

GAGOSIAN

BROOKLYN RAIL

John Currin: *Memorial*

Alfred Mac Adam

With the seven oil paintings in *Memorial*, John Currin embraces Mannerism in all its twisting, elongated distortion. The relatively true-to-life characters found in his earlier works have been replaced by grotesque, monstrous figures that wind eroticism into the obscene. Currin is the Pontormo of the Dark Side, but a parsimonious one who has here limited his production to seven works of great, if disquieting, power.



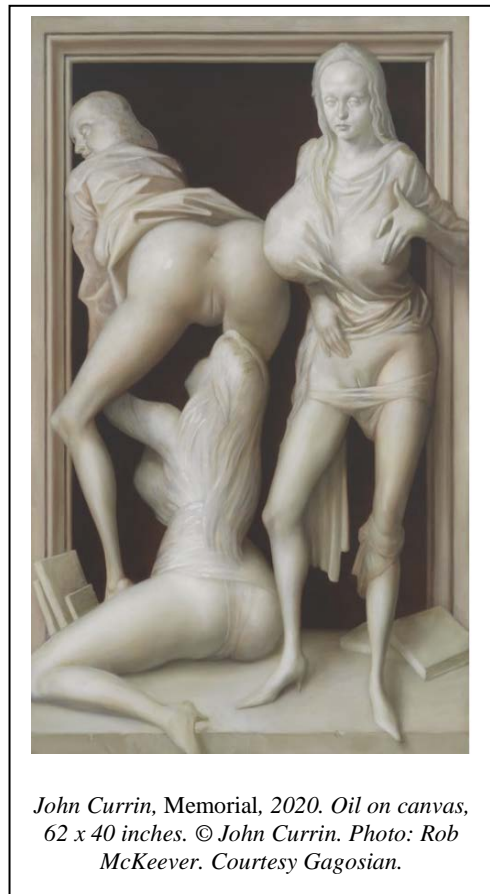
The show's title entails such a somber attitude toward the erotic that Currin might have appropriated one of Georges Bataille's titles and instead called it "Eros's Tears." A memorial is a reminder of someone lost to mortality — it is an idea that is inextricably bound to funeral monuments. These paintings included here serve as *memento mori*, urging us to realize how transitory our fleshly existence is, and how art, especially in its commemorative sense, is a provisional escape from death. Currin's use of grisaille—or faux-grisaille since some of the paintings do contain color—evokes a tradition that begins at the intersection of art and interior decoration. If the Renaissance patron couldn't afford real marble columns, then give him painted grandeur with trompe-l'oeil perspectives. Inevitably, the absence of color (or in Currin's case, the attenuated presence of color) conjures up the idea of the funerary and enhances the elegiac nature of the entire show. We are either in Eros's personal cemetery or experiencing a grim parody of the Medici Chapel.

Two examples might illuminate Currin's experiment with grisaille: Ingres's *Grande Odalisque* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Picasso's *Guernica*. In the 1814 Louvre version, Ingres's luscious model is full of life, powerfully seductive, while in the 1824–34 grisaille at the Met, she is a ghost of her former self, beautifully dead. Similarly, Picasso transforms the blood and carnage of the Spanish Civil War into a black-and-white news photo, not to reduce the horror of the event he commemorates, but to accentuate the finality of death. Currin, in turn, eschews the lively sensuality of the work he's best known for in favor of funereal grisaille, precisely to turn our thoughts to endings and last things.

The paintings, displayed on a single wall in the gallery, vary in complexity according to the number of figures they contain. First, beginning from the left, is *Sunflower* (2021). In his interview with Phong Bui in the September issue of the *Brooklyn Rail*, Currin describes the

figure's face as based on that of his wife, the artist Rachel Feinstein. He adds that the sunflower gives "a bit of life" to the painting. We beg to differ. The kneeling figure, with her oversized, pendulous breasts and skeletal legs seems to me a martyr—a Currin martyr, not holding the traditional palm branch, but a sensuous cut sunflower, itself a symbol of mortality waiting to be tossed onto a grave.

The second, *Caryatid* (2021), verges on Baroque composition. A fragmentary, incomplete angelic figure with blond hair, a halo, and red flames behind her enticingly fondles her left breast while sliding a hand around her uplifted leg toward her sex. Is she trying to arouse viewers, or to remind them that she's nothing but cold stone? The same false invitation to eroticism recurs in *Climber* (2021). Here a virtually faceless figure pulls back her gown so she can mount a figure below her whose left hand supports her partner's huge breast. The starry ceiling is cribbed from Annunciation chapel scenes, and Currin signs the work with a Durer-type panel leaning against a frame, inscribed "J. C. 2021." The horror of this frozen sex derives precisely from its fixity: instead of arousing passion, it simply renders it superfluous.



John Currin, *Memorial*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 62 x 40 inches. © John Currin. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagolian.

The stakes are even higher in *Memorial* (2020), the work that gives its title to the entire show. Here we have three figures: the two on the left are on the verge of sexual consummation, one bent forward, her buttocks and vulva revealed, while the other kneels on the ground, preparing to perform cunnilingus. The figure on the right looks—if statues can look—toward us, her underwear pulled down, her genitals revealed, her left hand poking her draped breast. This is Death as pimp, inviting us to join in the fun. Only there is no fun, just cold stone. Currin turns up the heat in *Limbo* (2021), which also includes three figures. The foreground figure is bent over backwards, her sex and anus visible. The other two—one with a colossal bosom, the ultimate caricature of that typically male fetishism of the breasts—stand behind. This is not the reduction of prostitutes to archaic sculpture or African masks that we see in Picasso's *Demaiselles d'Avignon*, but a denunciation of sensuality itself. The figure on the right wears an intriguing orange glove up to her elbow and her hair flows down like that of a repentant Magdalene, but there is no repentance here.

The motif of Mary Magdalene appears also in *Pinup* (2021). Here, a single, seated figure, her arms behind her head, proffers her breasts. To her left, the candle, in a

kind of Dutch candleholder that simultaneously provides a light source and contributes bright colors to the picture, blazes away. The skull usually included in pictures of the repentant Mary is missing because, again, Currin provides us with no possibility of repentance or redemption. This Magdalene does not need to contemplate death because she is death. Finally, we come to perhaps the most complex painting in the show: *Mantis* (2020). Here Currin parodies motifs like the Deposition or Pietà with a tangle of at least two figures. This composition combines the monumental with the fragmented, expressing sexuality through contorted and profoundly depersonalized bodily fragments.

It might be possible to dismiss John Currin, as many have, as a simple purveyor of libidinous images. This exhibition unmistakably proves that to be a grave error. The seven paintings presented here make explicit the inescapable link between eroticism and death—they are harrowing in their commitment to this insight. Flesh is indeed transient and weak, even if commemorated in painted stone.