

“Without all doubt, the torments which we may be made to suffer, are much greater in their effect on the body and mind, than any pleasures which the most learned voluptuary could suggest”

Edmund Burke, “Of the Sublime”

“There’s the passing moment, and then there’s eternity. Two different kinds of time in one painting”

—John Currin



JOHN CURRIN *Climber*, 2021 Oil on canvas,  
76 x 48 inches, (193 x 121.0 cm) CURRI 2021.0003

GAGOSIAN

A series of startling new paintings beginning in 2020 finds John Currin bringing his musings on intimacy, eroticism, and feminine and masculine identities into a fresh context that expands his repertoire of art-historical references while returning to the explicitly sexual imagery of his earlier work.

Reanimating the aesthetic of Lucas Cranach the Elder and Cornelis Engebrechtz, Currin brings dynamic, historicized figures into contact with a distinctly modern view of sexuality and the human body. He further complicates his graphic subject matter by giving many of the central figures the facial features of his wife, the artist Rachel Feinstein, a perpetual muse throughout his career. Through this visual invocation of his most enduring subject and model, Currin's paintings prompt a complex entanglement of personal, societal, and historical narratives.

In these paintings, the female nude stretches her supple body diagonally in front, and every part of her body is painted with such measure and diligence in endless pairs of opposites, which Currin has done before but never to this extreme - be it the large breast versus tiny hands and feet, small hands versus large torso, round forms versus pointed shapes, and so on. Knowing his love for Willem de Kooning, one can't help but to think of him as a



mediation between cubism and surrealism, especially de Kooning's works from the mid to late 1940s. For example de Kooning's *Fire Island* (1946), where the sense of motion and speed is implied by the necessary and novel distortions that correspond to the fluidity of linear constructions across the picture plane...

who too was interested in the idea of a figure in an interior. De Kooning let his impulses; his anxiety happen within that given space. He would often have painted a room with some ruled lines on

a somewhat visible grid, often including a window, which he got from Picasso, who repeatedly used windows as a common thread throughout his work.

## The Annunciation

1480–89

Hans Memling Netherlandish

On view at The Met Fifth Avenue in [Gallery 953](#)

Memling modeled this Annunciation on the left wing of Rogier van der Weyden's Saint Columba Altarpiece (now in Munich), but his innovative rendition portrays the Virgin swooning and supported by two angels, rather than kneeling. Like other fifteenth-century Flemish painters working in the wake of Jan van Eyck, Hans Memling cloaked religious imagery in the pictorial language of everyday life, paying close attention to naturalistic detail. This Annunciation takes place in a comfortably appointed bedchamber, though many of the domestic furnishings have symbolic



Currin says, “After having worked on the drapery, where parts were taken from [Hans] Memling, and it equally makes sense now that I think of the cutting sharpness and voluminous yet flowing style of the Flemish treatment of drapery lending its pictorial correlation to his recent interest in grisaille painting.”



Currin inspirations for the painting *Climber* included, for example, of Van Eyck's *The Annunciation Diptych* (ca. 1435) at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid.

Currin says, “Actually, I had a Flemish style drapery on the *Climber* for months, and he finally gave it up. I finally realized it wasn't working. The left-hand part is taken from Van Eyck, but the rest is stuff set up in my studio, done in a more-or-less realist style.”



To which degree on one or the other, it's hard to tell, but Currin mentions the painting by Jean Cousin the Elder *Eva Prima Pandora* (ca. 1550), in which the menacing female nude with strange proportions is depicted in exaggerated Mannerist style. These grisaille pictures, framed by all the edges, sculptural and funerary, present as monuments, yet showing no shame. In a way makes one think about what's going on in America, all the monuments being taken down, driven by the idea that people are threatened by these emblems of power that they don't have. People, acting with teenage rage, "vandalising" everything, statues of Lincoln in Spokane, the elk statue in Portland and so on.



As for the *Climber* and few other paintings, Currin says, "I have been thinking of and looking at Konrad Witz's panel paintings of *Synagogue*, from his amazing *Heilspeigel Altarpiece* (ca. 1435). Also, I wanted to include a window within the window so to speak, with a 1970s Southwestern sky

with horizontal strips of clouds in colour, which made it less about trompe l'oeil and more complex and contemporary."

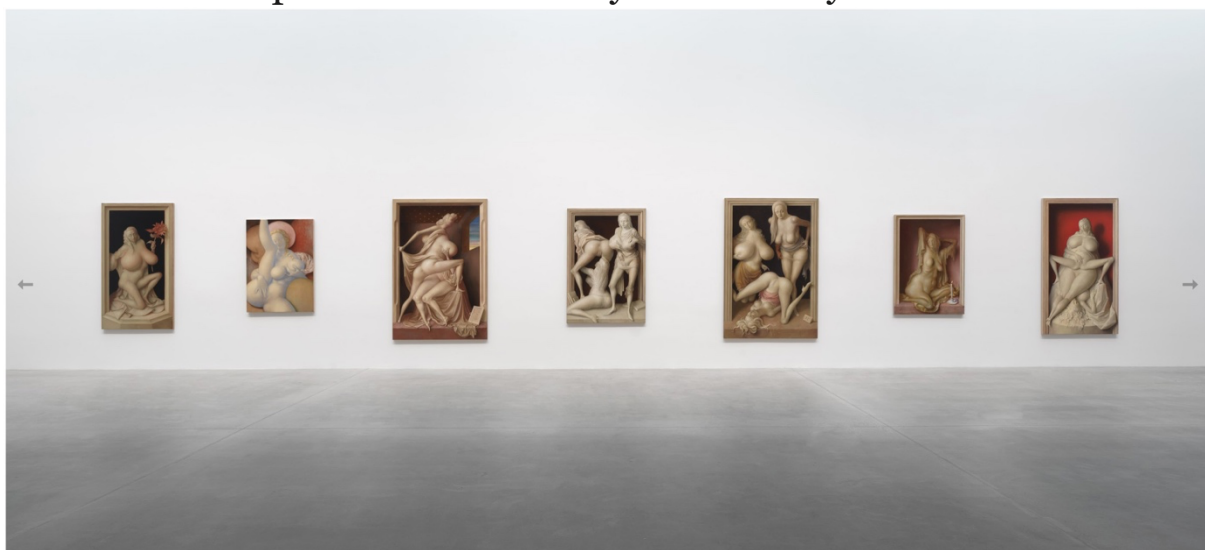
Again, one of the interesting things when one looks at these Witz paintings, everyone is clothed with this riot of drapery everywhere. When there is nudity, it's somewhat embarrassing. There's not much natural state of nudity, for it seems a little silly in making paintings of nudes who were elegant and comfortable in their natural state. It displays as both presentations of nudity that exist in our dreams, which can be both very exciting and very mortifying at the same time, and the nudity that gets portrayed in cartoons. It

prompts questions such as: what do men like? Is this what I like? Is that what women like? Do both men and women talk about what they like to each other? - questions that are Jungian in nature, with its preoccupation with the unconscious side of men and woman - their anima and animus.



Ludovico Carracci, The Lamentation, ca. 1582.

If you want to create a divine exhibition then just make seven paintings. The exhibition of seven paintings, *Memorial*, is a triumphant return to form, the paintings are reproduced with influences from an earlier work that Currin admires: *The Lamentation* (c. 1582) by Ludovico Carracci. Currin says he admires the painting partly because Carracci manages to show a very realistic body of Christ with a more stylized depiction of the mourners. The picture is both lively and deathly.



Currin says, “As a figurative painter, I’ve had to accept that I will never make a stylistically consistent work of art, so it’s pleasurable to see something similar occurring at the very height of the Baroque,” he says. “Carracci’s made something that has a mysterious physical presence: it’s neither flat nor real and, in a way, is dead and also alive the way Christ is.” Christ on the cross is of course the most dramatic image ever invented in art. Christianity makes realism necessary, in order to convey Christ’s suffering, how he died for our sins. The goal seems to be to intensify our humility in relationship to the world, to nature. It creates a spiritual quest to understand nature, in way other religions don’t anymore in the same way. Christ not being in the temple of his body, for his body betrayed him. The body is just a rotting piece of flesh that he generously decided to become, that so dramatic and so terrifying. Satan is everywhere, and God is nowhere near controlling things mathematically. It becomes a terrifying fractal, where the image is turning into stone. It is at peace and static because it’s not alive.

In looking at the *Climber* we find everything that has been associated with Currin work, issues of humour, irony, parody, caricature, satire, etc., etc. as most of would recognize as means to stress and stretch the nature of absurdity so present even more in these paintings—the contradiction that lies between substance and form, which can be easily misread as offensive to the “probity” of art, especially the wildly popular culture of political correctness we’re living through at the moment.

It is impossible not to feel a sensation of uneasiness that disturbs the mind and leaves an indelible mark on the psyche when engaging with these set of paintings.

In their extreme mannerism, they combine the beautiful and the grotesque, the sacred and the profane.

In my opinion, the *Climber* is a carefully constructed theatre set where the main protagonist is highlighted, and the “punctum” is the expressed diagonally from the anus, the hands squeezing the breast, to the celestial window beyond reach. The diagonally tilted plaque

(with a hole on it to put the nail through) further symmetries with the anus, and ultimately it is homage to the plaque on top of the cross (INRI). It signifies the mortality of the artist and his humility in relationship to the world, to nature.

Painters may orchestrate their paintings very carefully thinking that their secrets are safe. But with time they become over-confident of their ability to disguise and hide the truth, and from the audience not realising that the very means they use to conceal the facts not only make them more visible but, in most cases, even highlight them.

What a strange and wonderful painting! I really like it!

P.S Compiled from Gagosian press release, and excerpts from conversation of John Currin with Phong H. Bui (Brooklyn Rail), Sept 2021