

Identifying with Deborah Kass

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Deborah Kass is an artist whose paintings examine the intersection of art history, popular culture, and the self. She received her BFA in Painting at Carnegie-Mellon University, and studied at the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program and at the Art Students' League. Her work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art; the Whitney Museum of Art; the Solomon Guggenheim Museum; the Jewish Museum; the Museum of Fine Art, Boston; the Cincinnati Museum; the New Orleans Museum; the Weatherspoon Museum; and numerous public and private collections.

A survey show, Deborah Kass, *The Warhol Project*, traveled across the country from 1999 to 2001. Her work has been shown nationally and internationally, including at the Venice Biennale, the Istanbul Biennale, and the Museum Ludwig, Cologne. She is a Senior Critic in the Yale University MFA Painting Program. She is represented by Vincent Fremont and the Paul Kasmin Gallery. The Andy Warhol Museum is currently presenting a retrospective of her work, *Deborah Kass, Before and Happily Ever After*.

Bradley Rubenstein: It is really great that you are having your retrospective at the Warhol Museum; some of your most significant paintings were your Warhol/Streisand silkscreen paintings and your Warhol project, *My Warhol*. These were seminal works from the point of view of their time, but they were also a personal way of making art. They weren't just more illustrations of appropriationist strategies, to my way of thinking, at least.

Deborah Kass: At the time I thought what I was doing was the next step in a way, in terms of appropriation and feminist critique. I used an image, that of Barbra Streisand, that was not easily absorbed into a male narrative. Or a gentile one. This is what made Barbra the person, the image, the icon, so disruptive to prevailing notions of the category "female" when she burst on the scene in the early 1960s. The idea that her otherness could be a source of power and glamor and creativity was deeply disruptive at a time when homogeneity, whiteness, Christianity, blondeness, and shiksa goddesses ruled entertainment. Her pride in her difference and her ambition were incredibly radical for a woman. It still is, and it still makes people uncomfortable.

BR: In many ways I saw these works as being way ahead of the curve. At that time (the mid-nineties) it was a period of what I like to call "the death of the death of talking about the death of painting," a kind of ground zero where you could do whatever you wanted, and there wasn't big money behind "rescuing" painting or whatnot. You could make an image however you wanted. Your work seemed important because it was constantly morphing.

DK: It's the Picasso model as opposed to the Pollock model, I guess. For the record, painting has been dead for over 100 years officially. It was very dead when I started art school in 1970. I thought I would be an earth artist, and I did performances and conceptual work. Was it more dead than usual in the mid-'90s? I wrote an essay for a show I organized in 1992 called *Painting Culture* and wrote, "If painting isn't open to the voice of the colonized it deserves to be as dead as everyone claims...???" because women just were not supposed to paint in my generation. Photos, yes; painting, no. I thought

it was absurd to blame a medium for bad politics! Male painters might have had awful politics; oil paint didn't! It's like that thing on Facebook: "Republicans don't hate women, they just don't care what they think." Old male painters just don't care what women painters think.

BR: How important was it to you to have your work read on a personal level? There is a very intellectual component, and then a biographical element.

DK: I guess as important as it is to read any artist's work as personal.

BR: For example, music is important to you and an influence for these works -- your beloved divas, show tunes...

DK: There is that great Walter Pater quote: "All art aspires to the condition of music." I was looking for more emotional contact points than I am used to seeing in a painting, and letting the language or lyric I use and memory of a tune add an emotional and even nostalgic aspect to the visual experience of painting. Using show tunes or lyrics from the Great American Songbook brings into painting another idea of history, culture, ethnicity, and democracy that one usually does not think of when thinking about "painting." But I am looking for a point of active identification.

When I started using Barbra's profile, it was also the height of the multicultural dialog, "the cultural politics of difference," to quote Cornel West. Identity was the name of the game, along with appropriation. But something else started to click in my head as I was continually involved in shows about "identity." I got so bored of the labeling, the collective naming. At some point I realized an unsaid aspect that no one is addressing is "identification." It's an active thing, identifying with something. Identity is a noun, something that just is, almost in a passive sense. I began to realize that when we grow up we take the world in -- the music, the movies, TV, the world around us -- and we identify with some things and not others. It is how we begin to define our individual selves in the world, by picking and choosing what resonates, what we identify with. To identify is active, a verb.

When I grew up, I had no sense of visual art. No one talked about it or cared about it. But I was surrounded by music. My father played the sax (and violin, flute, clarinet, etc.), and he kept a constant flow of jazz going whenever he was home. He was the son of Russian immigrants. Music was a very important part of becoming both cultured and American for immigrants. There are many descriptions of walking through the Lower East Side in the early twentieth century and hearing music out of the windows. One of the first things Jewish immigrants did when they could was buy a piano or violin for their kids. Music was a way for the kids to become Americans. Gershwin, Berlin, Arlen -- great artists who shaped the American psyche. It was, after all, the Jazz Age.



This had a huge influence on me and my understanding of what art is. For me, interpreting art was the greatest art of all, since that's what jazz is -- lots of musicians doing lots of different things with one text, one melody. This was my first understanding of "great." Dizzy, Miles, Lady, Trane, Monk, Sassy, Prez.... Black musicians were my first experience of great artists, period. My father revered these artists. So do I.

So in my house growing up, there was no high or low, or pop versus something else. To be great you interpreted a pop standard your own way. And that was literally what I ended up doing with The Warhol Project and again now with the “feel-good paintings.”

BR: In the works that you have done with text, even more than in the image-based pieces, there is an element of Walter Benjamin. He talked about aesthetics in the mechanical age, which I think means books and writing more than pictures. He wrote that there are ages where things are “shrouded in darkness,” and “it is impossible to see things as wholes.” Like in the Middle Ages, we see fragments. This strikes me as relevant to the text pieces. You’re presenting these bits of songs or text that trigger us to remember something and then you’re painting them a certain way. I know that I have misinterpreted some of them because I didn’t get the song reference or whatever. How does that work for you?

DK: I pick phrases that mean something to me. They are from music I love, mostly made before my own generation’s music that really formed my consciousness. Before Motown, before rock and roll, Carole King, Joni Mitchell, Laura Nyro, Stones, Beatles, Dylan – pre-’60s. The sentiment might be familiar, even if you don’t know the source. If you know the source that plays into a nostalgia, you can get a sense of the sentiment. Nostalgia is a very underrated emotion.

At this point in my life I am trying to get more philosophic, but I’m still impatient with the world. I am trying to balance the reality I can’t control outside me with an attempt to gain some peace of mind inside, despite the insanity of our culture, our people, the destruction of the planet and each other for no reason I can think of other than greed. So I am trying to find resonant words that help. Either they explain things to me or help me identify my own point of view. Other people and the world are more of a mystery to me than ever. When I was younger I thought I had it figured out. Man, was I way off!

BR: When we were talking earlier, I placed your work alongside Cary Leibowitz and Kay Rosen. You share Cary’s sense of humor and love of pop culture. I am interested in your use of type, which is constantly changing and is similar to how Rosen uses the look of words to create the work. You said something before that was really interesting: “Content is style.”

DK: “Content dictates form.” -- Stephen Sondheim. I couldn’t say it better myself.

BR: I’m gonna take that to mean that the style of the words, the way things look, is derived from, or relates to, the bit of song, or lyrics, or whatever, that you are painting. It is kind of like listening to a song with someone else, and both people have two different movies running in their heads as to what’s going on, what the story of the song is. It makes me think of Matisse’s Jazz cutouts.

DK: Or simultaneous fantasies during sex.

BR: In the most recent show you started to work in materials outside of just painting. Sign-making media, like neon. Is it just a logical development, like, “In a way, I am making signs of a sort, so...”

DK: I just made a new one, “Enough Already.” Perfect for a child’s room or any frustrated adult.

BR: Getting back to the retrospective, has having to look at all your past work for the catalog and everything been a really motivating thing for you? Has looking at things from the past been an inspiration to make new work?

DK: I just saw the show when it opened for the first time. It was a bit of a revelation, in that the

different styles I have worked through, at first by pure instinct, make much more sense retrospectively. When all the “periods” of my work are up, it ends up being a pretty legible narrative. It felt like, “This is my life?” For better or for worse, this is exactly how I have spent the last thirty years. Just about everything I ever spent time thinking about is up on the walls.

I am going back this week to look again. I’m looking forward to that. There are a lot of paintings and color up on those walls. As a result, I am finding myself thinking about sculpture a lot.

- *Bradley Rubenstein*

Mr. Rubenstein is a painter, story teller, and smart culture aficionado.

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