

GAGOSIAN

DAZED

John Currin captures the desolate mood of porn as classical art
The controversial artist's latest exhibition, Memorial, immortalises peep show vignettes in the timeless appearance of marble

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John Currin, "Mantis" (2020), Oil on canvas, 74 x 39 inches, 188 x 99.1 cm © John Currin. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagolian.

"I find I can't get rid of my trashiness as an artist," John Currin once said of his provocative artwork. "A lot of my themes in painting, to the extent that there are intentional themes, are meant to bring that conundrum into high relief." Applying painterly skill comparable to that of an old master to scenes reminiscent of Pornhub thumbnails, the controversial American artist's new exhibition Memorial at Gagolian perfectly encapsulates that crucial complication that continues to make his work so compelling.

Known for bringing together the conventions of high and low culture, Currin once again subverts the canon by presenting a series of paintings described by the gallery as "sophisticated in

technique and perverse in subject matter”. Painted with a trompe l’oeil effect redolent of carved marble, Currin’s classical-style figures are exaggerated forms with gargantuan breasts and emaciated waists, contorting themselves with joyless exhibitionism across the canvasses.

Continuing his exploration of the erotic, Memorial evokes the gratuitous, desolate mood of internet pornography, depicting the cavorting characters’ vacant performances of sex in a medium more redolent of a mausoleum than a peep show. “Currin uses grisaille... to evoke the texture of marble,” the gallery explains. “He has spoken of the method as imparting to figures a funerary aspect, suggesting a meditation on death – or the demise of eroticism...”

With the detached air of classical nudes and their blank eyes devoid of pupils, Currin’s statuary figures look absently off into the middle distance as they pose pornographically in group sex scenes or lay prone with splayed legs, revealing Hollywood waxes. Bearing a deliberate resemblance to artist Rachel Feinstein – the artist’s wife and his perpetual muse, whose image recurs throughout his work over the years – their gaunt faces undermine the sensuality and caricature abundance of their bodies.

“Mantis” (2020) is painted in oils but, as with the other paintings in the series, seems to radiate the glowing quality of alabaster. A woman with impossibly disproportionate breasts and the reticent, downturned gaze of a historical statue gymnastically straddles a pile of naked bodies, beneath which emerges the impassive face of a woman whose renaissance-style hair curls and falls abundantly over the edge of the plinth... a fleeting scene from an anonymous sex tape, immortalised in would-be stone. “There’s the passing moment, and then there’s eternity,” says John Currin. “Two different kinds of time in one painting.”