



J O H N C U R R I N



PREVIOUS SPREAD: SUNFLOWER, 2021
Oil on canvas
173 × 91 cm

CARYATID, 2021
Oil on canvas
127 × 86 cm



CLIMBER, 2021
Oil on canvas
193 x 122 cm



MEMORIAL, 2020
Oil on canvas
158 x 102 cm



LIMBO, 2021
Oil on canvas
193 x 122 cm



PINUP, 2021
Oil on canvas
137 × 91 cm

FOLLOWING SPREAD: MANTIS, 2020
Oil on canvas
173 × 91 cm



While many took up jogging during lockdown, JOHN CURRIN painted alabaster porno nudes. The response was unenthusiastic. But, writes *Dan Nadel* after meeting the maligned master, the critics were wrong. Rather than celebrating our cynical world, Currin's *Memorial* cycle at once laments and transcends it

In September 2021, as we briefly emerged from Covid into a (still briefer) new world, John Currin exhibited seven paintings of luminously chalky *tromp l'oeil* female forms configured into impossible genital and sexual displays, and called the experience *Memorial*. It's not easy these days to make art that is, in every aspect, a sudden, enormous leap of imagination, so terribly beautiful that it sticks in a viewer's skull, and not for a day or a month but, in my sorry case, nearly a year. Harder still to hang it on a single wall, as though deserving of worship, in a psychically loaded Manhattan Gagosian room that was until recently a Mary Boone. In its entirety, the group, only just now finished and unlikely to be seen together again, is the most gutting art yet to emerge from pandemic life. The phenomenon of *Memorial*, for both painting and viewers, is rather like Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* as described by Geoffrey O'Brien:

"The film manages to be airy, spacious, sensually gratifying, without ever offering more than curtailed glimpses of anything like human happiness or generosity of spirit or even enduring satisfaction. The pleasures on offer are almost enough to make us overlook all that is lacking: real gaiety, authentic freedom, true faith in any of the social orders in which Barry and the rest are enmeshed. There is, for instance, a thrilling scene early on in which Barry and his cousin gallop through green countryside as they ride away from a duel in which Barry falsely believes he has killed a rival. For that one exultant moment, we can enjoy the excitement and unfulfillable promise of an adventurous future. Kubrick finds ways to film not only what his characters do but what they think they are doing."

When I write about art, I imagine what the artist is doing, what the artist thinks they are doing, and what other artists think that artist is

doing. This last category is what made me want to talk with John Currin. None of the interviews I read satisfied my curiosity, friendly conversations were mostly a shared sense of awe at how this group of objects might have come about, and the critics missed the point, indicting themselves or the artist himself. Contra Alex Jovanovich's review in *Artforum*, I do not think Currin has anything in common with a "cynical misogynistic worldview [that] helped get Trump into the White House." Currin is almost guileless, like ol' Barry Lyndon, and the worldview of the paintings is, if not hopeful, then wildly aware of the precariousness of human life.

Currin was already well traveled in the styles of porn and its most prominent cousin, advertising art

I came to this work having never quite grokked Currin's art. The "technical master + postmodern irony = sophisticated portraits of contemporary life" discourse around him I found annoying and somewhat ignorant. And while I don't doubt Currin's sincerity (to the relief of no one), I have wondered if perhaps he should always be taken at this word—if, per O'Brien, there is a split between what he thinks he is doing and what he is really doing. In *Memorial* what he's really up to is

not necessarily something he should, or needs to, verbalize. Nevertheless, we spoke by phone a few times and spent a long afternoon together in his airy Manhattan studio near Gramercy Park. Currin had recently expanded but not yet fully furnished the place, so it had the feel of an enormous den—comfortable sofas, copious books on Old Masters, a loose stack of reference magazines, a decent bar. A few small paintings were in progress, and nooks and crannies were littered with *Memorial*-related drawings, studies, and etchings, the latter of which are printed in a sleepy back room. There was no better place to roam and discuss a project that captured our moment and yet baffled its audience, and to some extent, the artist himself.

For Currin, the extremity of the sexuality in the series is the vehicle for a much larger field of play. The fantasy of posed women and men, genitals exposed and pushed together, is not uncommon—it's a particular bit of eros embedded in many of us. The paintings unsettle in part because while we are engaged with them via the twin reactions of "hot sex" and "misogyny," they declare that the fun is over. And not just in relation to the fucking, but to the entire erotic dreamscape, and, by extension, to our own carnal frolics. These paintings embody, in every way, the disaster of the contemporary moment. They are history turned to ash, sex made unrecognizable, the enlightenment held up for ridicule. Why do we need such things, given the news? I don't even think that's a valid question, but if I must: because they bypass our rational minds and cut to something universal that no amount of reading and listening can get to. That we find them distasteful is *our* problem, not the paintings'. Currin's radical *Memorial* contains his own and our shared histories, arising from a moment also described by Kubrick himself:



JOHN CURRIN photographed by ROE ETHRIDGE for BLAU INTERNATIONAL

“Drama is conflict, and violent conflict does not find its exclusive domain in my films. Nor is it uncommon for a film to be built around a situation where violent conflict is the driving force. With respect to Barry Lyndon, after his successful struggle to achieve wealth and social position, Barry proves to be badly unsuited to this role. He has clawed his way into a gilded cage, and once inside his life goes really bad. The violent conflicts which subsequently arise come inevitably as a result of the characters and their relationships. Barry’s early conflicts carry him forth into life and they bring him adventure and happiness, but those in later life lead only to pain and eventually to tragedy.”

First, Kubrick has perfectly encapsulated the American character as it crumbles in its gilded cage in 2022. And second, when I think of the person making these paintings, I think of Ryan O’Neal playing Barry Lyndon playing John Currin. Who else but someone dedicated equally to achievement and perversity could come up with these things?

When we sat for a while, Currin told me he was somewhat destabilized by his father’s and mother’s deaths in 2017 and 2018, and by the prospect of aging. He had cast about for different subjects and painterly modes, and wound up with a group of portraits featuring facial planes kneaded and pulled into distortions that shout, “It’s just pigment!” His *Philosopher* (2019) offers an implausible portrait of a woman, head swaddled, holding a somewhat floppy-looking bottle, her other hand wrapped around a blue shape indicating “vessel,” just above a knee that is woefully out of place. The paint handling shifts from area to area, but the form holds. In *Magus* (2019), the askew face atop a thickly outlined neck recalls the painter John Graham,

Currin remembers “yearning for color while I was painting these, fantasizing about making flesh.” Instead, the exposed genitalia, buttoles, and zeppelin-sized breasts act as color might have—bringing ever more information into the scenario, overwhelming the senses such that I stopped seeing “porn” and gave myself to paint.

Currin finished that first work just as New York stumbled, toppled over, and went quiet around March 13, 2020. Working on the paintings through the lockdown, he kept going, having little revelations that reinforced the larger one: “What if I turned porn to stone and put Rachel’s face on it?” He’s long added his wife, Rachel Feinstein, to his paintings, and in this case, he did so with an unusual impulse, telling me: “I didn’t feel bad about them. I felt protected by Rachel. In a sense I was using Rachel as a protective amulet. It was important, her presence in the paintings.” Her presence in *Sunflower*, which was the first painting in the installation—the arrangement of which was Rachel’s suggestion—is a kind of benediction. The “Rachel” being seems to be arriving at sentience in shades of pink and green, and holds a fuchsia sunflower that breaks the entire illusion. It is, according to the paint, quite alive, and subject, like nothing else in the group, to physics. *Sunflower* reeks of the intimacy of being in a family locked down together against the wind, its transgression only made possible by close and quiet quarters. The work is also redolent of the relationship between two artists, wife and husband, which becomes a secret at the heart of the paintings, standing in for all of us watching ourselves and our mates as we quiver and change, hoping only for a continued life, aware of the daily decay.

In *Limbo*, the tallest figure pokes her head

who looms over *Memorial* as another thoroughly modern artist whose fetishes enlarged and eroticized his paintings.

Currin was already well traveled in the styles of porn and its most prominent cousin, advertising art, when he ran across contemporary British cartoonist Art Wetherell, who, like many other jobbers in the 1990s and early 2000s, distended, distorted, and bent the human body far beyond the nightmares of any mannerist. Heads over legs, knees over feet, shoulders dwarfing arms. The stretching and bending of bodies in American comic books began innocently enough in the late-1960s as a search for a naturalism that mimicked how a photograph by, say, Garry Winogrand could capture the angles of a body in motion, hand pushing out from the picture frame. The late Neal Adams was the ideal practitioner of this mode of mannerist cartooning, having had the distinct advantage of being a draftsman trained in the ways of mid-century realism. Many of those who followed Adams, as with any style, mimicked the exaggerations without the understructure, and by the 1990s derivatives of derivatives dominated the field, like the drawings of popular superhero artist Rob Liefeld, who made virtually no attempt to conjoin logic, limbs, and space. So, too, went Wetherell’s images. In a recent interview, Currin said, “I’ve always thought you should look at the master’s students, instead of the master himself, where you can see their mistakes.”

Looking for new ways to position bodies, Currin adapted a drawing by Wetherell for a preliminary version of *Memorial*. That move more or less worked. But when the artist added his usual color palette, the painting became too loud for what was already a noisy arrangement of limbs and genitals—he deemed the picture “a humiliating failure” and took pause. It wasn’t until late-2019

that he looked at some process photos and noticed that underpainting—*grisaille* figures on a dark-brown background—felt to him like “a ghost of sex receding into darkness.” He remade the composition, recapturing the underdrawing, turning it somber. Two days later, Currin decided to paint the work entirely in *grisaille*, drawing inspiration from Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s *The Three Soldiers* (c. 1526–30) and stepping away from the irony that has suffused so much of his art. He remembered: “When you find that the way you paint can change, and then when little stylistic things can change a painting, your IQ is no help. You need to get dumber instead of smarter. On the other hand, you can do frivolous things that add to the painting, like Easter eggs” for the viewer to discover.

Faux-statuary became the big “dumb” idea, Wetherell’s panels became the primary compositional strategy, and then delights followed. The female faces are drawn from models, giving them an intimacy that is rebuffed by their frozen gazes. Viewed as *tromp l’oeils*, these “stone” beings profane Jan van Eyck’s *Annunciation Diptych* (c. 1434–36). It’s a basic illusion, a geegaw, that happily greets viewers. And then Currin began adding “goofball touches” to make the things even more enjoyable: “I made the vaginas into Brâncuși and the buttoles into eyes: the asshole Xs are like the heavy-lidded eye in Netherlandish art—you know what it is, but you know it doesn’t quite look like what’s painted.” These paintings do not function as remotely “realistic” portrayals of sex. Even on a physical level, the spaces, the bodies, gravity itself—none of it functions.

These bodily amalgamations are only comprehensible in a single chromatic range, with nothing to confuse the baroque arrangements.

“I’m having fun, giving that to people, and then making it serious”

out of the frame, but her cranium flattens, like a cutout. She wears a single muslin glove, hastily painted. Currin says the “Rachel” figure at left is inspired by Cornelis Engelbrechtsz’s *The Crucifixion with Donors and Saints Peter and Margaret* (c. 1525–27), which does add a certain additional perversity to the being weightlessly saddled with enormous nipple-less breasts and pointing, Christ like, to that dead-eye X and Brâncuși. That “JC” is marked on a little stone is cheeky and absurd, as though the artist had climbed in and left his mark, winking at JC all the way—and it calls to mind Jarvis Cocker’s great line from Pulp’s “Dishes” on *This is Hardcore*, for which Currin collaborated on the package: “I am not Jesus, though I have the same initials.” It’s the cheekiest and most self-referential of the paintings, representative for the painter of the “moment of recognizing that I’m having fun, giving that to people, and then making it serious.”

Unusually, Currin says he’s done with this cycle. “The moment has passed. The surprise is part of the point, and I don’t want to release Boston’s second record. You’re not gonna top *More Than a Feeling*.” This is the story Currin tells himself, complete with an ironic/sincere 1970s rock reference. Believe it or don’t—the paintings are what they are. Currin completed his *Memorial*

cycle in May 2022 with *Procession*, named for both the New Order song and the painting genre. Conceived simultaneously with *Climber*, in the center of which two figures meld with one another underneath a classic annunciation-scene ceiling and look out into a nice pastel field of color, the painting features a bulbous mass that extrudes from the back of the primary being. Atop the torso is a profile cribbed from Monet’s *Woman with a Parasol, Turned to the Left* (1886). In both, the face is a stand-in for recognitions.

Currin is rhapsodic about that Monet painting: “It’s like a hypodermic needle of emotion straight to the heart—the archetype of the remote mother.” After a pause, he added, “Maybe that’s too personal...” In the finale that is *Procession*, the figures are now rendered as glistening marble inhabiting a shallow, well-lit box. The artist’s initials are small and muted, and that slushy *Woman with a Parasol* face is now Rachel’s profile. Currin replaced the face of the unknowable mother with his wife, the mother of his children. In the upward sensuality of the pose, he asserts Rachel’s sensuality, and, he told me, he has also promised to relieve her of any further duty to appear in his paintings. She is not the mother/whore or virgin/whore of so much bullshit, but a mother/lover. Currin may have just found a way to subvert his own unconscious, to do both what he thought he was doing and what he had not been allowed to do: recognize the seriousness of death and the limitations on our vitality. Returning to that gray gallery wall in Manhattan, I would argue that *Memorial* begins with the life of *Sunflower* and ends with the final entombment in *Procession*, precisely bookending the collective, distinctly American journey through the plague years.



PROCESSION, 2022
Oil on canvas
193 x 122cm