asses off. Seeing the ballerinas now is the same feeling, although because I have foot problems it's a little depressing to see them jump around.

BP: I LIKE THE QUOTE ATTRIBUTED TO YOU ABOUT HOW IF YOU'RE MAKING REALLY GREAT WORK, IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO GET RIPPED OFF. DO YOU REALLY BELIEVE THAT?

JC: There's actually a funny story about Guido Reni, who had done a painting of Saint Peter hanging upside down with raking light. Apparently, Caravaggio cornered him on the street and said, "I'm going to split your head open if you make another painting like that," because he felt like he was being copied. My thing is I never like to think that the idea is so special.

BP: FOR INSTANCE, IS NUDE DESCENDING A STAIRCASE JUST DUCHAMP'S VERSION OF A CUBIST PICASSO?

JC: Well, it's an important painting, but physically it's nothing compared to a Picasso. The fact is that most people don't do anything special enough to be ripped off. I was listening to Wagner in the studio last week, all his operas, and—man!—it's like every movie score you've ever heard is stealing from this guy. And so, if someone thought I was ripping off Jeff Koons in my painting it only makes me look sad and pathetic in the end.

BP: WHICH IS HARDER TO PAINT: A NIPPLE OR A BUTT?

JC: A butt, because they're bigger and you only have about an hour before the paint starts to pull as it sets. Also, lead white liquefies slightly when you brush it so you have to keep the paint moving.

BP: DEBUTING THIS WORK IN CALIFORNIA, AT GAGOSIAN BEVERLY HILLS, DO YOU FEEL LIKE THE PAINTINGS SHOULD BE HAPPIER OR SUNNIER GIVEN THE CONTEXT?

JC: I think every show should be a happy show, every single painting should be happy. The one thing I can do is make a fairly convincing fantasy of happiness. It doesn't mean that I'm happy or the painting isn't creepy, but good melancholy comes from a thwarted joy, which is another way to describe parenthood or marriage or being alive.

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*John Currin's show at Gagosian Beverly Hills runs through April 11. His last solo show was at Gagosian Paris in 2013.*