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John Currin Is the Caligula of Painting

By Jerry Saltz

John Currin is the Caligula of painting. Someone whose work is so specifically fucked-up, perverse, shocking, visually insolent, menacing, and mesmerizing that as it puts us off, it also pulls us in. Our tastes often betray us as we find ourselves drawn to questionable things we know are problematic. That is where I am with Currin.

Everyone writes about his great skill. But that is ridiculous. Currin has no more or less skill than any good artist. To say his paintings are better because they're sort of Renaissance-looking is like saying a poem is better for being written in Greek hexameters or a bad opera is better for being produced at Bayreuth. Personally, I glaze over at all the smooth ye-olden labor-intensive historical rendering that goes into his work. Bram Dijkstra called paintings like these — visions of women as semi-comatose wanton succubi — “Idols of Perversity.” It's an apt phrase: Currin gives us the warping power of the curdled straight male gaze on culture, history, women, and even straight men themselves, twisting them — us, me — into noxious secret agreements with one another of tittering ridicule, leering laughter, glaring impotency, and insecure contempt. No one gets off on Currin's pictures of women with lute-shaped faces. Instead, we find ourselves observing a kind of male loathing, contemplating different rotted ideals of female beauty: the grotesques of Victoria's Secret models, deviant physiognomies of inflated sex dolls, empty-headed potbellied Renaissance maidens, tubercular Romantic heroines, Cubist torsos with X-shaped anuses and malformed breasts coming from every appendage. All male commodifications of female sexuality and subjectivity.

This 59-year-old mid-career artist has raised hackles since his 1992 debut. Back then, *Village Voice* critic Kim Levin called for his show of already fractious pictures of women to be boycotted. Meanwhile, the *New York Times* wondered if these paintings of women should even “be regarded as acceptable” at all. When he started showing his work, along

with his Yale colleague, Lisa Yuskavage, the art world hadn't seen representational work like this in ages, if ever. Currin blasted through Neo-Conceptualism, the cool of Commodity and Pictures Art, and changed what art about the body was by making it in a long-dead, non-modern figuration that had been relegated to the ash heap of academic art history. At the same time he scaled his work way down from the grand size of all that older work he was referencing or reviving and channeled a titanic dual irony and sincerity. The way we often feel, standing outside ourselves, looking in, while having genuine experiences. The irony comes in wondering how he can be serious about bizarre pictures like this? The sincerity is him earnestly pursuing this vision in this twisted older way of painting while also somehow making it seem new. This has always produced confusion and discomfort when looking at his work, always leaving viewers on edge, unsure of what to make of his subjects, be they his burgeoning race of contorted women or foppish idiot men in ascots unable to communicate anything or even aware that the world looks on them as incels and fools. What I make of them is something closer to the complex ways that the mind processes the world while trying to square it with fantasies, squelched desires, and bad thoughts. In many ways, neither we nor Currin have traveled far in regard to his imagery and the dated ways they're painted. By now, many see him as just a super successful art-world pariah making paintings for rich collectors. It's not so simple.

In his first downtown exhibition in 12 years, Currin is going all in on his almost-academic, anti-historical style, laboring like an ox over his compulsive, hyper-representational, semi-Surrealistic, neurotically freakish realism, albeit with new flourishes of unfinished painterly areas of canvas. On one wall of the darkened Gagosian gallery were hung seven flickering vertical paintings of sculptures of deformed, dolphin-shaped salamander-bodied women, seemingly sexless, without estrogen or breath, broken off from the world, ghosts. The gallery was often full and always silent. Viewers stood agape, furious, frightened, sharing glances at one another as if to ask, "What are these? Is it okay to like this? Don't you hate it?"

After each of my gallery visits, people stopped me both inside and outside to talk about these things. Most people liked the work; the ones who didn't loathed it in a way usually reserved for Jeff Koons. But there's been a change, whether from exasperation or raised consciousness. Where, once people might have disliked the work, they were now also judging the artist as evil or morally reprehensible. I was actually afraid to post pictures of his show on Instagram. When I did, most of the 700 comments I got were negative to scathing — many against me. Many wondered if newspapers would even be willing to run these pictures.

Each life-size painting depicts a trompe-l'œil architectural niche or reliquary saturated in strident light, bathed in russet color, painted in a hyper-illusionistic almost-academic old-master/Gothic patois of Cranach, Pontormo, Boucher, Mannerism, Rubens, Vargas Girls, Norman Rockwell, Andrew Wyeth, Odd Nerdrum, Botero, *Mad Magazine*, and bodice-ripper illustration. Keep in mind that these are not, per se, paintings of women. They are paintings of sculptures of women or forms cast in ash. This gives the work an uncanny air of something eternal, always with us, ways we ennoble, imprison, and manipulate the female figure. Each gives us one or more of these captive fossilized female poltergeists, stripped bare, blatantly displayed, in a shallow suffocating space. Nothing else can exist in these traps. We are as far from the warmth of any human sun as I recall in contemporary painting.

The paintings recall numerous historical tropes: painting cycles of the seven virtues and vices, female figures carved in architecture, twisted tomb guardians, sacrificial damsels, prostrated penitents seeking salvation, Kama Sutra temple couples, sheela na gig figures of women spreading distorted vulva, writhing Venuses, Daphnes turned into Laurel Trees to escape the male grasp, and other feminine colossi. In some ways, Currin's depiction is not that different from all these things we accept and revere. Each of his figures exists in a limbo of invalidism, enervation, atrophied mythology, Arcadian dreams of bathing beauties, and all our endless Modernist nudes by riverbeds, in parks, beds, stripped naked facing us, or masturbating. In one of the best three paintings here, *Sunflower*, a woman sits on a shrouded seat. She is a psychically devastated corpse. One of her feet is deformed into a high-heel shape, the other atrophied, neither able to support her bulk. These figures cannot move. Her waist is emaciated, belly distended, her mind a silent howl of stasis. She wears sheer garter belt and sagging stockings, holds a withered pinwheel sunflower, and looks down from eyeless sockets. As with many of Currin's females, her breasts are gargantuan, just rounded mastitis masses. Her withered face, like a lot of the faces here — which can throw you for a loop when you think about it — is that of Currin's artist wife, Rachel Feinstein.

In addition to *Caryatid*, an almost Pontormo-meets-van-painting ballerina-Madonna-angel imprisoned in the painting, the other real masterpiece here is *Mantis*. We see an insect-vectored anatomy of a two-headed/two-bodied playing-card figure with splayed anorexic legs astride an upside-down, bent-over, big-hipped woman. She or they might as well be hippos with pincer limbs and useless arms. All the figures expose indented vulvas with no labial interface; breasts have no nipples. Here are exaggerations of all our classicized, Platonic, Greek, sexualized female figures, the spawn of thousands of years of male artists stripping women of or amplifying sexual characteristics, all without agency.

Currin has gone all in on his despised vision. What causes the slippages in the final impact of the work and leave it imparting pathos without utter originality or creating especially memorable images that stick in the mind's eye, is that he hasn't accompanied this with equally radical formal invention. That's where the problem is, where his art deliberately stands outside any discourse other than itself, forlorn, impressive, insolent, but possibly stuck in a metaphysical cul-de-sac. That is the enormous Achilles' heel to this art that can make it impossible for his foes to accept. His paintings stand mighty but aloof, isolated, clownish, self-parodying Gothic monsters that become so inward, elaborate, cartoonish, mannered, and goading that they can go flat. They leave you an easy way out. Compare these to artists like Marlene Dumas or Tracey Emin, who seem to vivisect their own souls and the souls of all women in beautifully complex paintings, or Carroll Dunham's coital pictures of couples in flagrante delicto or warring with one another. These artists go the distance formally *and* figuratively; their surfaces are physical, seemingly dipped into acid baths, and fabulously tattered with quagmires of paint that set their own optical weather systems in motion. That is the big difference. Currin's surfaces are satiny, smooth, and not physically alive or original. Thus, Currin is pursuing an impossible project: reanimating an implicitly museological, canonical form while using this extremely charged subject matter but not changing the way these paintings were painted. It would be like trying to revive Viennese waltzes: a form of zombiism. In a way, then, his so-called painterly "sins" are not his own but those of the fathers of this dead style. Imagine this Currin show but with Native American, Black, Asian, or Hispanic women. You can't.

But Currin's distorted female nudes are as old as art. Our first sculptural figure of a woman, *Venus of Willendorf*, circa 23,000 BC, has tiny feet, gigantic breasts, enormous hips, and a small head. Modernism picked up on all this and only made it worse, tearing women to jagged shapes and pieces, exposing female flesh from every side at once, inside and out, with faces shot through with madness. When we feel rapture over the gorgeous voluptuaries of Matisse's dancing nudes, or Picasso's angular sex slaves and seductresses, we are seeing females without labia or nipples, animalistic faces, bodies imbued only with the force of nature or mindless glee and need. Now, of course, we love this work and filter these disarticulated Modernist nudes through the acceptable aesthetic signifiers and signs of abstraction, high-keyed color, odd geometries, surrealism, squiggles, bumpy surfaces, and formalism. All of these are variations of the male gaze.

When I look at these pictures, I see all that. But also, something else. Myself, a lifetime of my own male gaze that triggers without thinking, ignores the people I look at, that sends me into deluded visions, silly fantasies never acted on, all with no personal agency, at the mercy of

something that I know is dehumanizing and reduces me to always to looking, wanting, feeling unseen, avoided — in a sense, rejected. An instant after this, the disenchanted embittered cycle of this kind of seeing ignites again. In Currin's sick images, I feel the condemning twangs of these secret truths, everyday emotional raptures from seeing the female form, knowing I am distorting these forms, that what I see are only my own enfeebled thwarted mating calls. I know that being absorbed with this work might be damning. Yet, I am absorbed, caught by some ancient inner tide, feeling things that I find alarming but alluring, sensations with temporary God-like presences of yet other kinds of beauty, followed by rejection and loss that will be the same the day after tomorrow as they were the day before yesterday. In this uninterrupted personal abbey and idolatrous palace, removed from life, enthralled to something beyond myself, always signaling the slightest shades of change, I feel the pull of an almost cosmically old bio-evolutionary optical-chemical drive and force.