

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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John Currin has a way with awkwardness

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JOHN CURRIN Maenads, 2015 Oil on canvas.
48 x 36 x 1 1/4 inches, (121.9 x 91.4 x 3.2 cm) CURRI 2015.0004

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John Currin's "Maenads" (2015), oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches. (Douglas M. Parker Studio)

John Currin's paintings are catnip for art historians.

In terms of style, substance and composition, as well as scale, palette and paint handling, the roots of Currin's 11 pictures at Gagosian Gallery run back to Northern European painting from the 16th and 17th centuries. To get there they travel a meandering path through Italian Mannerism, French Neo-Classicism and what the Nazis called degenerate art — just about anything ambiguous enough to require viewers to think for themselves.

The more you know about the Old Masters — and the various ways their works have been reinterpreted over the last couple of centuries — the more you'll see in Currin's modestly scaled paintings of bare- and half-naked women. Jan Van Eyck, Jean-Honore Fragonard, Otto Dix, Lucas Cranach, Nicolas Poussin and Michelangelo Caravaggio come to mind.

That's a dizzying mixture of heavyweight painters, each of whose oeuvres is profoundly different — in tone, feel and philosophy — from the others. Currin amplifies the strange-bedfellow weirdness by including Norman Rockwell and Andrew Wyeth among the revered Europeans, their homegrown corniness adding significant kinkiness to the historical orgy.

Things get even weirder as Currin's queasy paintings embrace the past-its-prime imagery favored by many tenured faculty at backwoods art schools and second-rate universities. If that weren't enough, his reference-rich images also draw from porno movies from the 1970s, especially those made in Denmark.

Neither ironic nor straightforward, Currin's oils on canvas are curdled and perverse, both timely and twisted.

That brings them into the present, where they are catnip for critics. Over the last 20 years, Currin has been chastised for pandering to the appetites of sexist men who like to look at titillating pictures of sexy women.

You don't need to be an art historian or a critic to see that the paintings he has made over the last three years are peculiar and gripping, both unsavory and unavoidable in the ways they lay bare what is at stake when sex, power and pleasure collide and commingle.

Currin's paintings aren't sexy. Paint is applied frugally, almost stingily, as if it's in short supply and has to be stretched as far as possible. His canvases are coarsely woven. In some, blemishes are visible, the knobby, occasionally herringbone surfaces recalling burlap, trousers and other fabrics that have been repurposed as paintings.

The women in Currin's pictures are not beautiful, by any standard measure or stretch of the imagination. It's difficult not to empathize with them. I found myself identifying with some, particularly the ones who seem to be ill at ease in their settings, overly self-conscious about their poses and, most poignantly, uncomfortable in their own skins.

Many seem to be going through the motions — acting out fantasies that are not theirs. Acutely aware that they are playing a role, Currin's impossibly proportioned women recall Cindy Sherman's great photographs of herself posing as small-town women pretending to big-city babes.

In a sense, that is what Currin is up to in his paintings. He mimics the Old Masters to register the distance between their times and ours.

A connoisseur of awkwardness, Currin makes you feel it in his sitters, in your gut and in your head, where it sticks like a pop song that won't stop.

Gagosian Gallery, 456 N. Camden Drive, Beverly Hills, (310) 271-9400, through April 11. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.gagosian.com)