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# THE CANVAS

MONTHLY



Mickalene Thomas's 'September 1977' (2021). Rhinestones, glitter and acrylic paint on canvas mounted on wood panel with mahogany frame. 110 x 92 inches. © Mickalene Thomas. From the artist's forthcoming exhibition at Lévy Gorvy, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the first chapter of a multipart exhibition that will unfold across four international cities throughout the fall that will present interconnected bodies of new work, ranging from painting and collage to installation and video.

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# Just Getting Started

Mickalene Thomas

By: Jacoba Urist



Mickalene Thomas. Photo by Tatijana Shoan.

**M**ickalene Thomas is taking over the world this autumn, and for her legion of fans, it can't come soon enough. After a twenty-year rise and recent meteoric inflection, the Yale-educated artist is the subject of an exhibition bonanza that spans three continents, celebrating her dazzling portrayals of the Black female form. Beginning early September, Levy Gorvy presents *Beyond the*

Pleasure Principle, a series of shows that will unfold throughout the fall, in the gallery's four flagship locations—New York, London, Hong Kong, and Paris— as well as at Galerie Nathalie Obadia, in the city's 8th arrondissement.

Known for rhinestone-studded, stylish collages, paintings, and staged photography that depict the Black female body's power and eroticism, Thomas challenges the traditional male gaze in art. In her iconic painting *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les trois femmes noires* (2010), three radiantly sexy Black women in richly patterned clothing stare defiantly at the viewer, upending gender and societal norms of the western tradition. This May, the luscious patchwork painting, *Raquel Reclining Wearing Purple Jumpsuit* (2016), set the artist's record at auction when it sold at Christie's 21st Century Evening Sale for a little over \$1.8 million— three times its high estimate – portraying her longtime partner, collaborator, and muse, Racquel Chevremont in 70's-era splendor. Other mixed-media and silkscreen portraits, as well as video installations, have featured Oprah Winfrey, Whitney Houston, and Michelle Obama. And in November, Phaidon will publish *Mickalene Thomas*, the first comprehensive monograph of Thomas's work, with essays by the artist, art historian Kellie Jones, and writer Roxane Gay. Taken together, it all adds up to a landmark moment, even for the prolific and critically acclaimed artist.

Ahead of her first show at Lévy Gorvy's New York headquarters, Thomas invited The Canvas to her Brooklyn studio for a preview of her paintings, many of which were still in progress. On a rainy night in late July, masked again for safety as the Covid Delta variant gathered speed in New York City, Thomas shared her thoughts with Jacoba Urist on the last 18 months of the pandemic, her Resist series, and how it feels to take the secondary market by storm.

*Interview begins ▼*



● **Jacoba Urist:** Let's start with how you've been preparing for these four monumental Lévy Gorvy shows this fall. As the gallery's press release explains it, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* unfolds in a series of related, overlapping chapters across multiple locations. So, the exhibition is an interconnected whole, but also one that has distinct elements in each of the gallery's locations across various continents?

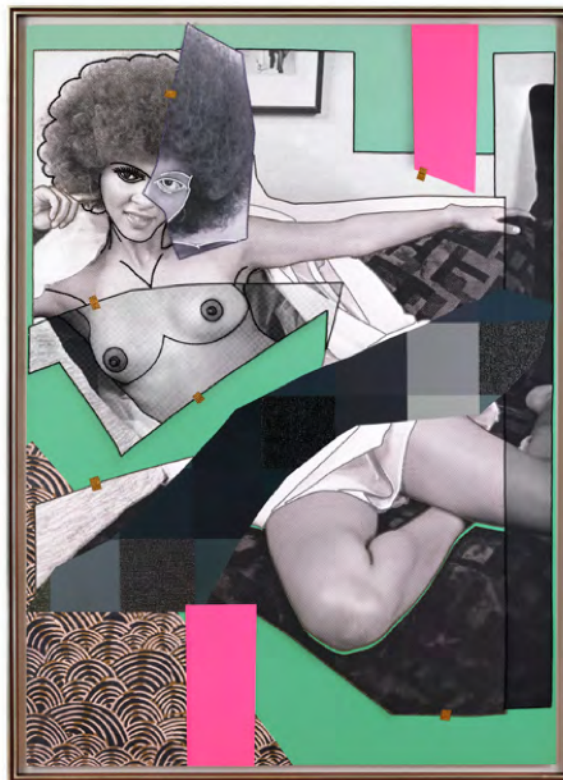
**Mickalene Thomas:** Yes, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* unfolds in a series of various bodies of work at different locations. They vary in execution and technique, but the concepts are cohesive. The shows connect thematically, dealing with ideas related to Black erotica, desire, beauty, and violence.

**Jacoba Urist:** In September, New York City opens first with large-scale paintings that reclaim images from vintage *Jet* Magazine pinup calendars. Later that month, London debuts your *Jet Blue* paintings. You've been exploring the iconic publication of Black American life in your practice for some time.

**Mickalene Thomas:** Yes, though not as relating to Black American life, but rather, more in relation to Black women's beauty, Black joy and Black erotica. The representations of Black women in *Jet* have always been a point of interest and I've used *Jet* magazine as a resource for my paintings since grad school. Throughout the years, though, my painting practice has primarily focused on working with women in my life and in the media. More recently, I decided to dedicate a series of collages and paintings that are based on archival *Jet* calendar pinups.



Mickalene Thomas's 'Jet Blue #25' (2021). Rhinestones, acrylic paint, chalk pastel, mixed media paper and archival pigment prints on museum board mounted on dibond. 84.25 x 61 inches. © Mickalene Thomas.



Mickalene Thomas's 'Jet Blue #30' (2021). Rhinestones, acrylic paint and archival pigment prints on paper mounted on dibond with mahogany and silver leaf frame. 85.5 x 61.5 x 2 inches. © Mickalene Thomas.

**Jacoba Urist:** I remember visiting your studio over three years ago for a cocktail evening you and Racquel hosted for a few art writers. *Jet* cutouts were all over that table behind you. There were hundreds of clippings everywhere.

**Mickalene Thomas:** I remember that. It was an open studio visit we hosted for the upcoming show I was having in Paris at Galerie Nathalie Obadia. I was working on the first series of *Jet* paintings. Over the years, I've collected many magazines and photographs of Black women expressing their sexuality. What you saw at my studio were clippings from calendars, prints, and other archival material used as resources for my paintings.

**Jacoba Urist:** When did you start the *Resist* paintings focused on Black American Civil Rights activism that viewers will see in Paris this fall?

**Mickalene Thomas:** My first *Resist* painting was created in 2017 for *Figuring History*, an incredible exhibition featuring Robert Colescott, Kerry James Marshall, and myself, at the Seattle Art Museum. Then, I was commissioned by the Baltimore Museum of Art to present one for their acquisition. This was during COVID, so I had a lot of material to use with the political nature of everything going on. I collected many images from Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter marches that I use in these works.

**Jacoba Urist:** Do you think people will see these canvases as a stylistic departure from your past work, where the Black female body is traditionally the focal point?



**Mickalene Thomas:** They are a slight departure. But still, at the center of this series is this idea of a Black woman as the protagonist. Black people – and particularly Black women – are resilient. All that is difficult in America was built on Black women's backs. So, even though the Resist paintings don't feature a familiar female figure like the Jet pinups do, these paintings represent the same conceptual core of the Black woman, the same woman who we see out in the streets today initiating protests. So, the Resist paintings aren't a literal depiction of protest, but they serve as a representation of the years of protest. I'm thinking abstractly, conceptually, politically, and socially about the impact of our mothers still finding within themselves the drive to lead after violently losing their children. I'm trying to think about the idea of what it feels like to hear your child call out your name as she or he is being killed.

**Jacoba Urist:** Your practice is known for drawing inspiration from Western art history, and the classical poses of artists such as Matisse and Manet. One of your most famous paintings, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* (2010), is a contemporary twist on Édouard Manet's 1863 painting. Yours, commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), portrays three fully clothed Black women, as opposed to the trio of nude female subjects in the original. For this new body of work, there are clearly echoes of Pablo Picasso throughout. Can you talk about that influence?

**Mickalene Thomas:** Well, the Picasso references actually started developing in my work several years ago, beginning in 2014. Since I'm also doing a two-gallery show with Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Paris during this presentation with Lévy Gorvy, I wanted the two shows to speak to one another. *Guernica* and *Seated Woman* spoke to me in particular when making both the Resist paintings as well as the Jet Blue collages, so it made sense to bring Picasso into the conversation as a kind of link between the two shows. *Guernica* is a perfect representation

of the themes in Resist – mothers with dying children, the war, death, and pain – and the *Seated Woman* series references the essence and posturing of the anonymous models in the Jet pinups. Also, I like to think of it as a way of claiming ownership of the Cubist art Picasso was himself appropriating.

**Jacoba Urist:** What was Yale like for you as an MFA student? Did you feel the institution, both professors and peers, were responsive to your voice and perspective?

**Mickalene Thomas:** Like for many Yale grad students, my term was challenging. Many of the faculty were rightfully critical. But despite it being tough, I had an amazing experience, and it was definitely a pivotal point in my life. I really used that time to experiment and explore some of the critical feedback from my professors and peers. To this day, much of my work is influenced by some of the criticism I received during that period. I have to say though, I think some of my peers had an even more difficult time than I did. I felt as though I was prepared for most of the criticism – often harsh – as I entered Yale as one of the few older students and didn't always take things as personally as some of the younger students. With that said, there were times I felt at a disadvantage, and sometimes even like an underdog in a sense, because a lot of them had more experience than I did.

**Jacoba Urist:** Do you mean more formal art experience?

**Mickalene Thomas:** Yes, formal art instruction. But regardless of the little formal training I had, I worked really hard. So many of them were on a trajectory where they knew they wanted to be artists since the age of seven. But once I got to Yale, I really made sure to listen to most of the criticism and all the advice I could get. I tried always to have an open mind when a professor made a constructive suggestion as I was very eager to learn and to allow myself to grow as an artist.



Mickalene Thomas's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les trois femmes noires* (2010). Rhinestones, acrylic, and enamel on wood panel. 120 x 288 inches. © Mickalene Thomas.





Installation view: Mickalene Thomas: *Better Nights*, 2019 Multimedia installation Bass Museum of Art, Miami, Florida. © Mickalene Thomas.

At that time, I wasn't trying to make a beautiful kick-ass painting. I was just trying to make some-thing that I understood and that made sense to me visually, an image that could create impact whether the response was negative or positive. I was experimenting like crazy with different ideas and trying to get as much feedback as I could while I was under their guidance, so that when I left, I had something to push up against while in my studio.

**Jacoba Urist:** You were extraordinarily busy before COVID, with the immersive multi-room show, *Better Nights*, at the Bass Museum, which opened for Art Basel Miami Beach; and your installation, *A Moment's Pleasure*, at The Baltimore Museum of Art. What was it like when the art world and the city came to an abrupt stop?

**Mickalene Thomas:** When January 2020 came around, Racquel and I were thinking of how we could create a space for the two of us where we could just be and reconnect. There was so much traveling that we had no time for ourselves. But then COVID happened—and time was thrust upon us. It was very intense, and it allowed us to take care of ourselves, to take care of our personal, professional, and shared lives. I've been extremely fortunate and thankful that I had the time and space to think creatively and make work in an open and beautiful environment away from the city.

**Jacoba Urist:** Shifting gears, this past spring, you set two major records when *Portrait of Jessica* (2011) sold for \$1.5 million at Phillips and *Racquel Reclining Wearing Purple Jumpsuit* (2016) sold for \$1.8 million at Christie's evening sale. Both had estimates in the \$300,000 to \$600,000 range. What was it like seeing the auction results?

**Mickalene Thomas:** Normally, I don't watch auctions, but I watched one of the record auctions live online. I'm not em-

barrassed to say that I was thrilled, because I feel I've worked damn hard, and it's been long overdue. My work is well made and has substance and is rooted in many art-historical concepts and life. My work doesn't fall apart. It holds up to what it's meant to be and what it's worth. And so, it felt validating. Although, I can't help thinking that it would have been nice to be able to participate financially in that validation.

It was definitely rejuvenating. Even though I've exhibited internationally, there are many collectors who aren't familiar with my work, and up until recently, my secondary market was basically pa-thetic and nonexistent. But with the new auction records, I feel like I'll be on more collectors' ra-dar, and they will help spark more interest in my work. It's the beginning of a new, mature second-ary market.

I'm just scratching the surface, and it's nice to move into the next tier. Will I be there forever? I don't know. I'm excited about the current momentum. My work hasn't changed. It has evolved, but when you compare earlier works to later works, the richness, impact, and depth of the concepts are still there. I've developed a vision in my work that is expansive. There's real life in my work that I present to the world and collectors respond to it.

**Jacoba Urist:** Were you surprised by either number?

**Mickalene Thomas:** Yes, a bit surprised. For various reasons, those two paintings happened to break records. They are different sizes from different periods in my career. Personally, I think that *Racquel Reclining Wearing Purple Jumpsuit* should have sold for more, and that the collectors put it up for auction too soon. It's an amazing painting with an incredible exhibition provenance and it's an incredible painting of my partner, collaborator, and muse.



Mickalene Thomas's *'Racquel Reclining Wearing Purple Jumpsuit'* (2016) which sold for \$1.83 million at Christie's *Rhinestones, glitter, flock, acrylic and oil on wood panel*. 96 x 144 inches. © Mickalene Thomas.





Mickalene Thomas's 'Portrait of Jessica' (2011). Rhinestones, acrylic, and enamel on wood panel. 60 x 48 inches. © Mickalene Thomas.

**Jacoba Urist:** Artists have been talking more openly about collectors, and how they feel about where their artwork ends up, whether owned by those with certain political points of view or as part of a particular museum collection, given the makeup of an institution's board of trustees. What are your thoughts on that aspect of art making?

**Mickalene Thomas:** There are some collectors whom I have developed wonderful relationships with, whether they're new or seasoned, and I really welcome and respect those relationships and conversations. Then, there are collectors who have bought my art over the years and supported all aspects of my career and practice for a very long time. They show up at exhibitions and collect various series of my work.

I'm not privy to all my collectors' politics. The art world is a complex and a deep rabbit hole with all different kinds of people. The collectors I respond to are those who treat me with respect. And at the end of the day, my main focus isn't even the collector, but the viewer and my artist peers. I like to think that the collectors who are investing in my art are dignified and have a conscience in some form. Mind you, I'm speaking of specific collectors who follow my trajectory and buy from each series. Those are the ones I gravitate towards, because as I grow and expand as an artist, as my ideas shift and change, they are riding the wave with me.

**Jacoba Urist:** Is it hard to find serious, supportive collectors like this?

**Mickalene Thomas:** Good people are rare; good collectors are few. I think a lot of artists have many kinds of relationships

with collectors. Quite frankly, collectors prefer to hang out with artists, but there's no need to hang out with or intimately know every collector who owns your work. The most rewarding relationships for me are those with collectors who are excited about my growth as an artist.

**Jacoba Urist:** From your perspective, what aspect of the art world is most in need of immediate change?

**Mickalene Thomas:** The secondary market needs to change in terms of artists receiving residuals or a percentage of sales. It seems like the NFT market has challenged and shifted how artists receive some benefit from secondary sales, and I think that's interesting. I think of residuals for artists like a 401(k) plan. If artists received even 3% of the resale, it would financially support many of them during slow periods in their careers or their estates. For artists with strong secondary markets, this would be a game changer.

“I've worked damn hard, and it's been long overdue.”

**Jacoba Urist:** Do you mean in terms of artist resale royalty rights?

**Mickalene Thomas:** Yes, resale royalty. The only person left financially out of secondary sales is the artist. Everyone else benefits: the gallery, the auction houses, the sellers, and the buyers. I talked earlier about auction records and feeling like I have just scratched the surface and entered new tiers of my career. But there are still collectors and tiers that I haven't reached. There are many more tables I need to sit at; and I'm looking forward to it one day. It's really about longevity for me. There are more mountains for me to climb. Will I reach those tiers or mountains in my lifetime, or will it be my estate? I don't know. There are certain areas of the art market that some artists never experience, and I'm only just entering some of those markets now.

**Jacoba Urist:** Artists often build their own art collections by trading work with other artists. Is that something you do?

**Mickalene Thomas:** I generally don't like to trade. It's rare for me. I've been burned by an artist I traded with early in my career. The artist sold the piece I traded at auction. So, I prefer to purchase artists' work in which I'm interested if I can afford it. One would think that there'd be an unspoken rule between artists not to engage in that sort of thing. I never imagined the artist auctioning a traded piece. But times have changed. For every artist that wanted to trade with me, I would have a stellar



collection of art by now. I'm still a bit jaded and scarred by the earlier experience. But even with my apprehension, I'm in the middle of doing a trade with an artist I highly respect and admire. Now I'll only trade with artists I truly adore.

**Jacoba Urist:** You also have a collaboration for autumn with the fashion and art publication *As If* magazine. What role do you have in this issue?

**Mickalene Thomas:** The magazine is highlighting the global exhibition in the way a catalogue would. Instead, it's a magazine. My main role is similar to a creative director: selecting contributors, assisting with layout, making final decisions. It's a limited-edition publication coinciding with *As If*'s issue #20. I've handpicked actors, filmmakers, art historians, and writers – all kinds of people from various art fields. I'm thrilled to collaborate with *As If* on this. They really are artists themselves and have impeccable vision with a wide range of distribution.

**Jacoba Urist:** After a staggering fall roster like this, will you take a beat? How do you re-charge?

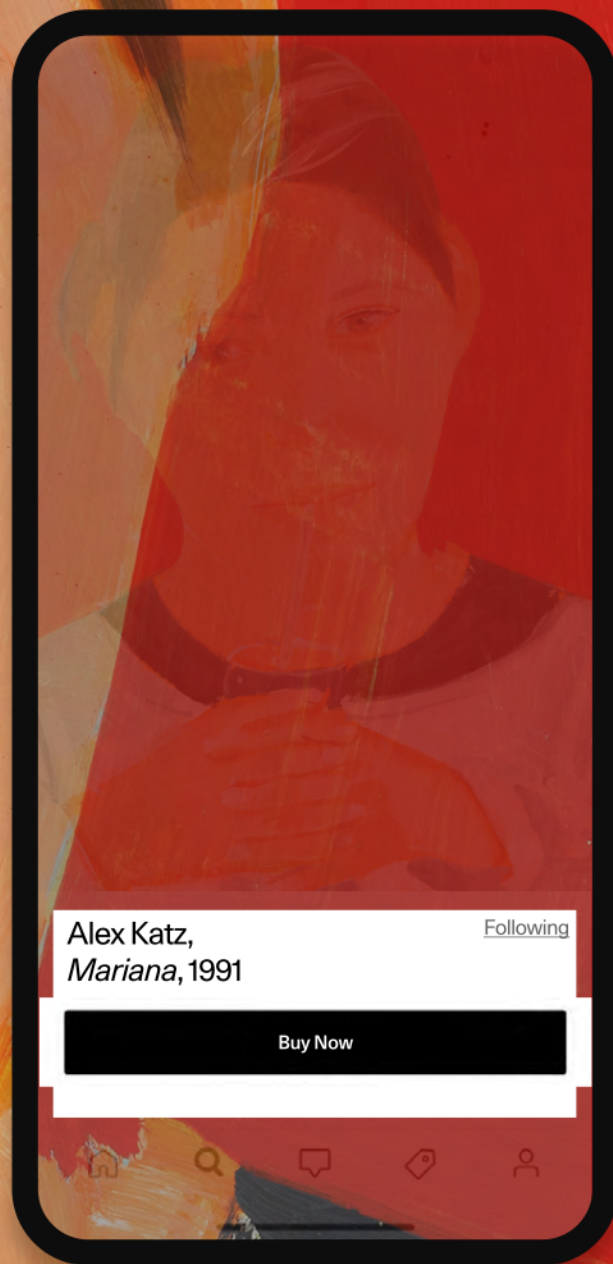
**Mickalene Thomas:** Of course, I'll take some breaks. It's important to rejuvenate. Self-care is crucial, so I'll be mindful of what my body and spirit need by being in the moment. ■



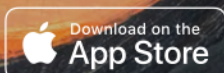
Mickalene Thomas's 'June 1977' (2021). Rhinestones, acrylic and oil paint on canvas mounted on wood panel with mahogany frame. 86 x 72 inches. © Mickalene Thomas.



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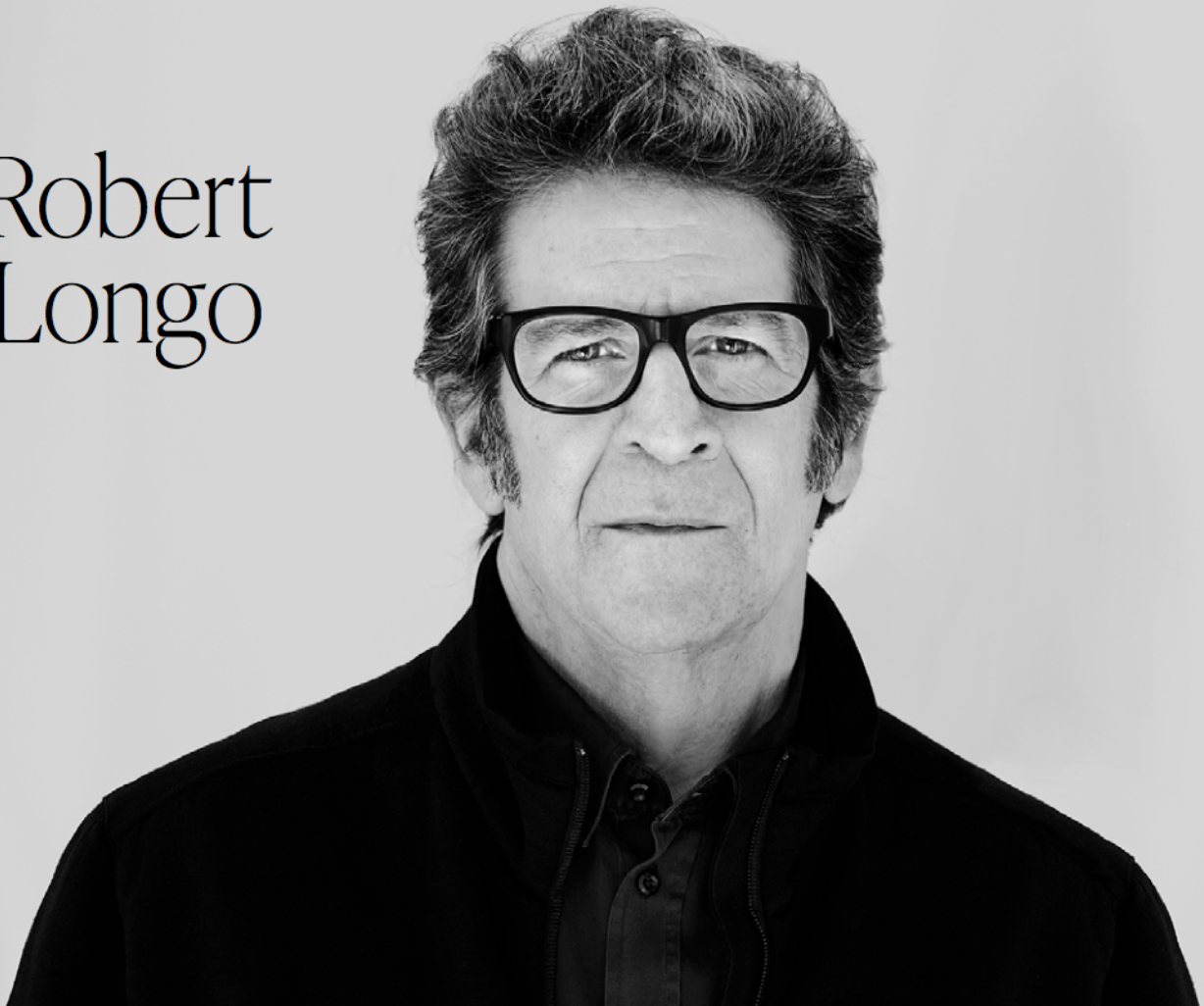
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# Ready for *His* Closeup

Robert  
Longo



*Photo by Martin Kunze.*

**A**head of his debut exhibition at Pace Gallery later this month that will showcase the final installment of his Destroyer Cycle, Robert Longo opens up to *The Canvas* for a frank conversation about the role American politics plays in his art, how he went about determining which gallery to join after it was announced that his longtime home, Metro Pictures, would close at the end of this year, and his place in a rapidly changing artworld.

● **The Canvas:** Thanks so much for taking the time to speak with me, Robert. I wanted to start by discussing this upcoming show at Pace, your first since joining the gallery. You've chosen to show your large-scale charcoal drawings without glass, which is a fairly unusual decision for you. What drove that choice?

*Robert Longo:* This is actually only the second time I've chosen to present these works without glass. The first was back in 2014 for the 'Gang of Cosmos' exhibition at Metro Pictures, which centered on my drawings of well-known Abstract Expressionist paintings. At the time, I was just tired of people saying, "I really love your photographs." So, I decided to flip things around and make it as ironic as possible by presenting them without glass so that people would then come up to me and say, "I really like your paintings."

But look, I think these works are incredibly beautiful without the glass. I remember having this interesting conversation with [Anselm] Kiefer. I had asked him where he grew up because his art is filled with all of these objects and pieces of junk that we associate with the post-World War II image in Europe. I was curious about whether he actually grew up around all of that stuff day-to-day when he was a kid. And he said, "Yeah, I played around destroyed buildings, hollowed out tanks, bombs, all of that stuff." It made me think about what I grew up with and I came to the realization that it was television. All my images are in black and white and behind glass because I'm very comfortable with images presented that way from my childhood.

Normally, I'm very conscious of how my works reflect into one another in the context of an exhibition. But this group of six works is small enough that I could present them without glass while still controlling how they interact with each other. This show at Pace is the fruition of the last 20 years of work in bringing this medium of charcoal drawings to such an insane point of perfection. I want people to actually be able to get up close and feel the texture of the charcoal and see the whiteness of the paper.

**The Canvas:** This particular show draws inspiration from news photography and footage from this past year. Generally speaking, it seems like a lot of the images in the 'Destroyer Cycle' series gravitate towards American politics as a subject matter. I've been reading through a number of your past interviews, and the sense that I get is that through your work, you often grapple with America's place in the world and what it means to be an American – and a proud American – in today's world. Would that be a fair assessment?

*Robert Longo:* Yes, and what it means to be a white male American today. To be honest, it's hard to be a proud American these days. America as this concept of a highly diverse democracy is this incredibly brilliant idea, but unfortunately, we're not living up to the ideal. More and more it just feels

like white people are freaking out that they're losing control. Politics has become this form of organized hatred where it's begun to feel like one giant abomination of hatred, envy, and corruption. It's a really weird moment for the country.

For a long time, I thought America was the one place that had real hope for the world because it was this incredibly diverse country where all kinds of people came together regardless of race or tribe or religion. But it seems like what's ended up happening is that since the Civil War, the United States has become almost like a sports team.



Robert Longo's 'Untitled (Ferguson Police, August 13, 2014)' (2014). Charcoal on mounted paper, 86 x 120 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York. Collection of The Broad Art Foundation.



Robert Longo's 'Untitled (St. Louis Rams / Hands Up)' (2016). Charcoal on mounted paper, 65 x 120 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

**The Canvas:** A sports team? I'm going to need you to explain that one...

*Robert Longo:* After the Civil War, so many men in the United States lost a sense of camaraderie that they had as soldiers, where each man was considered your brother and you had each other's backs. I think a similar sense of camaraderie exists on a sports team. And I think that men in this country



have looked to sports to fill that hole after practically every war we've fought since. Baseball was the first one after the Civil War, with its agrarian roots in the field and taking place during the harvest season. Football rose to prominence after World War II with the industrial boom in the US, where everybody had a job and these very formally prescribed positions. And basketball as a sport has become micro-managed, in a way that's similar to tech companies.

What's most frightening about this idea, though, is that America then becomes all about what you hear these people chant at all of Trump's rallies. I mean, what's the main goal of a sports team? It's to win. And I think that's the problem that exists in this country today. When 9/11 happened, there was no attempt to try to understand why America had created so much pain and hatred in the world. We simply viewed it as the other side scoring a goal against us, so now we had to come back and score 1,000 against them. So, when Trump started talking about America "needing to win," I was just thinking to myself, "Win what?"

But back to your original question. Yes, my work does often feature political subject matter, and I think my activism really started when I was in high school. I was the hippie football player who wore double zero on his jersey. And then, during the Kent State riots, a kid I went to high school with who graduated the year before I did – Jeffrey Miller – was shot by an Ohio National Guardsman. It was his body that Mary Ann Vecchio is kneeling down and screaming over in John Filo's famous Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph. That image continues to haunt me to this day, and when I first saw it, it was the first time I realized the power an image can have in making people feel something.

**The Canvas:** As a culture, though, because we're bombarded with so many images on a daily basis, it almost feels like increasingly, each individual image loses its impact and potential to affect someone.

*Robert Longo:* You're right, we are bombarded with images, and what's interesting is that people genuinely think they're processing what they're seeing, but because of the speed at which we're hit with all these images, they're not. The irony is that more information creates the opposite effect. People look, but they don't really see.

I think that's potentially one of the reasons that most of the images I work with are composites based on images that I have bought and altered and changed. In this show, there's only one image which I altered very, very little – the one of the insurrectionists at the Capitol – and I give credit to the photographer. To me, that image is just so fucking surreal. It's truly bizarre. There's this hand with an iPhone that comes in from the side of the frame to take a photograph, and the

rioter actually looks like he's posing for the picture. That's the drawing that I've decided to make the last official installment of my series, the 'Destroyer Cycle.'



Robert Longo's 'Untitled (Insurrection at the U.S. Capitol; January 6th, 2021; Based on a photograph by Mark Peterson)' (2021). Charcoal on mounted paper, 92-1/2 x 134 inches. © Robert Longo, courtesy Pace Gallery.

**The Canvas:** That drawing was the one that was featured on the cover of New York Magazine a couple of months ago even though it was still in process, right? I'm curious; talk to me a bit about not necessarily where you draw inspiration from, but how you eventually choose an image to recreate and composite from this vast sea of material.

*Robert Longo:* I think, in a way, all artists are searchers. I mean, I wouldn't really classify myself as an appropriation artist anymore –

**The Canvas:** An "image thief" was how you've described it in the past...

*Robert Longo:* Yeah, I'm way past that now. Back then, my work was about this idea of the 'loss of the real.' Now, I'm trying to make things that are realer than real. I'm trying to make images that are hyper-real. They're beyond photorealistic in that sense.

What happens with my work now, is that I get this vague, weird idea about an image that I want to make, and I then begin searching for images to piece together. I got it in my head that I wanted to make a drawing of a car crash at NASCAR because I think NASCAR basically serves as a form of war propaganda in this country. I think it's very representational of the stupidity of the United States, where people just sit there and watch cars go around and around in circles using up an enormous amount of gasoline. So, that image of the NASCAR car crash is a composite showing the cars going in one direction, one car crashing and spinning up in another direction, and the people in the crowd looking a totally different way. In a way, I like to think of it as this gigantic Abstract Expressionist



painting because I feel like my work can, in a sense, be highly abstract. A lot of these images are composites because I want them to feel to the viewer like memories.

**The Canvas:** In a way, it almost seems like you're attempting to create this feeling of déjà vu. When I think of a NASCAR crash, your image is somehow exactly the one I'm thinking of even though it doesn't actually exist in real life. That's an amazing effect to have on the viewer.

**Robert Longo:** Exactly. I want to take these disparate images and transform them to make them iconic. That's the challenge.

Look, the concept for this show was borne out of an idea of doing drawings of all the places we couldn't physically go at the beginning of the pandemic: empty school rooms, empty stadiums, empty movie theaters... Eventually, I came across this one image of an empty stadium that had a sort of haunting beauty to it and decided to focus on that. Then, I began toying with the idea of the origins of the pandemic in the first place. It's possible that bats were involved, so my original intention was to do a diptych with the bats hanging above the stadium. But since that would've been 18 feet tall, I ended up separating them and putting them side by side, instead. So now, the viewers will see the possible origin of the pandemic with its consequences directly next to it.

Then, after George Floyd was murdered, I was seeing all these images of people assaulting Confederate statues with graffiti. I mean, what kind of a country has statues of traitors, anyway? So, I decided to do a drawing depicting the graffiti-covered surface of the only remaining Confederate statue on Richmond, Virginia's Monument Avenue. It's covered with all these different tags that I had to learn the meanings of; for instance, BLM for 'Black Lives Matter,' or ACAB for 'All Cops Are Bastards.' I just found it all to be so incredibly beautiful.



Robert Longo, 'Untitled (Robert E. Lee Monument Graffiti for George Floyd; Richmond, Virginia, 2020)' (2021). Charcoal on mounted paper 96 × 146 inches.  
© Robert Longo, courtesy Pace Gallery.

**The Canvas:** If it's alright with you, I want to move on for a bit from the show at Pace and broaden the conversation. I read somewhere that Robert Wilson once gave you the advice to never leave New York City as you'll always feel the urge to come back. In a way, I do think of you as a quintessentially New York artist, so were you surprised by the extent to which people seemed willing to just desert New York when all the lockdowns first started last March?

**Robert Longo:** Honestly, I think I got to the point where I realized that New York City is highly overrated. I've started to live part of my week out in East Hampton where I have a studio in which I can experiment and develop new work that nobody else will see. I can make a fool of myself and have fun and not be judged. But when I come into the city these days, it's purely to work. At this point, I think of the city as almost a kind of hard labor camp.

**The Canvas:** I hear what you're saying. But try and go back to where your mind was before you and Cindy first moved to New York City in the late '70s. Do you think New York still has a future as a vibrant cultural hub for artists? Or do you think that the cost of living has made that pretty much impossible for young artists today?

**Robert Longo:** Back when Cindy and I were at school in Buffalo, the explicit horizon was New York. It was a no brainer that we absolutely had to come here. I remember reading about Caravaggio, who was raised in a town in Northern Italy, but ended up having to move to Rome because if you wanted to make big paintings during the Renaissance, then Rome was really the only place to be. At the time, moving to New York was almost like that, in a way.

Now though, with the way the world is, with the internet, I don't know. I mean, to be a young artist right now is really tough. If I were a young artist just starting out, I don't know that I would consider actually moving to New York a necessity. I think the art world has really changed, particularly over the last 10 to 15 years. I mean, Metro Pictures decided to close precisely because everything has changed so much.

**The Canvas:** I was wondering who would bring up Metro Pictures first. Of course, a lot has been written and said on the topic. I'm curious to hear your take on some of the factors that led to the decision to close Metro Pictures at the end of this year.

**Robert Longo:** When Helene and Janelle first opened Metro Pictures back in the '80s, the artworld was kind of similar to a gang war. I always joke about how we should have had leather jackets with the names of our galleries stitched on the backs and had street fights with each other. Mary Boone and Metro Pictures seemed to be at odds all the time. I always viewed Schnabel and all of those artists as showing what art was and us as showing what art could be, and yada, yada, yada.



I don't need to tell you that it's not like that anymore. And ultimately, I don't think Helene and Janelle wanted to deal with the complexity and scope of what a gallery is supposedly expected to encompass these days. They just felt that it was better for them to step aside, at this point.

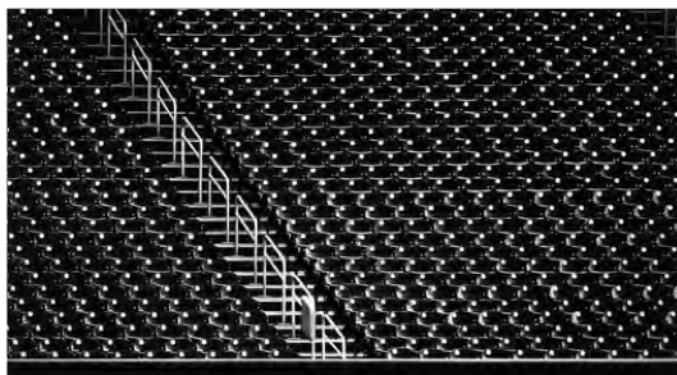
The problem is that for both Cindy and me, they're practically family. They were anti-gallerists, in a way. They always emphasized the art first above everything else. They never told you if you had sold something until the gallery actually received the money. They didn't want to participate in all that meaningless hype. They were very straightforward, very involved in the art, and they knew our history.

In the end, I'm really glad that I stayed with the same gallery for so long, but it really is a whole different world out there. The scope of a gallery these days is viewed through the prism of how many locations it has around the world. I remember my European dealer, Thaddaeus Ropac, explaining to me how he monitors where my work is sold throughout the world by using a map to track which areas see rising demand and therefore need more supply. I never even thought about it that way – and maybe that's a bad thing – but maybe it's pretty much just the way I am. To relate it back to your earlier question, the first place I always want my work to be shown is here in New York. But these days, the art world is all about thinking globally.

“Back in the ‘80s, the artworld was kind of similar to a gang war.”

**The Canvas:** It's interesting to hear you talk about that global perspective, and how galleries are categorized these days by the number of locations they each have around the world. Dealers often tell me that artists grow tired of showing in the same gallery space year after year and use that as one of the justifications for opening up more and more spaces. I'm curious if you ever had that issue in all your years at Metro Pictures?

**Robert Longo:** I did, in fact. I was getting increasingly uncomfortable with showing in that space. It seemed like every show I was doing was the same show, only with different pictures. It began freaking me out to such a point that when they decided to close, my decision about which gallery to join next seemed to be driven less by what the gallery could do, and more by which gallery had the best space to showcase my work. Of course, that was incredibly naive on my part.



Robert Longo's 'Untitled (Baseball Stadium, 2020)' (2021). Charcoal on mounted paper, 65 × 120 inches. © Robert Longo, courtesy Pace Gallery.

**The Canvas:** So, if you don't mind my asking, how did you eventually land at Pace as your next gallery?

**Robert Longo:** It's ironic, because Metro Pictures was right next door to Pace for 25 years, but I had never met Arne Glimcher until he came to my studio fairly soon after the Metro Pictures news came out. He was just really fucking great when he came here. I mean, here's this guy who is part of the history of the New York artworld, and he just seemed to get the work, which felt great. Then, of course, he explained to me that he doesn't run the gallery anymore and that I'd have to meet his son before making any decisions. So, I started checking out Marc, and at first, I wasn't quite sure if I would like this guy; he seemed pretty intense...

**The Canvas:** Very different from Arne...

**Robert Longo:** Very different. But then I met him. Honestly, he reminded me so much of my friends growing up on Long Island, who were these really bright, smart, passionate, honest, little Jewish kids, who I, as the lone Catholic, somehow ended up becoming friends with. And I just felt very comfortable with Marc. I knew immediately that he was my guy. It was just a no brainer.

Look, I have a really great European gallery; I absolutely love Thaddaeus. He's elegant and passionate and savvy. But at the end of the day, I didn't want another European gallery to replace my representation in New York, I wanted an American gallery. Marc has an extraordinary global vision, and at the same time, he intuitively understands my work and what I'm trying to accomplish, so I trust him. In fact, he was the one who initially encouraged me to show these drawings without the glass. So, needless to say, I'm very happy with my decision.

**The Canvas:** Thank you for talking about that entire process so openly, Robert. Not many artists are always willing to do so. I have a few more questions that I want to get to before I let you return to your day. In the past, you've talked about how drawing is viewed as this “bastard medium, which is always in a brown room in the basements of museums.” Do you still feel that to be the case?



Robert Longo's 'Untitled (Capitol)' (2012–2013). Charcoal on mounted paper, 120 x 450 inches. Courtesy of the artist; Petzel, New York; and Metro Pictures, New York.

**Robert Longo:** I do, yes. It's always funny when I tell somebody I make charcoal drawings because they have this idea in their head that I'm making these tiny little sketches rather than monumental works.

When I first started making really big art, one of my mentors was Richard Serra. I remember getting really drunk with him one night at an opening at Metro Pictures, and we started talking about big art. He encouraged me to never give up on it. Now, whenever we see each other, he always whispers in my ear, "See, you're still making big art."

Eventually, I realized that making big art is a way to challenge the idea of ownership. A person has to really, genuinely, want something if they're willing to take on something of that scale as a responsibility. I joke that I make my images really big because in America, big is always considered good, but the fact is that the subject matter is also really big. I need to take these images from the back pages of the newspapers and put them in front of the viewer to give them the gravitas they deserve.

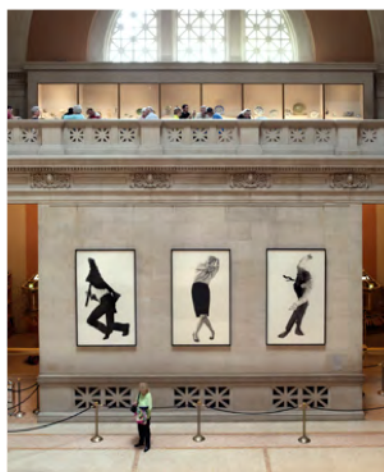
**The Canvas:** I want to read a quote of yours from an old interview and get your take on it now: "People know my work from the last 10 years and that's what I've become known for. Some of the young guys who work for me now pick up some of the books on my bookshelf and say, 'Oh, you're the guy who made that.' I started realizing I have enough history that some of it has been forgotten." Especially considering that this show at Pace is the final installment of your 'Destroyer Cycle' series, have you given this idea more thought?

**Robert Longo:** One of the interesting things is that if you're fortunate enough to establish an archetype, you eventually end up losing authorship of it. 'Men in the Cities' can be seen

everywhere, in iPod ads, in *Mad Men*, in fashion. Once it left my studio, I lost control over it. In a way, it's flattering, but it can also be quite weird and surreal.

**The Canvas:** Obviously with the caveat that it could 100% change tomorrow, at this point in your career – Robert Longo in 2021 – is there a particular series or body of work for which you'd like to be remembered? Would it be 'Men in the Cities?'

**Robert Longo:** You know, the other night at dinner I was talking about how in publications like Jansen's art history books, artists get remembered for one image. So, Jeff Koons will be the bunny. Cindy will be the black and white movie stills. And yes, I will be 'Men in the Cities.'



Installation view, *Men in the Cities*, Triptych "The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984" Great Hall, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY 2009. Photographer: Eileen Travell © Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

**The Canvas:** And are you at peace with that or do you wish there were...

**Robert Longo:** Hey, as long as I'm in the fucking book, that's all I care about. ■



# Betty Blayton



## *In Search of Grace*

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Image: Betty Blayton, *In Search of Grace*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 30 × 30 inches (76.2 × 76.2 cm) © The Estate of Betty Blayton. Photography: Timothy Doyon.

# Votives, Shrines, & Devotionals

## A Conversation *With* John Currin & Maria Arena Bell

By: Maria Arena Bell

**F**ull Disclosure: I've been a friend and collector of John Currin's for many years. So, when The Canvas asked me to write about the upcoming show of a friend, I feared that I might be a bit too loving an audience to objectively relay the work. I've always been drawn to John's art from the first time I saw his black background nudes of the late '90s, to when I came across his grotesque and comical paintings that somehow conjure up Picabia and Mannerism, but with a pop culture twist.

John and I are about the same age, so our references – things like his painting 'Bea Arthur Naked' – have particular resonance to me. I love the mastery of his paintings, the assuredness of the technique even when he's attempting to be "bad." John is not just the product of an extensive education in art. He also lives and works with other artists who have profoundly influenced



John Currin photographed by Richard Prince. Courtesy Gagosian.



him, not the least of whom include his friend Lisa Yuskavage and his wife Rachel Feinstein. He's a man who loves and respects women yet paints images from pornography in the style of Parmigianino.

Gagosian compares the new works in his upcoming show, 'Memorial,' to marble statues, but there's much more than statuary, or religious or pagan imagery at work in these paintings. There are paradoxes and humor in the work, as there is in John himself. He's a complicated man and an artist on a search. The paintings I was able to glimpse in his studio ahead of this interview look like some of the most amazing pieces he has ever made. So, disclaimer aside, I loved the opportunity to get a sneak peek into what he's been working on for the last three years and to have an incredible window into his process. John's shows of new work are few and far between. Amazingly, it's been 20 years since John first showed in Chelsea and almost ten since his last show in New York. John spoke to me by telephone from his home in Maine where he was still reworking paintings.

*Interview begins ▼*

● **Maria Arena Bell:** I'm so excited that you're doing this show, John! I saw on the Gagosian Instagram earlier today that this new body of work resembles renderings of marble sculptures, in a way. But now that I've had a chance to look a bit closer, I see that while it may at first appear that way, that's not really the case. Bill and I were just in Rome where we saw an extraordinary show of Marbles from a private collection. I clearly see in your new works a reference to classical sculpture – the Greeks, Romans, and Renaissance...

**John Currin:** The images may be sculptures but they actually refer to paintings – and specifically the paintings on the outer wings of an altar piece featuring grisaille saints in the niches. So, these new works are somewhere in between. Some are more sculptural than others, but I think the idea of them as more formal, somber presentations, lacking the appeal and the joy of living flesh is what really interested me. Especially with this subject matter, and the way it ends up morphing into this combination of funny and tragic, that is something that's always appealed to me in painting.

**Maria Arena Bell:** They relate to themes we have seen in your work before where there are some elements that are exaggerated and some that are shrunken. For instance, the painting on the left with the candle... It almost appears that the female figure is like a candle herself, with the drapery dripping from her.

**John Currin:** Incidentally, the candle isn't painted on there yet. I painted it on clear plastic to test it out first, and as usual when I do something quick like that, it ended up being the best candle I've ever painted. Rachel had just held up a candle and I painted it quickly...

**Maria Arena Bell:** And is that because she was kind of drippy...?

**John Currin:** The old lady we bought this house from had these lovely old candle holders. The figure in the painting started as a pinup and then she turned into this moldering wood sculpture enmeshed in ragged drapery. I thought it would be interesting if some of these had votives almost as offerings. Lisa Yuskavage once suggested to me that in Catholic shrines people leave things like flowers, candles, and beads, so I thought about that with these paintings. This is the only one I really did that with, though. It's tricky incorporating candles into my art... Richter owns candles... Urs Fischer owns candles... But I do think I can get away with putting the candle in like that.

**Maria Arena Bell:** The background of the painting with the climbing figure has an almost Italian futurist or De Chirico feel to it with the stars, the setting, and the drapery...

**John Currin:** De Chirico gladiators inside a room, yeah. I worked forever on that drapery. It was a kind of shattered jumble of triangles, parallelograms, and polygons that's often featured in Flemish drapery. Rachel had done these works

in terra cotta with little shoes on them that she made in the porcelain factory in Nymphenburg, but I thought it would be nicer if it looked like one of her rococo stands. In fact, I was working on that one today and I changed it a bit. I changed the frame around it to ivory and it alters the painting quite a bit. It has that Sunday church feeling of melancholy that I like very much. It's depressing, but in a cool way.



John Currin and Rachel Feinstein at the Whitney Museum of American Art's Inaugural Dinner and First Look in 2015. Photo by Neil Rasmus. © BFA 2021

**Maria Arena Bell:** I get that. I was just in Sicily and in and out of old churches where the paintings all have this faded quality to them. I think this painting taps into that and forces the viewer to really question what they're looking at.

**John Currin:** It also reminds me of a Scandinavian woodwork like in a Persona or Bergman movie where the characters wander around these weird mansions where all the woodwork is either white or cream.

**Maria Arena Bell:** It feels like a memory, in a way. It's from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. When you see the hand squish into the flesh at a point, you're left wondering whether it's marble or wood that makes up these figures.

**John Currin:** The woodwork was from a German saint painting. I wanted it to feel modern but, at the same time, very old.

**Maria Arena Bell:** They're in a frame, but also not framed, and yet somehow, they're also seemingly coming out of the frame...

**John Currin:** That's an illusion that is delightful to look at and quite fun when it occurs. It's not really all that hard to



achieve, but there is something really satisfying about it, nonetheless. When a painting has a convincing illusion like that, it almost has the same effect as a satisfying card trick or something.

**Maria Arena Bell:** The three figures feel like the pornographic series, but the figure on the left resembles a Venus.

**John Currin:** That painting has a sort of Art Deco fluted masonry to it, almost like a fancy Park Avenue building from the '30s. I didn't want it to feel ancient. I wanted to homogenize the figures and make them work together, so I stained it so I could come back with a grisaille to make them ghostly. It looks like old drippy wood, and yet it was inspired by these pornographic cartoons from the '80s and '90s by this one guy who has a really unusual drawing style. Somehow, their inherent silliness quickly melts away.

**Maria Arena Bell:** It's a very classical painting with its triangular structure of three figures – and it clearly looks like a classical painting – and yet, it's derived from cartoons.

**John Currin:** There are some obvious references, too. The three witches for instance, and the famous Mantegna oil on panel of Christ's 'Descent into Limbo.' Christ is walking against the wind with his robes billowing backward as he's halfway into the blackness of the cave. It's a frightening and haunting image and I wanted to incorporate some of that into this piece. I don't have it yet, but I soon hope to. It's actually why I like the Art Deco frame for the painting. One of the first scary movies I ever saw was *House on a Haunted Hill*, do you remember it?

**Maria Arena Bell:** Oh my God, yes! I was super scared by that movie as a kid.

**John Currin:** It's one of those classic haunted house movies, but rather than the house being Victorian or Gothic, which would be the usual stylistic choices for a haunted house, it's this modernist Art Deco cement house in LA. It's awesome!

**Maria Arena Bell:** Some of the figures are in a deco-like setting and some are in a classical frame or setting. Then, of course, the figures themselves have the exaggerations that are a theme throughout your work. Are these figures related to that earlier work with physical exaggerations?

**John Currin:** Yes, the figure on the right has these pendulous breasts that I found really funny. And then the Venus on the left also has huge breasts, but the figure on the bottom resembles a crab. I didn't invent the scenario, but rather saw it somewhere else and repurposed it. There was something about this guy's cartoons that seemed able to easily shift between the absurd and the serious. I hope other people can see it, but I'm not entirely convinced they will.

**Maria Arena Bell:** These paintings definitely have a scary quality to them. If you look at paintings of saints, they're often quite creepy. Have you heard about this kind of breast-shaped cake that's sold in Sicily? It's a tiny round cake in the shape of a breast with a cherry on top that's sold in Palermo at a bakery that's in a convent and run by nuns. The story behind it is just dismal. It's about this saint who had her breasts cut off as a punishment.

**John Currin:** Oh, Saint Agatha, of course.

**Maria Arena Bell:** I mean, how could someone take that story and think, "This makes me think I should make a cake."

**John Currin:** There's a beautiful Veronese painting in which she's holding a platter with her breasts on it. She's in so much pain, and it's easily one of the most horrifying images I've ever seen, yet somehow, the cake is kind of comical. I don't expect other people to find the humor there, but for whatever reason, I do. Pornography is the most pagan imagery you can come up with, and I thought of these works as trying to combine Christian and Pagan imagery and sentiments.

**Maria Arena Bell:** One can see the classical in the arrangement of figures, like they are the three graces or some other version of the gods. But also, the paintings that have three figures call up the threes in Christianity: The Holy Trinity, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. What are the specific references?

**John Currin:** When I went to the Archaeological museum in Athens that has all the Greek and Roman Sculptural artifacts, I was totally shocked when I saw what looked to me like images of the Madonna, the Holy Mary, and Christ. I mean, these things are all from 400 B.C. But when the Italians dug this stuff up, they decided to appropriate all this Pagan imagery as Christian symbols. So ultimately, the two can't be separated. They saw it, they used it, and that's the way I feel when I incorporate the same images into my work. For instance, take the painting I just did of the figure with the big breasts holding the sunflower.

**Maria Arena Bell:** Her face reminds me of Rachel's...

**John Currin:** That's because it IS Rachel's face. I wanted to accentuate her age and have an unidealized Rachel. Rather than depicting a saint holding her cut off breasts or the wheel on which she was killed, this is more like Artemis. It's a Pagan fertility goddess, but she's holding it like a saint. When looking at your wife, you realize that she is both a fertility goddess and a saint. She bore my children, she suffers for my children, and she suffers for me. She's not a saint in the sense that she can do no wrong, but rather through her suffering. She suffers for sex, she suffers for motherhood, and she suffers for her art. Those are the echoes I'm trying to show in this painting.

**Maria Arena Bell:** It's about fertility, the harvest, and abundance. But I was thinking that painting the background black was also such an interesting choice.

**John Currin:** I had been thinking about that and vacillating back and forth, and eventually I ended up talking to Lisa Yuskavage, who encouraged me to just go for it.

“She is both a fertility goddess and a saint.”

**Maria Arena Bell:** It reminds me of the kind of black backgrounds in your nude paintings.

**John Currin:** But those didn't have black backgrounds. They were blue and other colors mixed together. Black is a fucking huge commitment. It's a commitment as a pigment, and it's problematic as a paint. Nothing will stick to it, you can't really amend it, and you don't want to paint anything over it. I've since discovered that the latter isn't really true, but nonetheless, it's like burning a bridge. As a painter, I've always been afraid to use black.



John Currin's 'Nice 'n Easy' (1999). Oil on canvas. 44 x 34 inches. 111.8 x 86.4 cm. © John Currin. Courtesy Gagosian.

**Maria Arena Bell:** This is a huge and rare commitment for you.

**John Currin:** I've never liked black because if you paint over it, it will eventually crack apart and alligator. Picasso may be able

to do that, and have it look great each time, but whenever I use black, I treat it almost like a separate material. So much emotion goes into a black background. My black background nudes were a blue and a brown mixed together. This is pure black, like Kerry James Marshall uses to paint people in his work. When he does it, it's so beautiful and brave.

I've been working on the painting next to it for three years. This was not taken from the cartoonist, but rather a pornographic picture from 1991. I made a quick drawing of it and then turned it into this pseudo-Indian sculpture.

**Maria Arena Bell:** Three years is a long time. Are you ever able to feel finished with a painting? Or is there a part of you that feels like a work is never really complete. Every time I reread something I wrote, for instance, I feel like there's still more to be written.

**John Currin:** My regrets are never that I didn't do enough work, but rather that I did too much. Or that I did it in the wrong sequence. Or that I didn't finish it quickly enough. I often become so preoccupied with tackling the hardest element of a painting first, that I delay, delay, and delay. Instead, I should focus on getting all the easy shit out of the way as if the painting has to be delivered that night.

Fake your way through and when the moment comes, you might surprise yourself. There's all this stuff you feel you can do because you're technically skilled and you can get away with waiting, but then you become paranoid about the magic part of it all. But if you just follow your impulses, that often leads to the extraordinary. Inspired impulsiveness!

**Maria Arena Bell:** Exactly. It's that moment in the writing process where you keep getting stuck, decide to get up for a cup of coffee, and when you come back, the solution to what you were having difficulty with is waiting right there.

**John Currin:** Sometimes I think to myself, "Just paint a fucking shape. Make it visible. Don't get psyched out that you can't do it." Sometimes, you just have to close the fucking deal.

**Maria Arena Bell:** I remember talking to Rachel at one of your last shows – I think the pornographic show – and she mentioned how sad she was to see these very personal paintings – of your kids, of her – leave the house. Because you're not the type of artist who just cranks out paintings one after the next.

**John Currin:** I wish I could crank things out! There's no virtue in not cranking out art. I often find myself thinking that I should have cranked out way more bad paintings over the years. On the other hand, I still stay up late at night regretting the bad painting I made in 2012. But I've come to look at them almost like investments, really. You put all your pain into those paintings.



**Maria Arena Bell:** So, are you sad when they eventually leave the house?

**John Currin:** There's a certain sadness to it. It's like sending them off to boarding school unsure of whether you'll ever see them again. On the other hand, though, you don't want them living at home in the mother-in-law suite when they're 30!



John Currin's 'Nude with Raised Arms' (1998). Oil on canvas. 46 x 34 x 1 1/2 inches. 116.8 x 86.4 x 3.8 cm. © John Currin. Photo: Fred Scruton. Courtesy Gagosian.

**Maria Arena Bell:** Then that plays into Rachel's comment about your last show. These paintings represent a specific time and era in your life, and it sounds like you – like all of us –struggled these last few years.

**John Currin:** Yeah, I started this one painting the year my dad died. It's the most unresolved. I still haven't finished it and it's very emotional. I do love these paintings and I have a lot invested in them; enough that if everyone hates them, I'll definitely have some fuck-you energy to withstand all of that. But it's been a really hard three years. I lost my dad in 2017, my mom in 2018, and of course, there's been all this other shit with the pandemic since then. It feels good for me to have been creative and productive during that difficult time.

**Maria Arena Bell:** You can feel it in these paintings. They have a seriousness to them from a time that was so fraught.

**John Currin:** I just hope there's humor and joy in them, too. At the end of the day, joy is the only thing of any value. It's redemptive.

**Maria Arena Bell:** There's clearly joy in the leaping figure. But it's similar to the idea of making a cake out of the story of Saint Agatha. You've taken a dark idea and made it extraordinary.

**John Currin:** Those saint paintings are always just terrifying. For instance, the painting of Saint Agatha's breasts cut off is horrible. Scary. I suppose it does relate to this and the time these works come from. It's about that regret and pain in Christian imagery and pleading for grace and forgiveness from God or a cosmic thing; whatever your God may be. And, as in those saint paintings, or altar pieces, it's all so painfully beautiful. In painting and in art there are so many requests for forgiveness. There's so much shame at the same time. That's some of the stuff I'm feeling with these. It's part of where they came from.

**Maria Arena Bell:** Like the nun's cake – the paintings have tragedy and comedy. And there's absurdity and humor there, as well. In the way you're looking at life, religion, paganism – it's a search for meaning. After the last year, where are we?

**John Currin:** I'm showing these at Gagosian's Chelsea space on 24th Street and I'm hoping that the natural light from the skylight will hit them and make the whole thing feel like a solemn altar-like presentation. I really like that idea of these goofball porn paintings presented with that kind of formal solemnity. Maybe they are works that will speak to people about all they carry with them into now. ■

“I really like that idea of these goofball porn paintings presented with that kind of formal solemnity.”



# **PAGE (NYC) AT PETZEL**

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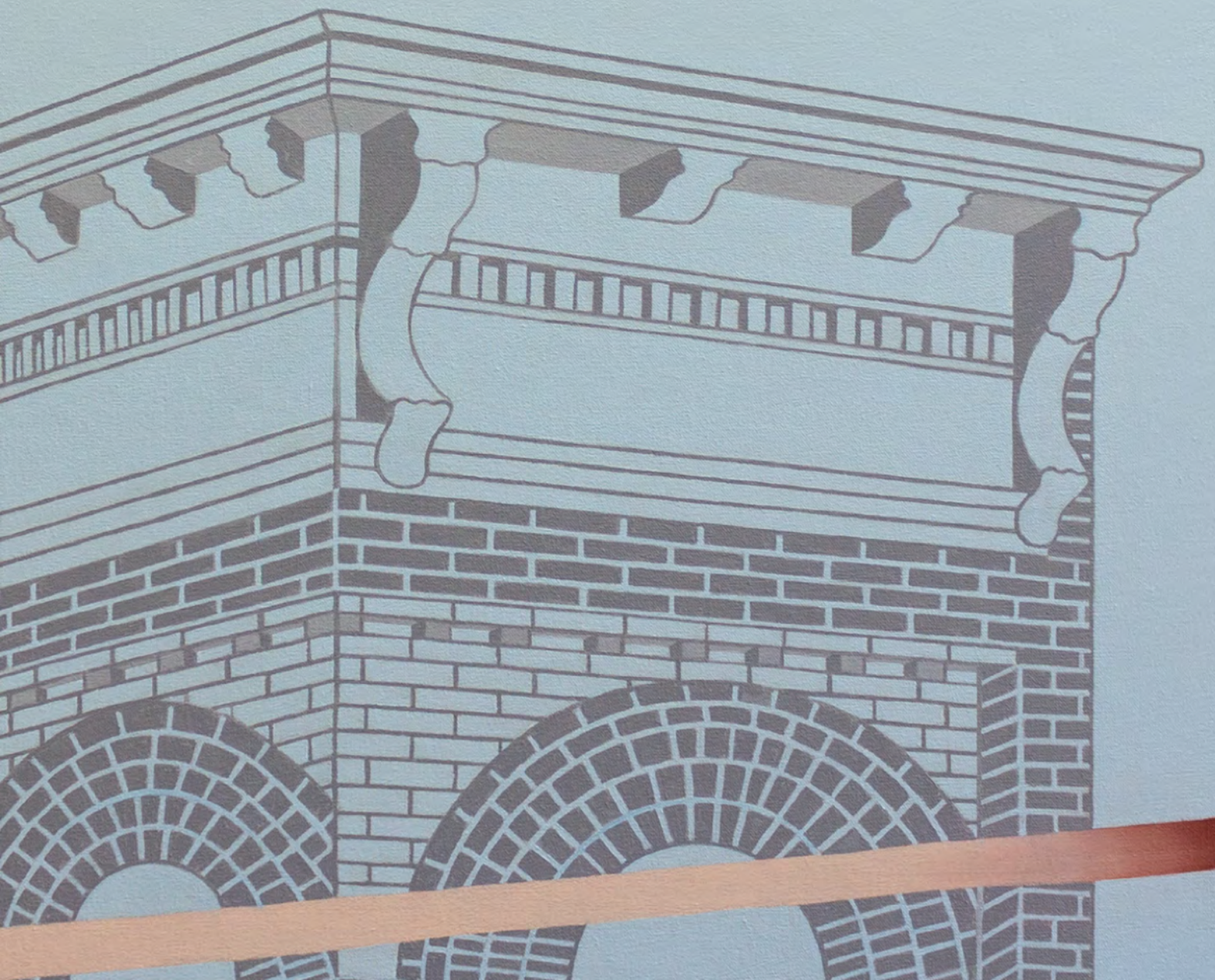
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# Independent



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New York and Online      September, 9–12, 2021

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# Capturing *the* Light

*With* Martha Diamond

By: David Carrier

*I*f I were a senior curator with a major museum collection at my disposal, I would love to organize an historical show devoted to urban art. The exhibition would start with one of Bernardo Bellotto's great eighteenth-century scenes of Dresden, then display a Paris cityscape by Camille Pissarro, and continue with a painting of Manhattan by Rackstraw Downes. Undoubtedly, I would show one of Claude Monet's scenes of the Rouen cathedral. And, in my catalogue essay I would include the de-



scription of Manhattan by the greatest modernist painter of light, Henri Matisse. When he first visited America in 1930, reports his biographer, Hilary Spurling, "he was enchanted by the light," which was, he said, "so dry, so crystalline, like no other," and "by the combination of order, clarity, and proportion." Ultimately, I would conclude my exhibition with a 1980s painting by Martha Diamond, whose work extends this grand tradition into the present. Like these prior masters, she is a city artist. However, where Bellotto, Pissarro, and Downes show the details of their urban scenes, what interests Diamond most is the light of the city. In that way, her painting, which moves toward (but doesn't aspire to achieve) abstraction, propels this way of thinking into the late twentieth century.

*Interview begins ▼*

● **David Carrier:** Late last night, I was thinking of your work, Martha. It's really fascinating to me, this conception of being an artist of the city, and your relation to the Baudelairian notion of the painter of modern life. This idea has been around for so long, and yet it's still clearly alive in your art.

**Martha Diamond:** Well, I always appreciated this idea of 'Old New York.' I was sort of raised up through it.

**David Carrier:** You have this fascinating quote in which you said that "As I child, we did just anything we wanted to do. I was never intimidated by cars, or people, even." That is just a wonderful response to New York City.

**Martha Diamond:** My version of the city was borne out of being raised in Queens. When you're a city kid, I think you're convinced that nothing can hurt you. Although, apparently, when I was a little kid, I climbed outside the window and took away all my mother's jewelry. Evidently, I was not afraid of the outside.

**David Carrier:** And what floor were you on when you did that?

**Martha Diamond:** I don't know, really. I was a little kid, a really little kid. I probably could count, but I don't have any idea.

**David Carrier:** Do you feel that that essence of the city has gone, now? Or is it a place you can still walk around and enjoy?

**Martha Diamond:** I miss all the old stores and the old neighborhoods. You know, like the book area or the area where they designed clothes. Or the jewelry area.. I liked all the neighborhoods that there were, and I don't think there are so many distinct and individualized neighborhoods anymore.

**David Carrier:** I knew an artist, Harvey Quaytman, who lived on your street. When I knew him in the 1980s, the Bowery was close to Soho, but it felt so far away. Now, of course, it's changed completely; the Bowery's just another gentrified neighborhood.

**Martha Diamond:** It was different, then. I mean, the humans were different; the doorways were different; the cars were different.

**David Carrier:** Do you see your art as a kind of chronicle of a New York that's disappeared, or currently disappearing? Or do the scenes depicted in your paintings exist in the present for you.

**Martha Diamond:** I think of them as showing the present. But I don't distinguish my art from what exists outside because my idea of what I make is really kind of primitive. At one point, I remember going to people and explaining, "I make it just like this," and would mimic painting brushstroke by brushstroke in a very simple way. I know that's not how buildings are made, but that's how I understand them. That's primitive thinking!

**David Carrier:** You have a very focused interest in the city's light. You're not interested in the pedestrians on the street, you're interested in the light hitting the building. That seems to me a very peculiar and particular interest.

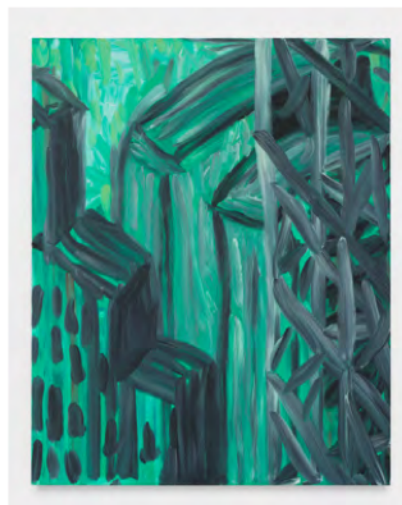
**Martha Diamond:** Well, the pedestrians change all the time. And life doesn't, really. It changes, but not in its essence. I like the consistency of the city's buildings, or at least its early buildings.



Installation view, *Martha Diamond: 1980-1989*, Magenta Plains, New York, NY,

**David Carrier:** I was just looking at the paintings that you're going to show next month, Martha, and I was interested in how you have those structures, those grids. It seems to be really central to this group of paintings. They're very basic, almost primitive, to use that word again. In fact, I would definitely call your *Green Cityscape* (1985) primitive! How would you describe it?

**Martha Diamond:** Green. What else can I say? That's it. It's a realistic painting in greens because I wanted to see if I could get away with doing that. I don't know how I initially conceived of it. Maybe I was thinking of the buildings I saw out of the windows of various places I lived when I was young. But I didn't go up to the Metropolitan and imitate what I saw. The subjects of my art are the buildings around us. These were the buildings outside my window... I'm a very primitive person in that way, I think. And I don't mind that. No, I don't mind that at all.



'Green Cityscape' (1985). Oil on linen. 90h x 72w inches. Courtesy of the artist and Magenta Plains, New York.



**David Carrier:** One commentator says, “Diamond is doing for the cityscape what Joan Mitchell does for the greater outdoors.” And I thought, that’s interesting, but also weird, in a way, because what’s more different than a tree and a building? You couldn’t work outdoors? That wouldn’t interest you?

**Martha Diamond:** I’d really have to know more about it in order to feel comfortable doing it, whereas with the city buildings, I take it for granted. I was born in Manhattan. I’ve lived in Manhattan for a long time, and I’ve walked through it for a long time. But trees are specialized, and I guess I don’t think of buildings as particularly specialized.

**David Carrier:** When you call yourself a “primitive” painter, do you mean that the histories of Bellotto in the eighteenth century, and Pissarro, in the nineteenth, don’t particularly matter to you as much as the immediate and visceral experience of being on the street? Would that be a fair characterization?

**Martha Diamond:** I never thought of that, exactly. But, yes, for me, I think that’s true.

**David Carrier:** The German Expressionists of the 1920s were doing scenes of the city, and they were interested in the aggressive, visual life of Berlin, at that point.

**Martha Diamond:** I guess if I were going to paint the people or the social aspect of the city, that’s probably where I’d go with it. It would be interesting. I remember very clearly growing up in New York City and noticing how the other kids I went to school with dressed, and how their parents dressed for their jobs, and other little differentiating details about their families. But now, everybody dresses alike. My closet must have 25 pairs of dungarees. It’s the same every day.

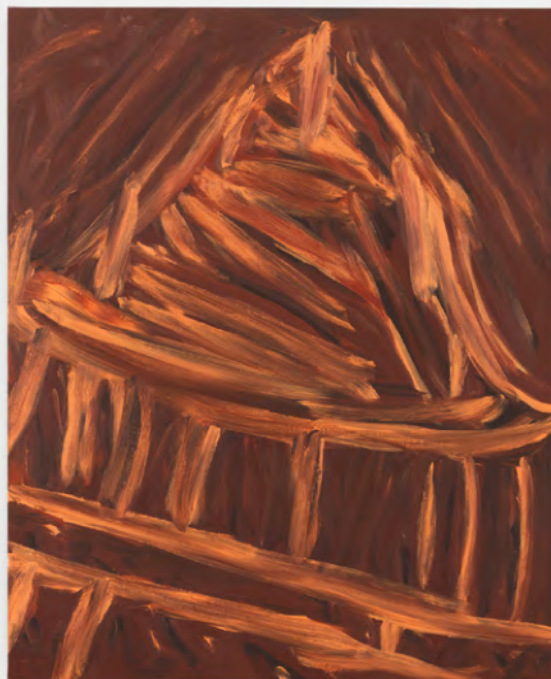
**David Carrier:** You’ve cited two painters – Jackson Pollock and Andy Warhol – who, early on, were important to your work. Reading that, I thought, wow! Really? Such different people. Heavens! Can we talk about that for a moment?

**Martha Diamond:** Jackson Pollock tossed paint. But Warhol? I guess I just take him as it comes, you know? If someone’s painting soup cans, that’s okay with me. And if someone’s throwing paint, that’s also okay with me.

**David Carrier:** You remain, in a certain sense, a figurative painter, a painter who needs the city. You didn’t move all the way into abstraction, as did many of the artists who followed de Kooning. You wanted to remain attached to that city grid; that city structure – the life, and the buildings, and so forth. You didn’t want to be an Impressionist painter of the city, but you also didn’t want to make a purely abstract work. You sort of wanted to be in a place in between? Here I think of your painting, *Structure* (1993), as an important example.

**Martha Diamond:** When I made that painting I was thinking, “Can I make an orange cityscape, or can I do it with a different

color?” That’s all I thought. It wasn’t realism...I mean, I really think that is how simple-minded I was. I know I’ve described my approach as primitive before...



*'Structure' (1993). Oil on linen. 60h x 49w inches. Courtesy of the artist and Magenta Plains, New York.*

**David Carrier:** Often, intuitive artists like you have difficulty finishing. Certainly, de Kooning did. Is that ever a concern of yours? How do you know when something is finished and ready to leave your studio?

**Martha Diamond:** Pretty much when I don’t feel like doing anything else to it.

**David Carrier:** In other words, after it achieves a certain kind of rightness?

**Martha Diamond:** Yeah, a point where whatever information I was thinking of putting down seems to exist now on the canvas.

**David Carrier:** Right. And do you ever come back to a painting, over months and years? Or is the process faster than that?

**Martha Diamond:** I put together something that holds together visually, and makes some kind of sense, visually. All the hints should be there, somehow. So, I’m not documenting the city for anybody. I’ve never done wrist work; it’s not what I do. As a matter of fact, one friend calls me “slasher!” I wave the brush around wildly. The fact that I use brushes, I think, is a big part of what I do. Brushes have limited definition. I care more about evoking the light than depicting the details.

**David Carrier:** Do you ever look out from the Bowery onto the street and make art?

*Martha Diamond:* Yes. And I've done drawings on the street, in crayons, in pen. I love the city, so I look at it often. And I have a memory of places which I can also use to my advantage.

**David Carrier:** I pulled out this statement I like from Bill Berkson: "The light on buildings against the high, Atlantic sky, makes New York life tenable." The buildings and the light – the combination – it seems like you need both? You don't want to just show the building structure, it really is all about the light against the buildings?

*Martha Diamond:* That's the New York City I live in. I mean, the buildings are there, and the light is there. I'm not often out in places where there isn't natural light. Unless I'm in a coffee shop.

**David Carrier:** Do all of these super skyscrapers give you a sense of how the city has changed and morphed throughout the years?

*Martha Diamond:* The details aren't interesting. I mean, what am I going to look at? There are some buildings with real decoration, but they were built, 50, 70 years ago. The light's all there is defining anything. I think that must be what I see. I mean, I'm sort of simplified, but there it is.

**David Carrier:** What would be the first painting that you would think of as being a work of yours?

*Martha Diamond:* When I was young, we lived across the street from a relatively new grammar school. I tried to draw my street outside the window of my class, in the second or third grade, or so, and I only had paints that weren't really subtle. Anyway, my first art problem was how to paint asphalt.

**David Carrier:** You were a self-trained artist in New York. That's amazing to me. There are so many art schools, yet you taught yourself?

*Martha Diamond:* I did go to classes on 57th Street, at the art school that was there, and learned from somebody about painting with brushes. I loved that, and I still use those kind of Asian brushes that I first learned about at the time.

**David Carrier:** In one of your past interviews, you speak about your time teaching and your female pupils, and the often-difficult place for women in the American art world. Can you say anything more about that, especially now, after looking back at all the changes the artworld has seen over the years?

*Martha Diamond:* Well, I think the only changes I know of are changes that other people made, really. I taught at Skowhegan a few times, and sometimes the men wouldn't teach

the female students. Obviously, I didn't approve of that. And I wasn't a lunatic about social stuff but, I thought, how could you not pay attention to all the women artists out there? And somehow, at a certain point, I just made a point of teaching the women students and telling them stuff that I thought they needed to know.



*Martha Diamond photographed by Georges Piette in her studio in 1993. Courtesy of the artist and Magenta Plains, New York.*

**David Carrier:** Was that when you began to form a community of friends around you who were poets and artists?

*Martha Diamond:* That came later when I lived in Manhattan. And, with Peter Schjeldhal, whom I met when I was studying at Carlton College, in Minnesota. There were all kinds of people there, and it was great.

**David Carrier:** When did you move to the Bowery?

*Martha Diamond:* 1969

**David Carrier:** When you got there, was it already crowded with artists?

*Martha Diamond:* Yes. Living on the Bowery, that's where I first started really meeting artists in earnest. That was a wonderful time. And it was a great time for parties, really good parties. And you could walk at night and find other parties if the one you were invited to wasn't so great. You could just go up and ask a random stranger if you could go to their party since the one you were at wasn't so good. We would do that all the time when a boyfriend of mine and I hosted parties. People would call and say, "Could we come?" And we'd say, "Yeah!" It was a great and interesting time to meet a lot of artists who were talented at many of the things that I didn't really experience growing up in Queens. Like cooking, for instance. I mean, my mother cooked nothing. So, you know, I discovered food during my time living in the Bowery. You know, after all these years, I've never really had any complaints about living in New York.

**David Carrier:** At the end of the day, from your perspective, has the artworld changed over the years?

*Martha Diamond:* Where is the artworld? If you can find it, sign me up! ■





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# Fragmenting Realities

*With*  
Anna Park

By: Bill Powers



Anna Park photographed by Luis Corzo. Courtesy of Half Gallery.

On the eve of her first solo show in Asia at Blum & Poe's Tokyo gallery space, Bill Powers sits down with Anna Park to discuss the rapid evolution of the 24-year old's burgeoning practice, her upbringing as a South Korean immigrant in Utah, and what comes next for the Brooklyn-based artist whose gritty, frenetic, charcoal drawings have captivated the artworld.

● **Bill Powers:** People have so many different takes on your drawings, Anna. Some see a new vision of Futurism or even traces of Joyce Pensato and Cecily Brown. Do any of those references register with you?

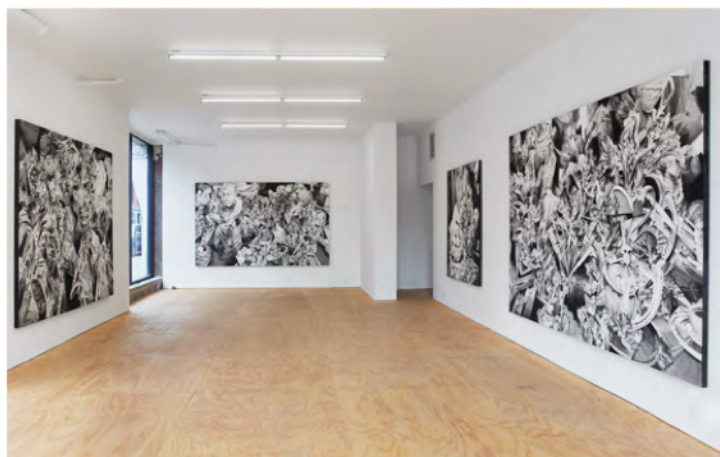
**Anna Park:** I feel like my hand naturally breaks up form. But I wasn't directly influenced by the Futurist movement. It was an organic progression for me, switching up perspectives and playing with spaces.

**Bill Powers:** When I first saw your artwork at The New York Academy of Art it felt...maybe not hyper-realist, but considerably tighter than your drawings now.

**Anna Park:** My work early on was definitely more discernible. Now, I'm trying to operate from the memory of people or places and what that distortion feels like as opposed to a depiction of reality. I think our memories are intrinsically fragmented, discombobulated.

**Bill Powers:** Do you read your compositions as compressed chronology or are you truly aiming to capture a snapshot in time?

**Anna Park:** I'm jamming a bunch of disparate moments into one image. It's how we're fed information now - like through our phones - this bombardment. I'm trying to key into some recognizable moments, which inevitably break down into these abstract marks.



Installation view of 'Pluck Me Tender' at Half Gallery. April 8, 2021- May 8th, 2021. Courtesy of Half Gallery

**Bill Powers:** Talk to me about the sex drawings. Is that a harder subject than, say, a tea party scene?

**Anna Park:** I think so. Our desire is so deeply rooted within us - and completely natural - but then the idea of making an orgy scene or explicit sex scenes makes me feel like some creepy, weird voyeur. Maybe I'm just a prude...

**Bill Powers:** Are you concerned that viewers will imagine it's autobiographical?

**Anna Park:** You can never completely separate the art from the artist, right? And I think you should be as honest as you can while making the work, so maybe that's why it stresses me out sometimes. It feels like I'm exposing myself...

**Bill Powers:** Is this fragmenting in your recent work partially some attempt to camouflage your own presence?

**Anna Park:** I'm trying to leave the narrative open ended, but there's probably some self-masking going on as well.

**Bill Powers:** When you won the AXA Art Prize in 2019, what was the drawing you submitted?

**Anna Park:** I like having double meanings in my work and punching up the humor. I remember being fascinated by office parties. So, in that vein, I was thinking, what would happen if a parent/teacher conference - the underbelly of social interactions - went awry? That thought ended up forming the basis for 'Parent Teacher Conference' which I ended up submitting.

**Bill Powers:** You still maintain an element of humor embedded in the drawings. For instance, I'm thinking of the newlyweds atop a wedding cake cutting their own heart in two.

**Anna Park:** 'First Marriage' probably reflected my skewed vision of marriage. I didn't have a ton of great examples from my own childhood. I didn't really see the sanctity in it and I marveled at how people become fixated on the ceremonial aspects: the flowers, the cake. That drawing came from this Briedezilla moment where she's so consumed by all the material stuff that she forgets it's really about the couple...to the point that she's almost shoving the groom out of the picture.



'First Marriage' (2021). Charcoal on paper mounted on panel. 60 x 72 inches. Courtesy of Half Gallery.



**Bill Powers:** What about the drawing of the two women in the nightclub saying hello even though they kind of hate each other?

**Anna Park:** 'The Frenemies?' I'm always interested in social dynamics and people watching, and the level of fake niceties we are all forced into at times; like how two girls might be warm and friendly at a party and then immediately go home and talk shit about each other.

**Bill Powers:** Throughout your work, you consistently play with this theme of social engagements mostly being a lot of fake white noise. I'm thinking of the birthday party drawing depicting revelers chatting but without much substance or connection in their interaction.

**Anna Park:** We often get caught up by distractions which seem to warrant our attention, but we end up not really being present in any particular moment. Who doesn't crave genuine interaction? I think when I moved to New York from Utah to go to Pratt, I was overly stimulated, but, at the same time, I was so hungry for it. I almost felt high off of these social interactions. I wanted to capture moments as a witness to these events where we are all thinking the same thing at a party except no one ever says it out loud: What the fuck am I doing here?

**Bill Powers:** What was it like in high school in Utah? Let's be real for a second.

**Anna Park:** I was weirdly super-focused. I used to get uptight about grades to the point where even my mom was like, "chill out a little." I was a pretty angry kid in high school, and I think I saw academics as my way out of Utah.

**Bill Powers:** You felt that you needed to achieve your way out of your circumstances. Do you think you had seen that modeled by your mom becoming a pharmacist as a means to leaving South Korea?

**Anna Park:** Yeah, she adopted the role as the breadwinner for the family when we moved to the US. She set a high bar for me. I was definitely more of a recluse in high school. I liked being alone, which was kind of perfect for making art.

**Bill Powers:** And why were you so angry?

**Anna Park:** Maybe a better term would be angsty. I just knew I wanted to get the hell out of Salt Lake City. We moved around a lot when I was a little kid, so I had a varied perspective as a result of coming from New Zealand and California prior to Utah. I also remember visiting New York with my mom when I was maybe 14 or 15 and telling her I would eventually move here. I didn't even know why. But it was important to have that dream. Originally, I had thought I'd move back to Los Angeles one day to be an animator, only

I'm not very good with computers. I wanted to do hand-drawn animation cels, but apparently that's a dying art form.

“I think our memories are intrinsically fragmented, discombobulated.”

**Bill Powers:** Did you enroll in illustration courses when you first entered college?

**Anna Park:** I started as an illustration major at Pratt because I thought that would make it easier to get a job after I graduated. In the middle of my freshman year, though, one of my teachers pulled me aside and asked me why I wasn't concentrating on painting and drawing. That's when I scoped out The New York Academy of Art and switched schools the next year.

**Bill Powers:** Do you think it was helpful to start in illustration just to learn about anatomy and proportions?

**Anna Park:** Pratt was actually way more conceptual at the time and the grad program proved fairly traditional so it was kind of the opposite of what you might expect. I wanted the structure to learn form and figure which the Academy was great for.

**Bill Powers:** Did you ever feel the pressure to become a painter?

**Anna Park:** I think I felt that way the whole time I was in grad school. It's a painting school, mostly. I wanted to be in the conversation about what drawing could be.

**Bill Powers:** Were there any specific artists who had opened that door for you, mentally?

**Anna Park:** I went to a Robert Longo show at The Brooklyn Museum and he walked our class through the exhibition. Also, Kara Walker was a big influence. They helped me see that there wasn't a hierarchy of mediums. It's about the ideas you're putting out there. The medium informs your concept through language.

**Bill Powers:** It's interesting how you approach depicting ethnicity in your drawings – and I'm not saying it's an overt strategy – but a viewer would be hard pressed to guess you are Korean from looking at your work. Contrast that with, say, Kehinde Wiley, where many people might assume the artist is Black.

**Anna Park:** I've gotten that in critiques before: Why are you not portraying Asian people? That really surprised me. I was just drawing from my own experience. My formative years were in Utah, and my adult years have been in New York City. I feel the most awake right now so that's where most of my content comes from. I haven't felt ready yet to reference back to my Korean roots in my work. I think, perhaps, as I grow older, I will be able to discover a more nuanced way of depicting my experience. Having spent almost the same amount of time split between Korea and the US, American culture is now as much my culture as anything Korean.

**Bill Powers:** Did you ever feel bias toward you as an Asian immigrant?

**Anna Park:** I was 11 when I moved to Utah. I hadn't ever felt so much like an outsider. Of course, I've been called every racial slur in the book. I think the worst part, though, are the micro-aggressions where you're targeted without even knowing it. I'd rather have things said to my face than feel othered. Maybe that's why I'm so happy in New York, to live among such diversity.

“There isn't a hierarchy of mediums. It's about the ideas you're putting out there...”

**Bill Powers:** What are your thoughts on the rise of emerging Asian artists? I'm thinking of Dominique Fung, Matthew Wong, and you, of course...

**Anna Park:** I think it's really exciting to see. Artists like Sasha Gordon, Lily Wong, and Sally Han, too, just to name a few who I look up to and get inspired by. Obviously, Asian is not a monolith, and what is so great to see are the many different ways that each artist is portraying their specific experiences through their work.

**Bill Powers:** Part of your origin story is that when they honored KAWS at The New York Academy of Art three years ago, he was so impressed by your work that he bought a drawing, posted it on Instagram, and then all his fans started hitting you up. Am I getting that right?

**Anna Park:** It was a life-changing moment for me, but I couldn't see that in real time. I didn't fully comprehend the

impact and how much it shaped my career now. Also, I'm not great with faces so I remember asking him if he was an artist, which, in hindsight, is so embarrassing. I felt so dumb.

**Bill Powers:** Are you thinking at all about the audience for your Blum & Poe show in Tokyo this September?

**Anna Park:** I've never shown in Asia before, and I wanted to keep in mind the audience in Tokyo. But I don't think I would have done anything that I wouldn't have done for a show here. What excited me was the incredible history Tokyo holds for works on paper and the practice of drawing, as well.

**Bill Powers:** There's a new rodeo drawing in your studio. Am I correct that you are often drawn to scenes of Americana?

**Anna Park:** This new show is kind of a part two of my New York show. I want the themes to revolve around performance and performance anxiety, and how people brand themselves. For instance, a girl with this really bad spray tan. Or, a girl playing violin who suspects no one in the crowd is actually listening to her.



'Mind Over Matter' (2021) from the artist's forthcoming solo show at Blum & Poe in Tokyo. Charcoal on paper on panel Two parts; 86 x 60 inches each. © Anna Park, Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo.

**Bill Powers:** What does that say about you psychologically? I'm thinking back now on your beauty queen drawing where we see this pageant winner drunk on attention. Is that autobiographical?

**Anna Park:** For sure. She seems disassociated and almost like she's not really there. It's definitely a fear of mine. Like I want my work to be seen, but I also hold a lot of anxieties about being judged. And, by the way, no one is putting a gun to my head to make these drawings.

**Bill Powers:** Is there a moment where you felt like you had made it?

**Anna Park:** I think when my mom could retire. I wanted to help her retire and to pay off my student loans. ■



# Anna Park

September 1–October 9, 2021



Anna Park, *Full Disclosure*, 2021, charcoal on paper on panel, © Anna Park

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