

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

HYPERALLERGIC

John Currin's Silly Porn-Inspired Portraits Somehow Work

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John Currin, "Maenads" (2015), oil on canvas, 48 x 36 x 1 1/4 inches (all photos courtesy Gagosian Gallery)

LOS ANGELES — John Currin's bizarre vignettes of feminine allure are bound to arouse some rather rich and complicated feelings in the viewer, and that is a good thing. His current show at Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills, his first Los Angeles area exhibition in ten years, consists of eleven new oil paintings of invented muses that are magnetic in their beauty and weirdly compelling in their historically-inspired, imagined settings.

Working with the confidence of a chef who knows his ingredients well, Currin spices his paintings with references borrowed from high and low culture and leavens them with humor. The most prevalent flavor in Currin's current stylistic mix is Mannerism, the sensual and decadent "late style" that charmed Venetian aristocrats in the late 16th century, and provided a counterpoint to the previous generation's fixation on Classicism. In particular, the portraits of Pontormo (1494–1557), a Florentine Mannerist, seem to haunt the delicate features of several of Currin's invented women. Pontormo's influence is also apparent in a certain floating, self-conscious langour present in a number of their poses.

One painting of a Neo-Mannerist flavor, titled “Maenads,” references the frenzied female followers of Dionysius: “Maenads” roughly translates to “the raving ones.” In Currin’s composition, a nearly nude, auburn-haired beauty with two apples on her knee rocks forward on a tasseled golden pillow. Another woman, who floats behind the right shoulder of the central figure, pleasures herself — or probably pleasures herself — on a billowing cloud of pinkish fabric. A third beauty on the left looks away while possibly helping with the possible pleasuring: Currin teases his viewers, and himself, by obscuring the sexual particulars.

Over the past few years Currin has been working with pornographic imagery, and several of the works on view at Gagosian reveal glimpses of recycled porno painted with an Old Master touch. If “Maenads” seems hard to place in terms of time and culture, keep in mind that Currin has syncretized what you would normally think of as incompatible sources — I get Vogue, Hustler, Pontorno, and possibly the Bed, Bath & Beyond fall catalog — into a single composition. And somehow *it works* ...

Of course, part of the reason Currin is able to do what he does is that his skills as a painter continue to grow. He has been working on textured canvases, including some with a herringbone weave, and when his work is viewed in person, Currin’s bravura brushwork and ability to render soft flesh, reflective fabrics, and decorative patterns is impressive.

The inspiration for another of Currin’s striking new paintings — “Nude in a Convex Mirror” — seems to come from another Mannerist: Parmigianino (1503–1540). His remarkable “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” was created when the artist was only twenty-one and presented to Pope Clement VII as an advertisement of his talent. Working on a curved wooden panel, Parmigianino used a convex mirror’s distortion to emphasize his pale, pinky-ringed hand: it makes his touch almost available.

Currin’s tour de force uses a similar effect to expand a nude woman’s shapely ass into a stupendous, tondo-filling monument of sensuality. Call it gimmicky if you want, but I found this painting both very funny and very beautiful. In fact, Currin’s paintings are all slightly humorous and silly, as if he wants to remind us that rendering beauty without levity carries the risk of achieving dull, chilly perfection.

Mannerism works for Currin because it is an aristocratic style that favors invention. In a certain unexpected way, Mannerist distortion has also brought out a Picassian aspect in Currin’s work. Looking over the massive buttocks of “Nude in a Convex Mirror,” I was reminded of a talk I heard by Françoise Gilot, the mother of two of Picasso’s children. She recounted that Picasso often had dreams in which women and parts of their bodies became very large or very small. The exaggerated eroticism of Currin’s callipygean tondo suggests that a new direction for his work might be to follow Picasso’s lead and use distortions of scale for more expressive purposes.

In contrast, Currin’s painting “Altar,” which shows us a single woman with a suggestively placed hand, is more optically conventional. It is also peculiar: the figure’s improbable acorn-shaped fabric hat adds quirk to what might otherwise come across as a rather dated piece of soft-core erotica. The work succeeds somewhat better as an allegory of painting as a form of mental masturbation.

“Altar” is a sweet and sour picture and it brings up an issue often raised by the acrid humor in Currin’s work: he frequently treats his subjects of both sexes with a measured contempt. This invariably has the paradoxical effect of making the works more appealing, and in the case of Currin’s current paintings of women, it makes their saccharine sweetness tolerable.

Taken too literally, it may be easy to find things to dislike about this show. Some might argue that Currin is just another in a long line of men who objectify women for their own purposes. Then again, it is important to realize that Currin paints from his imagination, and seeing these women as “real” in any way leads down the wrong path entirely. While products of an artist’s erotic musings, the works are pure inventions, drawing viewers into a rich conversation with unexpected fusions of high and low culture.

John Currin continues at Gagosian Gallery (456 North Camden Drive, Beverly Hills, California) through April 11.