

GAGOSIAN



For His First Museum Show in 15 Years, John Currin Turns His Gaze to Men *The artist, who made his name with his polarizing but masterly portraits of women, discusses his lesser-known paintings.*

Adriane Quinlan



The artist John Currin photographed at his studio on Mount Desert Island, Maine, where he has worked each summer since 2016. CreditCreditGreta Rybus

John Currin is best known for painting women, and he has spent his summer on Mount Desert Island, Maine, doing just that: laying the groundwork for a new series of portraits of female subjects whose smiles are stretched by lines of anxiety, whose eyes blaze with to-do lists. He based the faces on models from Sears catalogs and stock photos, but calls the type a “Redbook Juggler,” after the supermarket glossy that advises women on how to cook, shop and dress. While Currin’s exaggerated compositions blow his figures up to kewpie-doll proportions or deflate them into a jumble of jutting elbows and toothy smiles, he renders each inch of flesh in

laborious, glowing brushwork that has earned him comparisons to Dutch masters. He was, in fact, exhibited alongside the celebrated Golden Age Dutch painter Cornelis van Haarlem, at the Frans Hals Museum in the Netherlands in 2011, just two decades after his first solo show at the Andrea Rosen Gallery in 1992 (where his provocative portraits of bold older women elicited accusations of sexism but nevertheless sold out). Currin's works still draw that criticism on occasion, but not much that he depicts emerges solely from his own imagination. His subjects wash in from the flotsam of American life — kitschy souvenirs and cringey ads, screenshots and centerfolds — and it's by polishing this lowbrow commercial imagery with a high-art sheen that he manages to make obvious what others might be happy to ignore about our culture.

Currin's summer studio emerged from a similar process. From the outside, the wooden, Swiss-chalet-style lodge with twin peaked roofs and a wraparound porch is a replica in miniature of the midcentury lake house down the hill that Currin and the artist Rachel Feinstein bought in 2015. Currin built the studio in 2016 and has worked here every summer since (for the rest of the year he is based in New York). Inside, it is spare and white, a reworked, glossy, art-world version of the main house.

Currin and Feinstein first came to Mount Desert Island — a large outcropping of rock that has drawn lobster boats and wealthy vacationers since the Gilded Age — in 1996, as guests of the Acadia Summer Arts Program. Later, they got engaged on a hike here, and it's where their children — now 10, 14 and 16 — go to camp. When the couple bought their house overlooking Long Pond directly from its original owner, they also purchased everything that was inside: the Knoll dining set, the space-agey Wendell Lovett hearth, the hand-embroidered pillows and dog-eared sci-fi novels. "For people who have to make aesthetic decisions every day," says Feinstein, the idea of redecorating is "exhausting."



Currin and the artist Rachel Feinstein were looking for a retreat on Long Pond, their favorite lake on Mount Desert Island, when they stumbled on this 1963 chalet-style house designed by the architect Alphonse Pasquale. © Greta Rybus. The couple have hardly touched the house since they bought it wholesale from its original owner, and her paintings still hang on the walls. © Greta Rybus.

Currin's latest retrospective, opening this month at the Dallas Contemporary, offers its own kind of respite. "My Life as a Man" brings together just over 100 images of men made by an artist known for depicting women. "I would get kind of tired of the constant, you know — my constant fixation on women, and paint men as a kind of relief or as a kind of discipline, as a kind of fast," he says.

The works in the show range from a 1984 ink self-portrait of a ponderous 22-year-old Currin, to his 2016 oil "Newspaper Couple," in which an elderly man and woman smile at each other serenely despite a jumble of bric-a-brac balanced surreally on their heads. The exhibition also includes raw sketches and ink drawings that show Currin working through ideas: A series of sexualized male doctors culminates in "The Dream of the Doctor" (1997), a full-scale oil depicting a man, stethoscope unfurled, leaning in toward a screened-off patient; a troop of sad-eyed men land as "Old Guy" (1994), a glowing oil painting of a man in a sweater-vest who holds a limp, pink tea towel as if it's his only offering.

Currin's men are not macho. Some were based on the faces of women and cloaked with beards; his assistant Suzanne Bennett modeled the legs in "Hot Pants" (2010); and other subjects are based on the artist himself, in wigs. They appear dressed in furs, cravats and braces. "It's almost like this kind of nightmare of different men," he says.



John Currin's "Fisherman" (2002). Credit © John Currin. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian. John Currin's "2070" (2005). Credit © John Currin. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.

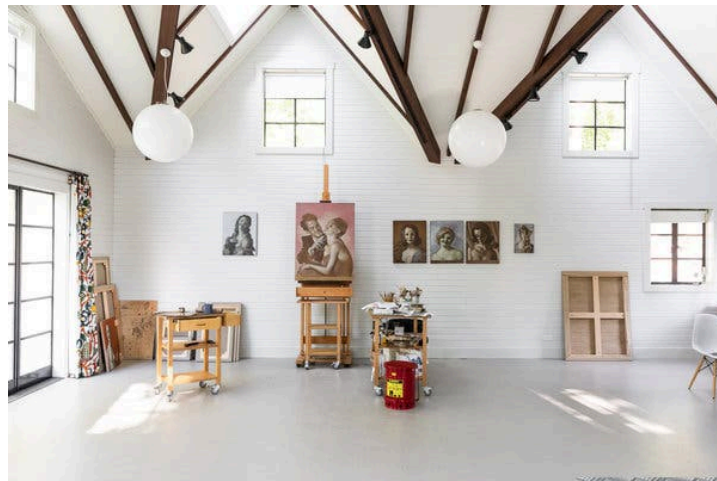
This exhibition will be his first museum show in 15 years, and it seems designed for the post-Weinstein era. Its mockery of masculinity may give the artist some relief from the accusations of sexism. And though Currin didn't time it deliberately — he credits the curator Alison Gingeras for conceiving the show, whose title takes its name from a Philip Roth novel — the timing has worked out. "The older I get, the less joy or thrill I get out of offending people," he says. "I used to relish that." This may be why he is now drawn to his "Redbook Jugglers," women whose cloaked pain he obsessively draws to the surface and magnifies for the world to see. Across the room from their watching eyes, Currin took a seat on a Chesterfield sofa, upholstered in buttery cornflower-blue leather, and answered T's Artist's Questionnaire.

What is your day like? How much do you sleep, and what's your work schedule?

I go to bed probably around 12, 12:30. I've always been a stay-up-late person. One of the things I like about Maine is I have much more of a routine up here than I do in New York. The kids go to the camp up at the top of the hill. Usually, Rachel and I take them up there. We get up at 8:30 and take them up there at 8:50. Rachel's been doing yoga. Sometimes I do yoga. All right, I don't do yoga but I go with her to do yoga. And we usually swim almost every day. We did this morning. And that's the most beautiful thing there is. Then I have a long breakfast on the porch, and drift up here around 12 or 12:30 and work here until about 8.

How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?

Maybe seven or eight.



Currin built his freestanding studio on the property in 2016 to mimic the design of the main house on a smaller scale. © Greta Rybus.



On Currin's worktop, a sketch for a painting in his new series and tubes of paint, including lead white, which he buys in bulk out of fear it will one day be banned. © Greta Rybus. Currin's latest series captures a type he calls a "Redbook Juggler," after the magazine. The subjects are "a little nervous," he says, "with a million things to do." © Greta Rybus.

What's the first piece of art you ever made?

The first thing that I remember making was a drawing of a Tyrannosaurus. There might have been airplanes fighting it. It was a big battle scene. I remember even then, you know, I wasn't satisfied. I just remember the pencil — thin, textural pencil — and it didn't look right. I just remember being unhappy.

What's the worst studio you ever had?

I rented a place in New Haven. I'd just gone to Yale for grad school. It was a crappy sort of two-story building, and there was a pizza place downstairs. It might have been \$50 a month. It had a feeling of like a '40s low-budget crime office, like a Raymond Chandler kind of office. It smelled like burned crust the entire time.

What's the first work you ever sold? For how much?

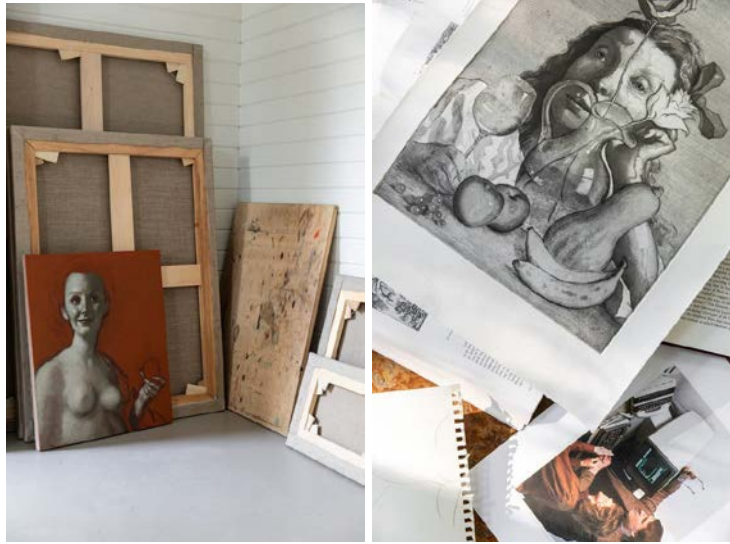
I painted signs in a restaurant but that doesn't count. I do remember one in particular I sold after college, a painting, a kind of colorful fake de Kooning to — I think it was the aunt of my girlfriend — for \$450.

When you start a new piece, where do you begin?

I'll make drawings. I literally will grid that onto the canvas. I have a lot of anxiety about composition, so a lot of times I work from just very, very quick drawings. And I don't want to change it a lot, because I just think it gets worse.

How do you know when you're done?

I don't know how to finish a painting. All I can tell you is how it feels for the painting to be finished. I don't want to make a gross or inappropriate analogy, but it's a little bit like when you first remember being in high school or college or whatever and it's going to be your first kiss. It's scary. You don't know what to do. But then it just happens. And in retrospect it seems like, "Oh yeah, of course. It was natural." Something a little bit like that happens in the painting where you're nervous and nothing's happening and it's like you're thinking it through and talking, and talking, and talking. And then, if you're lucky, something physically happens in the painting; physical logic takes over, rather than the idea. My role diminishes, and I'm more of a craftsman. I just work here. I've been sent to fix a few things. I'm just cleaning up now. I'm picking up my tools.



Currin buys his canvases pre-made, but prepares them himself with layers of warm tones. If a work ends up on this wall, it's because he's not sure it's working. © Greta Rybus. A portrait of Feinstein that Currin worked on this summer, and a printout of a stock photo. © Greta Rybus

How many assistants do you have?

There's Chrissy Lloyd. She's an old friend of ours. She worked with Rachel at a nightclub. Chrissy was a bartender at that place, and she's a fashion stylist, so she comes over once or twice a week to my studio after she gets done with shoots. She's sourcing objects, delivering objects, putting them together. She also arranges models for me. I have an assistant in another sense: Suzanne Bennett does bookkeeping for us and is the general manager of our household. She started as my studio assistant.

What music do you play when you're making art?

It's going to be bad. It's going to be embarrassing. I last listened to a playlist on Spotify: '80s Metal was the name of it. Black Sabbath, Zeppelin. One classy thing I did listen to when I was making the "garbage paintings" was all the Wagner operas. My mom was a piano teacher, my father was a big enthusiast of classical music, and I just listened to it constantly in my house. It doesn't work in my studio because it's just like I'm a kid and I'm home.

When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?

When I didn't have to go paint houses or plaster walls. When I realized that I was waking up and I was going to go to my studio.

Is there a meal you eat on repeat when you're working?

I don't eat when I'm working.

Are you bingeing on any shows right now?

We did "I, Claudius" this summer. I tried to get the kids interested in "The Wire" and it didn't work. The last one was "Game of Thrones," like everybody else, which I never totally got on

board with. But Rachel loves it. I didn't like it at all when it first started. I would look at my iPad while she watched. But then, that scene where Daenerys stands up naked out of the ashes with the dragons, the baby dragons — that's what sold me on it, like everybody else.

How often do you talk to other artists?

I mean, they're my friends so quite a bit. Not daily, but certainly every weekend. We go out to Orient Point in Long Island and we have friends there, a lot of artist friends there, so it's always social. I'm not counting Rachel.

What do you do when you're procrastinating?

Look at my phone. That's the worst one of all. I used to make billions of drawings because my hand was free. You feel like doing something with your thumbs, and I would just doodle. Now when I draw, it's to figure something out. Before, I was all day drawing: naked ladies, cartoons — and sometimes making a nice drawing. I don't really do that so much anymore. That's a big loss. The phone just sucks up all your hand-motor-eye stuff.

What do you usually wear when you work?

I wear Carhartt pants and a Carhartt shirt. I do get a little bit weird about lucky shirts and lucky pants. I like to wear work boots when I paint for some reason, even though I don't have to. My work pants have a little pocket here. [Indicates thigh.] I've gotten in the habit of having a knife always on hand. You never knew how much you needed a knife.

If you have windows, what do they look out on?

I intentionally didn't want to look out on anything here because it's just distracting, and I also don't want people walking up and looking at me work. This is west, so if it's sunny and I'm working, I usually close these curtains because of the glare.

What's your worst habit?

Vodka tonics and Words With Friends, buttered bread, Twitter. I don't post on it, but I do like to look at it. There's a few people that I check every day. Iowa Hawk. He's a guy who's into cars. He's very, very funny.



The house is one of only a handful on Long Pond, where most of the shoreline is protected by a national park. Currin and Feinstein swim here most mornings, before they begin their work days. © Greta Rybus

What embarrasses you?

For whatever reason, I am attracted to embarrassing situations in painting. I think I seek it out. But I think I also fear it, so I'm not sure. I would say that I'm embarrassed by my body. As Rumsfeld would say, "You go to war with the army you have," or whatever. And the army I have is plagued by embarrassment and insecurity.

What are you reading?

I don't really read. I mean, I used to. That's another thing I think iPads have destroyed in my life. I read constantly, but I don't read books. *The New York Times*, *Drudge Report*, headline news type of stuff, articles, links. Wikipedia I like a lot.

What's your favorite artwork by someone else?

I have to sort of balance my urge to lie, and my urge to tell the truth. I need to lie to figure it out. I know it was "Hunters in the Snow" by Bruegel, or "The Peasant Dance" — the one where the people are running in from the right side of the painting. And then Botticelli, I guess. "The Primavera." But you know, I feel like it's a little dishonest of me to name an Italian artist.

Courbet is kind of the trashy one that I always come back to when I'm feeling like I've got to figure out something. WWCD: What Would Courbet Do? I saw "The Origin of the World" in Brooklyn when I was 19. I'd seen 900,000 photographic images of women spreading their legs but I'd never seen a painting. It was the weirdest feeling. It was much more real than a photograph. It was the strangest thing I'd ever seen. It completely knocked me over. And in a way that's one of my favorite paintings. I'd be lying if I said it wasn't.