

GAGOSIAN



by Bill Powers

GALLERY



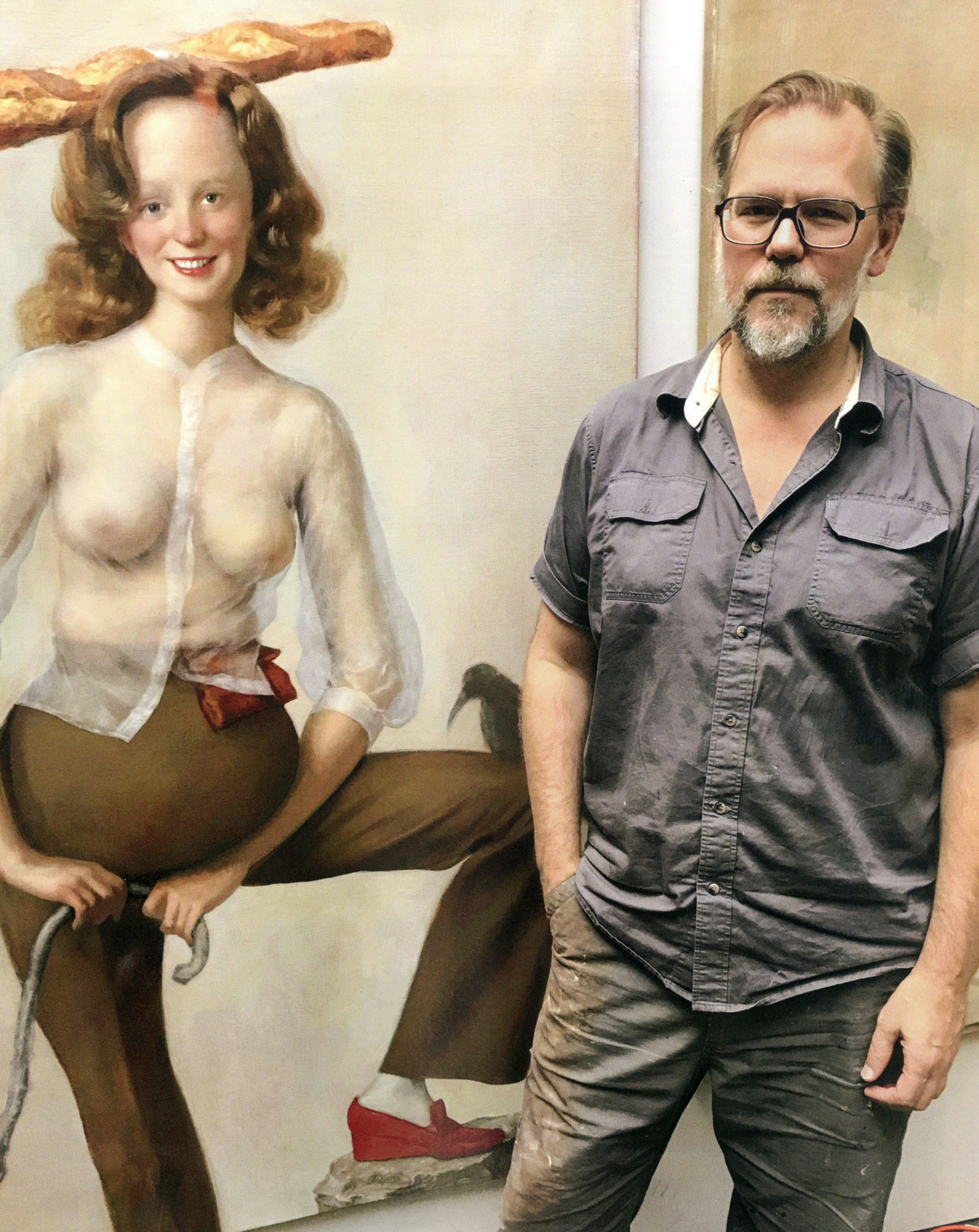
► *Velázquez sexually harassing Norman Rockwell—that’s what John Currin’s paintings look like. They’re funny as hell, but not silly: His 1999 piece ‘Nice ’n Easy’ just sold at auction for over \$12 million. Here, NEW YORK CITY’S TWISTED MASTER PAINTER talks about X-ray vision, X-rated art, knocking off his friend Richard Prince—and even sits for a photo shot by Prince himself.*

by Bill Powers

# Art's New Old Master

 RICHARD  
PRINCE







**F**rom his penthouse studio off Park Avenue, John Currin's rear windows directly face a classical-ballet school, where rows of lithe dancers practice their grand battements. While the setting calls to mind the work of Edgar Degas or even Jeff Koons, this proximity to one of culture's more sophisticated (and vigorous) outlets gives Currin energy. Something about the dancers' diligence and quest for excellence resonates with him in his own undertaking, and yet he can't gaze out at them admiringly for more than 20 seconds without feeling like Quasimodo, the optics being what they are for a gray-bearded 54-year-old.

This past November, Currin's double nude *Nice 'n Easy* sold at

Christie's auction house in New York for over \$12 million. The accompanying auction catalog compared his paintings to those of Goya, Manet, and Otto Dix, but there remain trace elements of Norman Rockwell's America embedded in them as well. (Currin's paintings have an explicit humor more aligned with illustration, but it's often dwarfed by his Old Master virtuosity.) Sometimes the title is the giveaway. *Nice 'n Easy*, for instance, might be a nod to the freewheeling sexuality of easy women or the artificial hair coloring sold by Clairol or, most probably, both. In person, Currin's verbal wit is spontaneous, generously self-deprecating, and wickedly cutting. When asked

if he takes issue with bad reviews in the press, Currin's chief complaint is that the critics are usually right. He speaks—when animated—with an endearing stutter (think Jimmy Stewart in *It's a Wonderful Life*). At a dinner during Art Basel Miami in 2008, guests on the patio at the Delano hotel were surprised when an unexpected fireworks display erupted overhead, to which Currin raised a glass and enthusiastically shouted, "Hey, everybody, Madonna and Guy Ritchie's divorce just went through!"

After earning his M.F.A. from Yale in 1986, Currin got his professional start three years later, showing paintings of fictionalized yearbook photos at the non-profit space White Columns in N.Y.C. There was something goofy and utterly humanizing in elevating these awkward displays of teen bravado and insecurity to the realm of high art. It also established a precedent the painter still abides by in contorting pre-existing photographic material to serve his own twisted ends. Yes, yearbook pictures are funny and full of promise in a disposable way—the anonymous publicity stills of every generation—yet they can have a prophetic quality, too, one that hints at who we are and what the future may hold if we can hold on. In that tradition, it feels commensurately fitting that Currin returned to London this winter with a suite of new portraits (some of which are shown here) that were unveiled at Sadie Coles, the gallery he christened with its inaugural exhibition exactly 20 years ago.

**GQ STYLE: Two decades back, did you feel like it was easier to show X-rated paintings overseas?**

**JOHN CURRIN:** That was more about my elegy to European painting and my naive idea of European libertinism.

**So it wasn't you tiptoeing around American conservatism?**

No, and I subsequently got interested in making the convex-mirror paintings, because they're less about a social reality and more a reflection of how my own ideas have changed about porn. I thought of the mirror's distortion almost like an invasive eyeball. ▶▶

↙  
With *Happy House Painters* (2016), Currin liked the idea that you've stumbled upon a lesbian couple who broke into your house to paint it.

→  
The file folder on Currin's computer for these new paintings, including *Pistachio* (2016), is labeled "Garbage People."

◀◀  
**OPENING PAGES**

Left: *Nude in a Convex Mirror* (2015) appears in Tom Ford's *Nocturnal Animals* and on the cover of the artist's 2016 Rizzoli monograph. Right: John Currin with his new work, *Red Shoe* (2016), photographed by Richard Prince for *GQ Style*.

















**Do you agree with Richard Prince that one of the foundations in learning how to paint is knowing the scale of a human figure?**

When I started these new paintings, I consciously made them way bigger than I was comfortable with. I wanted the head to be out of scale.

**It definitely adds to the peculiarity. You also seem drawn to painting older couples now. In the past, I remember a lot of May-December romances.**

I've always been interested in stock photography, and within that there's a whole genre showing people happy in their oldness. Maybe the images were intended for retirement advertising.

**Is it significant that your own parents are still married?**

I think so. Actually, I'm a little worried what my parents will think of this new work, you know, like I'm mocking them. I would never want to make fun of anyone for looking goofy in my paintings.

**So you hope the figures maintain a certain dignity?**

No, I want to convey the indignity of being covered in garbage...coupled with the formality of the painting.

**And where do you find this stock photography?**

The Strand bookstore sold used catalogs that stock houses sent out to ad agencies. The setups are somehow reminiscent of anonymous 18th-century paintings. I love genre pictures. I prefer to outsource my scenarios rather than construct them.

**The big question for me is: Why cover these people in garbage?**

I think of the objects on them more in the way you might depict the attributes of a saint, you know, holding a wheel or something important to their backstory.

**I notice that the old boot in one of the paintings is the same style as the Red Wing boot you're wearing.**

I got off on the Rembrandt-y quality of the old shoe. Or have you ever seen *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* by Todd Haynes?

It was shot with Barbie dolls. One thing that really struck me in the movie was how her parents were rendered. He gouged wrinkles into their faces with, like, a woodcut tool, and it just seemed so crazy, the imposed age. I like that he made their aging almost a stylistic treatment. Somehow that related to the idea of the old boot.

**I ask because someone told me that you're not a big fan of surrealism.**

I'm not a fan of surrealism when I perpetrate it, but I do love Magritte. In fact, the idea for all these new paintings came from a surrealist Picasso called *Seated Woman with Fish-Hat*.

**Which reminds me of your painting *The Moroccan* from 2001, in which a woman has dead fish draped over her forehead.**

And I made a painting of Rachel [Feinstein, Currin's wife] with a lobster on her head, but it got lost at the airport flying back from Maine. I mean, I've always had this craziness in my drawings, but translating that energy to painting

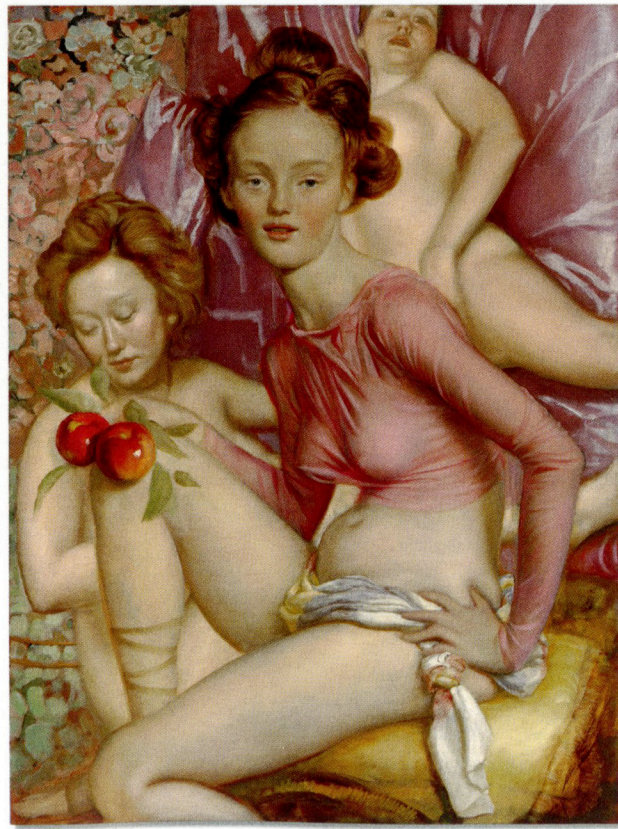
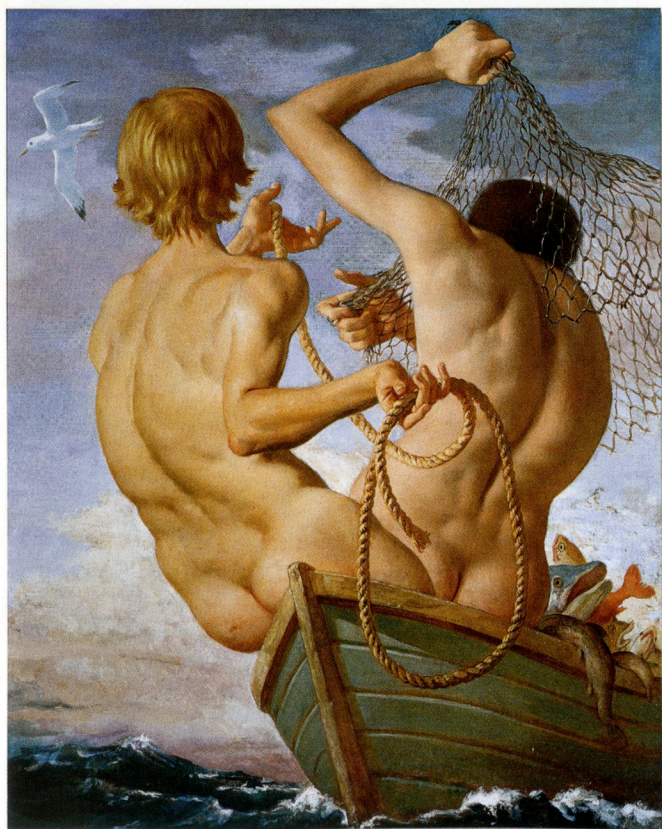
↖ *Fishermen* (2002) is a self-portrait with Currin's old studiomate, fellow painter Sean Landers.

↓ *Maenads* (2015). In Greek mythology, maenads were ecstatic female followers of the wine god Dionysus.

↘ In recent years, Currin has diversified his subject matter, but *The Leg* (2016) suggests he hasn't abandoned sex entirely.

#### PREVIOUS PAGES

Left: Sexually explicit work like *Good Beer* (2012), while controversial, hasn't dampened Currin's critical acclaim—or his market. Right: "I joke," Currin has said of his painting *Hot Pants* (2010), "that the tailor was a less robust Terry Richardson."





is a totally different thing, because the humor falls away. I don't want my paintings to be too jokey.

**On that note, tell me about the painting of the older woman sitting topless at her desk.**

I had the picture lying around my studio. I thought it would be nice if she were nude.

**The choice to make her naked isn't a reaction to the growing popularity of granny porn?**

No, but if you're in your 50s, there is something weird about looking at pictures of a naked 19-year-old. I find the older I get, the less I have a physical response to them as images or even sexually.

**Speaking of sex, another reoccurrence in these new paintings is your strange way of depicting a pregnant woman, where only the bottom half of her belly protrudes.**

When I first did that years ago, it was to make the pregnancy look as shocking as it feels when your wife gets pregnant. I didn't want the pregnancy to

become the subject of the painting, but to seem more like an imposed condition.

**Almost like the baguette she balances on her head?**

Or here's a decision: The see-through shirt I based her top on, it actually has gold stripes in real life, which would be beautiful to paint, but I want you to look at her breasts more like you have X-ray vision. It's better that she's a Venus, unaware of her nudity in the same way she's blind to her pregnancy.

**And then she has one foot propped up on this ancient stone.**

Do you know that big Artemisia Gentileschi painting at the Met of the woman fainting in front of a king? Well, it has these stone steps with paint splattered all over them. It's like a real Bob Ross moment. I guess this is my version.

**Knowing that someone like Marc Jacobs is a collector of your work, do you get nervous taking on fashion in your paintings?**

Look at the guy in this painting with the ice cream cone on his head.

I worry that he gets too clownlike or country-clubbish. I want these people to live in a world that could never exist socially.

**Does it ever concern you that in, say, 200 years some art historian analyzing your paintings will misread the meaning of this snail crawling up a woman's shoulder or the tilted candle resting on the boot?**

Any good art should encourage cockamammy interpretations and conspiracies. My work is a petri dish for that stuff, I hope. The truth is that when these things start off as jokes, over time they become something else. Even I start to read different meanings into aspects of the painting. Like the tilting candle, for instance. I started to think, How would a candle pose for a selfie? Because when you're making decisions within a painting, it helps to have a bit of a narrative. I don't think of the symbolism as "symbols," but the poetry of a disjunctive process. I like Magritte because he figured out how to make unusual paintings.

**Tell me about *Happy House Painters*.**

It began as a man and a woman, but then it seemed more fun if they were a lesbian couple: One would be stern—almost indignant—and the other woman would be new to it all, you know, like she recently left her husband. I liked the idea of walking in unexpectedly on people painting. I thought it was funny if they were caught breaking into your house to paint it.

**The expressions on the lesbians' faces are priceless.**

The faces got very real to me. I only want to finish the painting enough now that it doesn't come off as flashy. I'll let some looseness stay as long as it's not in a conceited way. I mean, I'd love to be able to get away with the swagger of a Sammy Davis Jr., but my fear is that I'm doing a too long guitar riff in a soft-rock song.

**Are there particular emotions you find hard to convey?**

Angry I have a hard time with. I tried that once when I painted over advertisements from *Playboy*. Did you ever see those? They're basically rip-offs of Richard Prince.

Or like a frightened man—I've never been able to do that kind of face you find in a Velázquez.

**It surprises me that you have a live goldfish in your studio.**

When you paint from life, there can be something spectacular about it. Also, there's the problem of certain subjects that other artists have already done so well. Can you top Matisse's goldfish? It's like two strokes of orange, and it's perfect.

**You gave a lecture at The New School once where you said, "Wouldn't it have been a pity if Van Gogh was a video artist?"**

I'm not sure video art is owed a genius like Van Gogh. I put Van Gogh in the top five of all time. He's up there with Goya, Botticelli, Picasso, Velázquez. If you press me on this, I'm pretty sure my top five artists will end up being a list of 17.

**Calvin Tomkins says that your honeymoon to Italy was a turning point for you. Have there been other moments as pivotal?**

The realization that the mission is happiness. Humor, happiness, the fantasy of happiness, joy, beauty: These are the things I get energy from. I can't channel angst, for whatever reason. But then you also have to accept that happiness is not a constant state in life.

**So the collective anxiety we feel as a country right now doesn't end up in the paintings?**

I'm pretty crestfallen at the state of things, but the older I get, the less political I feel. Also, who would care what I think about politics? I'm not young anymore, so there's no glamour to my opinions.

**Your house in Gramercy Park has horse jockeys on the facade. Are those landmarked?**

Yeah, I painted the faces very beautifully, but I had to do it quick.

**When one of the women in your paintings stares out from the canvas, do you imagine that she looks at you, the painter, or at us, the viewer? In your painting *Good Beer*, for example?**

In that painting, I'm looking at you, only through her eyes. ■

BILL POWERS runs Half Gallery in New York City.

