

GAGOSIAN



John Currin, Painting's Male Provocateur, Turns His Brush To Men
On the occasion of his first museum show since 2003, John Currin sits down for a long talk about painting, masculinity, and very fast cars.

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Artists John Currin and Rachel Feinstein in their home in 2011. © Lee Clower for The New York Times/Redux

John Currin doesn't have a private plane, or a yacht, or the keys to a hotel suite he can stay in at a moment's notice—you know, the toys a rich guy in a movie might have. But for a painter, he certainly has the full treasure chest: a wooden mid-century bungalow on a lake in Mount Desert Island, Maine. A weekend house on the North Fork of Long Island. A townhouse in Gramercy, that he and his wife, the artist Rachel Feinstein, spent half a decade rebuilding from the ground up. They have three beautiful kids. Cool and powerful friends in fashion, art, media, and society. He lives comfortably enough that he can say things like, "If I ever do another country house, I'm making my studio closer."

And he has a silver Porsche! "Yeah," he said, apologetic and amused, when he picked me up at the airport near his Mount Desert home. "I'm that guy who picked you up in a Porsche."

Currin has collected all these goodies during his career as the premiere chronicler of twisted women in the dubious grip of male desire. He's a rare thing: a celebrity painter. (And also a painter of celebrities: perhaps you saw the September 2017 *Vogue* cover he painted of Jennifer Lawrence as one of his Rococo-Mannerist ingenues.) Now, he's having his first museum show since 2003, featuring his paintings of...men. Opening at Dallas Contemporary on September 15,

it's called "My Life as a Man"—a title borrowed from the Philip Roth novel, and audaciously, perfectly faux-macho. In July, I went to his house in Maine, where he and Feinstein decamp for basically the whole summer, doing yoga, getting massages, playing with their kids' iguana, and making art. (Feinstein also has a major show opening at the Jewish Museum in November; she is also probably the coolest woman on the planet.)

But for all his great stuff, Currin obsessively thinks about the masculine idea the art world believes he embodies, but that in his mind forever eludes him. He is haunted by the idea of being inauthentic. He's got a Porsche, sure—but it's because he like, can't have a Ferrari. "I may very well look stupid in a Porsche, but I'd look really stupid in a Ferrari. It's just like, I don't have the... You have to have black hair, you have to have, you can't just..." He trails off, his hands waving in search of the words. "My facial... I don't have the right nose. Whereas the silver Porsche is kind of like a balding guy. It kind of looks more like"—he gestures up at himself—"you know?"

Or it's like, you know, the difference between Sean Connery playing James Bond and Clint Eastwood as Dirty Harry. (If Currin had a nickel for every time he chuckled and darted to another extended parable of the perfect male specimen versus a less refined reality, he'd be, well, as rich as a guy in a movie.) Connery, "you can't stop looking at him. He's funny, he's cruel, mean to women." He doesn't walk down the street with everybody else, he doesn't wait for the light to turn green—"he doesn't deal with any of the tiny humiliations." Eastwood, on the other hand, "has a crappy apartment. There's nothing in his fridge. There's no woman ever. There's no loyal woman doing things for him. He's constantly having to wait for stop signs. He drives a shit car, has clothes that don't fit him, and has a fucking big gun. Whereas James Bond has the Walther PPK, a teeny tiny little gun, right?"

"I sometimes think I'm trying to paint like I am Sean Connery," he told me, "but the closest I'll ever get is Clint Eastwood."

We got to his lakeside house, which, he explained, was on the side of the island that wasn't "the really Wasp one." (You can always tell a real Wasp, because they love to explain how they're not a Wasp.) In the past two years, Currin has started wearing a beard and big vintage Dunhill glasses, which give his boarding school bad boy face a much softer look, like Michael Caine-takes-Maine. When we met, he was wearing a plaid shirt and slip-on sneakers with which Feinstein had told him he couldn't wear socks (he was wearing the socks; he apologized to us both). After Rachel made me avocado toast, he and I hung out in his studio, a short walk up the hill from the house. The light poured in through huge windows between a set of William Morris-style printed curtains, and a few paintings for an upcoming show in Hong Kong—wacky ladies rendered like old yearbook pictures—sat partially finished against the wall. The space is otherwise serenely empty save for an orangey wooden table and a leather couch, where we sat and spoke for a chunk of the summer afternoon.

If you were to graph the career trajectory of the typical great male artist, you'd draw a straight line (or even a downwards line) that skyrockets up after he dies. In more recent history—think Jeff Koons, or Gerhard Richter, or Willem de Kooning—it's often a steady line going up, up, up. Currin's is more like a Cy Twombly: a series of loops, with the reputation he's both earned and fashioned as a bad-boy painter working for and then against him and back again, over and over.



Yummy. Homemade Pasta, 1999. Oil on canvas. © John Currin. Photo: Fred Scruton. Courtesy Gagosian.

Getting his MFA at Yale, he painted as one of the guys—Abstract Expressionist stuff, aping Julian Schnabel and de Kooning, which “all fell apart when I left college, and I realized I had no relevance other than being top dog in an art school.” Then he read the Irish writer Joyce Cary’s *The Horse’s Mouth*, about a figurative painter whose destructive streak is more like a power current. “I really got into it,” he said. “I wanted to be that guy.” He wanted to be “tortured, like Gauguin or something.” He made paintings of middle-aged women, looking drab in their suburban Connecticut J. Crew worst, which were shown as his first solo show, in 1992, at New York’s Andrea Rosen Gallery. The *Village Voice* art critic Kim Levin called them “awful paintings,” famously declaring, “Boycott this show.” That’s ’90s for “canceled.” Currin will tell you he doesn’t intend “the end meaning” of his works, but he certainly thinks a lot about the beginnings, and he knew that at that time, “painting was retrograde and right-wing.” The very premise was a provocation.

And by the mid-’90s, the art world came around. Currin wasn’t a misogynist, a new line of thinking went, he was a provocateur. It helped that his paintings shifted in their approach, evolving into a magnetic pastiche of the American yokel instincts of illustrator Norman Rockwell and the fussy perviness of Rococo painter Jean-Honoré Fragonard, imbued with the weird physical “offness” of Mannerists like Parmigianino. Falling in love helped, too. He didn’t want to act like an arrogant male artist anymore: “When I married Rachel, I just completely bankrupted that idea, because I was so happy that I *couldn’t* be that. I couldn’t do those things anymore.” In 2003, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago mounted a mid-career retrospective that eventually landed at The Whitney Museum, whereupon Levin reviewed it with a kind of mea culpa. “I was wrong, of course,” she wrote. “Currin’s work proceeds to skewer not only clichés of women and parodies of men—mock-idyllic Lolitas, pathetic lotharios—but art itself: high, low, good, bad, and ersatz. Masterpieces by dead white males fare no better than the vulgar pictures favored by live ones.”

In 2006, he tested his newly gleaming reputation by starting to paint porn: eruditely rendered paintings of nasty threesomes and serpentine tongue flicking and so on. It was like he couldn’t stand to be liked. Calvin Tomkins profiled him for the *New Yorker* two years into this phase,

documenting his process making paintings that he feared (and maybe secretly hoped) would make him loathed again. (The moment at which Feinstein reveals to Currin's parents in Connecticut that the paintings show penetration is like a Ben Stiller vehicle directed by George Cukor.) Why was Currin drawn to this imagery? John's father, James, told Tomkins that his son had a "screwy idea" that the paintings were really somehow about the 2005 censorship of the Danish newspaper cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, "but I think he did it because he could. I think he said, 'I can do this, and make people like it,' which is pretty much what happened. He made everybody but me like it."

Beloved again, and newly in the stable of power gallery Gagosian, Currin started to make a lot of money. He'd sold well in the late '90s, but Gagosian priced many of the paintings in the pornography show, his first with the gallery, for close to a million dollars. In November 2016, his 1999 painting *Nice 'n Easy* — of two laughing nude Boticelli blondes, whose Mannerist hands are thoughtlessly familiar in that ladies-who-lunch way save for one lasciviously placed on the other's Renaissance belly—sold for more than \$12 million at auction at Christie's. An artist's auction price is out of his hands, of course, but...that's a lot of money for a living artist. He wasn't the first artist to get rich, but he was doing it so much by design, and so much in public. As he told the Independent in 2008, "It helps to have a ton of money." Critics began to ask whether a provocateur could really be rich. And every time someone interviewed him, it seemed, they wanted to ask whether these paintings of women, who always seemed to be braying or purring, were maybe kinda sexist after all.



Currin's men are nubby and nobby. Untitled, 1994. Gouache on paper. © John Currin. Courtesy Gagosian.

Now, in the midst of a moment in which the art world, like many others, has been seized by #metoo, eager to topple long-held fortresses of power and rewrite the canon, we find ourselves at quixotic curve in Currin's Twombly-shaped life. Currin's male gaze is one of the contemporary art world's most infamous—which makes it particularly interesting that he's putting on a show about the times he's turned that gaze on his own sex.

"Part of the fun of doing this thing," he told me of the show, "is that there's something slightly pathetic about doing only a show of men at this moment. Like, 'I'm gonna get away with this because there aren't any sexist images of women!' You know what I mean? I think there's kind of a funny failed apology premise to it."

“I don’t think I’m a painter of male power,” Currin said. “I think when I paint men, it’s in order to make a beautiful painting of weakness.” He has a point. Because I mean, have you *seen* John Currin’s men? They are nubby. They are nobby. They are old and they look stupid. In his Jackass series, based on images from vintage *Playboy* magazines, he’s changed the adoring faces of the women so that “babes” gaze on at “hunks” in disgust as they roast hot dogs and play volleyball on the beach. Currin’s men wear clown makeup as they clutch or leer at women’s bazongas. Even the happy old couples—which he sort of hinted, fondly, are inspired by his future with Feinstein—are crowned with a dunce cap-like melting ice cream cone and a bottom-of-the-sea boot. “The heroic clown,” he calls his men.

Or take his panting *Hot Pants*, from 2010, in which a tailor gingerly takes his needle to a preening banker-type’s precious and bespoke pair of...tiny shorts. What a terrific painting, with technical feats like a glass ball and a gleaming black marble floor, and a palm branch peeking into the mirror as the man inspects himself, as if to say, “Seriously?” He said it’s inspired by another twinning of male iconographies he once saw in a cigarette ad—the guy who chases trends like hot pants, and the guy who stays “authentic” by pledging allegiance to Camel cigarettes. He loved this very dated image, he said, “of these fake stupid men, clowns, following the whims of whatever.”

This is what drives Currin: he’s always chasing images that represent an inability to be authentic, knowing that “the real thing” itself is suspect, too. Print ads from old *Playboy* magazines, an old TV spot where an idiot threatens anyone who dares to take away his Schlitz beer, male egotist archetypes from old biographies he’s read. In a span of two minutes, he goes from Hyacinthe Rigaud’s painting of Louis XIV to *Silence of the Lambs* to David Lee Roth—images of “almost violent power, combined with, I guess vulnerability or whatever.” It’s a man thing. “I’m not so sure that women dream of having a different persona the way men do, or the way I do,” he said. “Men are preoccupied with authenticity.” I think he’s right: women feel pressure to live up to some standard created by advertising, by media, by Hollywood—but the paradigm is that we’re sold products to improve ourselves. You know: maybe she’s born with it, maybe it’s Maybelline! Men don’t have the Maybelline option. You’re just supposed to be born with it.



A man clutches a beautifully rendered penis in the presence of a woman’s bazongas. Office Workers, 2010. Oil on canvas. © John Currin. Courtesy Gagosian.

For a man, you might be thinking, Currin doesn't seem to have a high opinion of men. But that's actually quite wrong. Currin seems to love being a man. (And how could he not?) "This isn't the only reason I paint men, but I think when I paint men, it's in order to explore some of my feelings, not so much about sex, but about painting, and about authenticity." American masculinity, he seems to suggest, is a premise that no man can ever live up to, and when he tries to (and he always will), it makes a fool of him. American masculinity is a concept with failure built-in.

It's the same with his paintings, with his being a painter—an American painter, which he calls "an oxymoronic idea." He said, "You can't really be a painter if you're American. You know what I mean? Just like you can't really be a man if you haven't been in battle, or if you haven't killed a man, haven't broken a horse." He laughed at the dumbness of these "tests" of manhood. "Any fistfights I was ever in were always sad and comedic, and it lives on, even at my age: a kind of insecurity or a feeling of authenticity as an American painter."



The terrific painting Hot Pants, from 2010. Oil on canvas. It was inspired by a very dated image, he said, "of these fake stupid men, clowns, following the whims of whatever." © John Currin. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagolian.

Currin is a great artist, but his technique doesn't approach that of European idols like Courbet, Van Gogh, or Poussin, who had otherworldly brushwork and sense of color and scale. In truth, no modern painter's approaches them—technical skills are no longer the unquestionable foundation for great art. Still, Currin has this hangup that European artists are somehow more "real," and that being an American figurative painter puts him in a strange place in the canon he plunders. "It may be just as fake in Europe and I can't see because I'm American," he said, but European art "seems to go back to like, King Arthur, you know? Or Rome. Greece. I mean, *the Renaissance*. It goes back to the beginning of Christianity." In America, he said, "my feeling is [that] the echo is so shallow that you amplify it. It's not going back to the Renaissance. It's going back to old ads you saw when you were a little kid. And the vastness is not of time. It's of this cacophony of pop culture."

So Currin's men are that insecurity manifested in portraiture: blurred and blotched and clown-y. "His baldness is more sensitively rendered than his face," he said of one. Obscured, hidden, and unassertive.

The other reason I know Currin loves being a guy is that his penises are gorgeous jokes. Perfect dick pics. The penises in his porn paintings, for example—“Those I tried to paint like portraits, you know?” He continued, “If you’re going to have a penis in a painting, it better be good.” Not because penises are powerful or great—but because penises are just funny. A breast is by nature beautiful. You can make it funny, but that’s not its natural state. But a penis is always a punchline, a perennial gag. “Whether it’s big or small or erect or flaccid, it’s always funny. It’s always goofy. It messes the painting up.” “Real artists” paint them like they’re incidental, like it’s just another line or a smudge of greenish and pinkish. Greeks, who loved beauty and humor in equal measure, always drew them tiny—do I remember? He drew me a tiny Greek antiquity-style penis so that I would remember. “Dink-dink-dink!” he said as he penciled the bitsy penis and two balls. Now that’s comedy.

Alison Gingeras, the curator of “My Life as a Man,” writes in the show catalogue that that Currin is precisely the kind of artist that artists and curators are siphoning out of the canon as they seek to reorganize it (the Twombly loop slopes down again!). In titling the show after a Roth novel, she was thinking of parallels in the censoring of visual art and literature: “I don’t know how many times I’ve overheard cocktail party chatter where some people denigrate the writings of someone like Philip Roth or Karl Ove Knausgaard purely on the grounds of their gender and claim they only read women like Elena Ferrante instead,” she wrote in an email.

So what do you do with complicated men like Currin? Can you recalibrate the narrative of art history, and the hierarchy of the contemporary art scene, without completely silencing the original narrative’s winners and stars? The premise of Gingeras’s show suggests that you find new ways of seeing them—and my conversations with Currin suggested that this may actually bring them to a new way of seeing themselves. Maybe it was because we had sat on a couch talking, but when he dropped me back at the airport, he seemed somehow relieved, and said our conversation had been really helpful.



Even the happy old couples are crowned with a dunce cap-like melting ice cream cone and a bottom-of-the-sea boot. Pistachio, 2016. Oil on canvas © John Currin. Photo: Todd-White Art Photography. Courtesy Gagolian.

Still, the crucial fact that makes the show something more significant—beyond its hilarious self-indulgence—is a sense that we’re reliving history. Despite all the progress it feels we’ve made, the fervor of cancel culture and an over-rigid insistence on political correctness have ironically returned us to the atmosphere in which Currin first emerged, when the early ’90s culture wars were in their final froth. Artists—like writers, celebrities, or anyone in a group whose power is being questioned for the first time, really—feel they have to be really careful about what they say and do. One wrong move and it’s over. No room for mistakes. Gingeras told me she was thinking about that parallel, too, “between the fierce PC atmosphere of the ’90s when John was emerging and our current ‘woke’ politics and cancel culture.” She added, “I admire John’s independence and his often self-effacing humor in this context—it’s easy to forget how to laugh in such times.”

I wondered if he was thinking that he might be subjecting himself to—or even inviting—a moral relitigation of his reputation and his work, particularly his early stuff. “I mean I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t, but, you know, I kind of have my ignorance and stupidity as protection in a way,” he said. “Everything you do, especially as time passes, you fear that kind of, *What was I thinking?*” He started to explain why he was making those paintings in the first Andrea Rosen show, stumbling into a kind of defense, and then a critique of defenses, and so I said, “I’m not accusing you,” I said. “I’m asking—”

He interrupted: “I’m more accusing *myself*.”

“It just seems like you think about these things,” I said. He’s a media obsessive, after all, with more than a passing interest in his own public persona. (In 2015, for example, he told Bill Powers he worries about upsetting Gawker.)

“I’m thinking about it,” he said. “Yeah, I mean, I made misogynist paintings at a time when I was having misogynist feelings and I don’t know if that should... Maybe that should still get me canceled or something, but I was simply trying to be an expressionist. Trying to be an artist, and trying to have my art speak back to me instead of bossing it around like a kid who won’t do what I say.”

But he insists he doesn’t welcome provocation the way that he used to, mostly because people get mad in such a flat way now, asking simply never to hear from you again rather than expressing their objections with the opportunity for you to argue back. “What they’ll say is, ‘Why do we need another...?’” That’s what he fears the most now—this idea that people will think he doesn’t have something to say, or that his white maleness might preclude his ability to. That “they just say, like, ‘We don’t need this anymore.’”

At one point, he mused that he hadn’t painted any men in a while, and maybe it was time. What happens is that he gets tired of painting all these women, “and I need to do a fast,” he said. Now he’s overdue for an “attack of men. Because it comes like a rash. Like shingles or something.”

“I could see it backfiring,” he said of the show, but he doesn’t think it will. I just hope it doesn’t make him so secure that he starts painting movie star hunks with tiny Classical penises.