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25 Questions for Voracious Appropriationist Deborah Kass



Deborah Kass at the opening of her exhibition “My Elvis +” at Paul Kasmin Gallery

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Name: Deborah Kass

Age: 60

Occupation: Artist

City/Neighborhood: Brooklyn, NY

Current Exhibition: “My Elvis +” at Paul Kasmin Gallery, 515 West 27th Street, New York, January 24 – February 23, 2013.

Your current exhibition at Paul Kasmin Gallery gathers together a number of paintings from your “My Elvis” series for the first time. The series depicts Barbra Streisand in her role as Yentl (from the 1983 film of the same name) in the style of Andy Warhol’s famous silkscreen of Elvis Presley. Repeating the “Yentl” image over and over is an undoubtedly Warholian thing to do. Do you see differences among the works in the series? Why did you decide to stop producing them when you did?

They are all different, since each Yentl is hand-painted and screened individually. Some are jaunty, some are more serious, but it’s not like I have much control over it. The based-out ink on the “Ghost Yentls” have a completely different resonance, one I was not expecting at all, than the ones made

with full-strength ink.

Your photograph “Altered Image #2,” also on view at Paul Kasmin, is a veritable layer cake of cross-dressing. You recreate the 1981 photograph “Warhol in Drag,” which features Andy Warhol dressing up as actress Marlene Dietrich, who herself dressed as a man from time to time. (To clarify further: It is an image of a woman dressed as a man dressed as a woman dressed as a man.) How does this work resonate 18 years later? How important are strict gender roles and gender identity in the art world today?

“Altered Image” is from 1994-5. “My Elvis” and “The Jewish Jackies Series” were started and shown in 1992, so “The Warhol Project” is 20 years old. That is a generation ago. Issues surrounding difference, power, gender and identity, which seemed controversial then, are now a kind of baseline understanding for younger people. Queer studies and women’s studies were nonexistent for my generation. They weren’t invented yet. All the world’s “greatest” books and art, the “canon” as it was taught, were for and by white men and only white men. This was called “the universal.” There were no alternative versions of cultural history yet. My educated generation, like the ones before, was taught and believed a very narrow idea of greatness and value. It was male and it was white.

This is no longer the case for the young adult children of the people my age. Critiquing “Hetero Normativity” is the kind of thing they actually discuss endlessly in college now. It’s de rigueur. Howard Zinn is taught. “Queering” is now a verb. Not so when I made this work in the early 90s.

You’ve said that your Jewishness has been more problematic for your career than being a lesbian. Why do you think that is?

Simply put, it was the internalized anti-Semitism of older generations of collectors, my parents’ age, who were important in the art world then that made my out-Jewishness problematic. When they were growing up, all Jewish actors in Hollywood changed their names to sound Gentile, until Barbra, who did not. This was considered radical at the time. She completely understood the power of her difference, before “difference” became academic jargon. These older people did not. Drawing attention to Jewishness terrified them. They lived through World War II, so this is not a surprise.

I was told at the time in no uncertain terms by three older, female, Jewish art consultants that this work was “bad for the Jews,” “too Jewish,” and that “the Jews don’t like Barbra.” The reaction was pretty intense. I really hit a nerve. I thought Barbra was totally assimilated by then, especially as presented through my Warhol lens in such a consciously dignified way. Barbra’s out-Jewishness was a problem for some assimilating Jews like my parents in the ’60s. Much to my surprise, so was mine 30 years later in the ’90s. Who knew?

It’s not the case anymore, I hope. Younger people founded Tablet and Heeb magazines. They contextualize their identities, including Jewish, in broader, more fluid theoretical ways, which was exactly what I was proposing in this work. And have had a couple more generations of assimilation under their collective belts, and a lot more self-regard, like Barbra herself.

But don’t get me wrong, plenty of people “got” this work in the ’90s. Somewhere very deep they identified with Barbra and Andy; usually gay men and self-directed women. There was definitely a guilty pleasure that many found irresistible in the work, as I hoped.

Over the course of your career you have appropriated the styles and imagery of a broad range of artists, from Jackson Pollock to David Salle to — most famously — Andy Warhol. Rumor

has it not everyone was enthusiastic about your appropriation. What's the most memorable reaction you've gotten from an artist whose work you took on?

I won't name names now. I am saving it for my memoir.

What project are you working on now?

"Feel-good paintings, prints and sculpture for feel-bad times" continue.

Describe a typical day in your life as an artist.

I haven't had a typical day in awhile, but here's my ideal day that I can't wait to get back to: Wake up at 9, get to the studio by 10, work 'till 6. Listen to the radio — WNYC, WBGO, WFUV or Nyro, Barbra, Sondheim, Coltrane, Bruce, whatever. Work out for an hour in the studio a few times a week. When I am really cooking there are a 4 to 5 works going simultaneously, which gives me something to be doing constantly. This totally suits my ADD and it's how I am most productive and happy.

What's the last show that you saw?

Mine last night.

What's the last show that surprised you? Why?

Mike Kelley at the Stedelijk. I was blown away by the darkness and intensity. And sadness. It was brutal. I had no expectation and so was unprepared for how moving and truly tragic it was.

What's your favorite place to see art?

The Met.

What's the most indispensable item in your studio?

The computer. After that: blue painter's tape and milk crates.

Where are you finding ideas for your work these days?

In my dreams.

Do you collect anything?

We collect art.

What's the last artwork you purchased?

Four classic Sister Corita prints from the '60s.

What's the first artwork you ever sold?

A painting called "Dogs Come Home in the Rain," made while I was on the Whitney Program in 1972.

What's the weirdest thing you ever saw happen in a museum or gallery?

Some inexplicably bad shows of terrific artists. One wonders, what was the curator thinking?

What's your art-world pet peeve?

Misogyny.

What's your favorite post-gallery watering hole or restaurant?

Bottino.

Do you have a museum/gallery going routine?

The last couple of years have been so busy, most of my routines have been lost. But whenever I am uptown and have the time, I go to the Met and wander. I always visit Titian's "Venus and the Lute Player," my absolute favorite painting there, and my second fave, Picasso's "Gertrude Stein." It's hard for me to get past the Greek pots, I adore them. One of the other objects I always visit in the Greek and Roman wing is the Cycladic "Bust of a Woman," which looks exactly like Picasso or Brancusi could have made it. Recently I luckily needed to spend a lot of time at the Met in preparation for a talk there and started obsessing over the pre-Columbian gold. When I was a kid, one of the regular field trips was to the Egyptian rooms. So I avoided them for a few decades. Lately I have gone back and they just wow all over again. Same thing with the armor: It is almost impossible to imagine putting one of those things on. How much do they weigh? How did they pee? What was it like being inside of one of those things and having a huge piece of metal hit you? Were those guys really so small? I haven't spent enough time in the Islamic Wing yet. Oh and the French period rooms — I would like to live in them.

I never got over the first MoMA renovation, let alone this one. I still have what could only be called a weird resentment that Cezanne's "The Bather" is not where I could always find it when I wanted to in high school. That said, the blockbuster painting shows never fail to enthrall. Still buzzing about [the] de Kooning [retrospective], which I had the great pleasure of walking through with Irving Sandler, listening to everything he had to say about his friend Bill's paintings. What a thrill.

What's the last great book you read?

The Swerve: How the World Became Modern by Stephen Greenblatt and The Shock Doctrine by Naomi Klein.

What work of art do you wish you owned?

Elizabeth Murray, either "New York Dawn" (1977), or "More than You Know," (1983), or "Can You Hear Me?" (1984).

What would you do to get it?

Quite a bit.

What international art destination do you most want to visit?

We are planning a trip to the caves in the south of France this year.

What under-appreciated artist, gallery, or work do you think people should know about?

Since it's indiscrete to name my wife, Patricia Cronin, next in line is definitely Karen Heagle, the Alice Neel of her generation.

Who's your favorite living artist?

Too close to call.

What are your hobbies?

What's a hobby?

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