

# whitewall



## DEBORAH KASS: FEELING BLACK & BLUE

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**Deborah Kass** and I were assembling a small mountain of discarded pistachio shells while sipping a stiff pour-over and peering at new works for her upcoming show at **Paul Kasmin Gallery**, which opens at the end of this year. They were works in progress, a cluster of leaning blue and black mixed-medium canvases that were nearly the height of the ceiling and dominated the space. I asked her if a sleek black multipaneled piece commandeering the better part of the back wall in her studio was intended to be reflective. “Oh, yeah,” she said.

Her new series feels invariably necessary to the larger body of her work, perhaps inevitable. Why black and blue? “It’s how I feel,” she sighed. And Kass was making similar pieces



even before she began the series. Miniature prototypes from years before littered random crannies of her studio—small blueprints of the evolution of these works. They’re a natural continuation of “Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times” (2007–10), an extension of both her identity as an artist and her exceptional command of art history.

Following a conversation with *Whitewall* late last year, we talked briefly about her May show at **Sargent’s Daughters** in New York, her Warholian “America’s Most Wanted” series (1998–99). The amount of work she erected in the month between our visits was astonishing, which she chalked up to part realized aesthetic trajectory, part prolonged absence from her studio while her building was being remodeled.

Sitting down with *Whitewall* for the first unveiling of her new series, Kass spoke with us about multiculturalism, feminism, and as always, her love of pop culture.

**WHITEWALL:** I’m seeing a few young artists using appropriation in a similar way that you have throughout your career, with their work tapping the zeitgeist by way of the pop culture/middle class psyche.

**DEBORAH KASS:** I just sort of think it’s the language of the times. I grew up sampling from pop culture in my work, and from art history, like, day one. The first things I ever did in college were Jasper Johns. So, it’s hard to talk about appropriation even being a specific thing anymore since it’s such a common language. And of course it’s about common language.

**WW:** We’ve talked before about the imbalance and underrepresentation of women in the art world. And through your initiation as an artist during the height of second-wave feminism, and as both an observer and participant



**of third-wave feminism, you've mentioned feeling wary of the potential for absolute equality.**

**DK:** Well, I think I said that in my whole adult life, women went from making 60 cents on the dollar to 75. That's 15 cents in four decades. That's not encouraging.

**WW: How do you try to reflect that in some of your newer works? You've maintained that feminism comes first in your art.**

**DK:** Well, art history comes first in my work, too, so there's a few firsts. And then painting comes first in my work. All those things come first in my work. I don't know how overtly feminist I'm being in this. I'm just sort of contemplating the world, other than quoting from Gertrude Stein. But mostly I'm quoting from the Rolling Stones, and then Bessie Smith or Louis Armstrong, or the Backstreet Boys, depending on who you like.

The work is never one thing. It's specifically not one thing. It's specifically many things. And I don't think that "feminist" is the primary thing in these, as much as just some reflection on the world through my lenses, which are painterly, feminist, and leftist.

**WW: You've mentioned many times before a conscious omission of middle-class representation in art history, and how that's also a subtext in your work. You have these artists who break out and then are plagued by a self-hatred of their middle-class roots. One of the things that's most apparent in your work is its blatant representation of middle-class fixtures and pop culture phenomena.**

**DK:** The middle class, in my generation, was the thing we all ran from because it was so boring and so many artists who are my age came from the suburbs, and particularly the



New York suburbs. The people who were rich in those suburbs at that time have gotten exponentially so much richer because of Reagan and tax restructuring, and just the nature of the economy since the sixties or seventies. The middle class was really big and it was the thing to escape. Now it's become to me something to aspire to because it's so endangered. This thing that so many people couldn't wait to escape just looks like heaven now. Good public schools, for instance.

It was just the thing to escape—into culture, into Manhattan, into the theater, into museums, and into the Art Students League, MoMA, or the Met. That was the escape. I don't think people look at my work and experience this way, and that's why I was so struck that you did. I was completely like, "Whoa."

**WW: That's apparent in all of the references to Broadway and pop iconography—those aren't highbrow fixtures.**

**DK:** That's true. Specifically, they are not. I don't think it's an attractive topic for an aspiring population any more than feminism is, or ethnicity, if it's Jewish. I mean, Gobar's [retrospective at MoMA] is so overwhelmingly Catholic. I think Andy [Warhol] is overwhelmingly Catholic. People don't really talk about it. People have addressed it, but the history of art is overwhelmingly Catholic.

**WW: And certainly there's a rejection of marginalization not just with ethnicity, but queer identities as well.**

**DK:** It's to address a bigger audience. That's why people do it. God knows, Leo Steinberg and Clement Greenberg talked about this. It was the whole shift from the left to the center in New York between the wars and after World War II, particularly, when everybody dropped





all the social context out of their work or they'd be called communists. Certainly Guston. I mean, that's like the perfect example of someone who went from socially informed work in the thirties to abstraction, and then came back later. That's what the whole Abstract Expressionist thing was about, according to Greenberg and other people. It was a move to the center, and move to universality, or making your work be more accessible and less specific.

Multiculturalism was all about being more specific, and I'm younger than those people. They're dead now. My generation was about a different ideal. Specificity always looked interesting to me because it's what made really good artists—really good artists, as far as I could tell—in the late eighties and nineties. And it's certainly what made the intellectual content of the best writing, the best intellectual writers. What made them interesting was race and gender, and that's my time. That's what formed me. And growing up at MoMA.

**WW: So in this world that was skyrocketing the careers of men and doing nothing for female painters, you've said before that you feel like you possibly, for lack of a better word, shortchanged yourself by not utilizing male partnerships for social or career mobility. And we discussed your college boyfriend, a person with whom you defined your understanding art history by taking a shitload of psychotropic drugs—**

**DK:** Acid. And smoked a ton of pot . . .

**WW: But that must have been weird to be catapulted into such a male-dominated environment.**

**DK:** It was. It was a shock. It took me at least a decade to figure it out.



**WW: How did you manage that?**

**DK:** The same way every woman did. You just kept doing your work. I went to a party last year and a 70-year-old man grabbed my tits. And this guy I liked. We spent many, many openings talking. This was a guy who was really invested in seventies Color Field painting, so I've always loved talking to him. And that was the thanks I got. Both tits grabbed at a party when he was drunk. Now, I'm a 61-year-old woman at this point, and I was really so shocked by this. And I say this to explain my experience in the art world. Like, you're a grandmother, and someone grabs your tit who's even older than you because they think it's cute.

I don't even know how I survived [making a career in that environment] except I had no option because, at the end of the day, all I can do in life is be an artist. And without family money, without a husband who makes \$1.29 to my \$1.00. I just lived. I lived a nice life. I had a great girlfriend and she had a career doing something else. But it was really appalling, and surprising, and upsetting to watch the guys I knew who were my age behave like an older generation of men.

**WW: I feel like you're really speaking to the experiences of a much younger demographic of women, too. We've spoken at length about this.**

**DK:** Things haven't changed. Who do you think is collecting art? What money is buying art? Women's money is not buying art. Their incredibly rich husbands are buying art. The women may be the people making the choices, but they didn't make the money. We live in a world where we are completely unprotected. Even for single straight women, it is really different going through the world protected by a man. And I can remember that from being



with my boyfriend who I loved so much. Just what it was like walking through Manhattan in the seventies hanging on this man I adored, and how safe I felt. You are protected on so many levels, starting with financially. I don't mean every artist who's a man makes money. I'm not saying that. As I've said to you, nothing has changed. And I fear for all of you people.

I've just seen generations of boys get the benefit of the doubt, and women not. Thus, as of now, my show is called "Black and Blue."

**WW: That's incredibly powerful.**

**DK:** People buy work that reflects them, where they see their reflection. All I've ever done is try to make work where I see my reflection.

**WW: So with this series specifically, what was the intention?**

**DK:** I'm just continuing in my great American songbook—or not American, if it's the Stones. It's really just a continuation of "Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times." It's just hard to feel good anymore.

**WW: For a viewer, these works are adept at reflecting what I think a lot of us, specifically women, are feeling right now in the current social and political climate.**

**DK:** That's so good. That's so cool. I really want them to be emotional. I'm very interested in emotional resonance. It's a very underplayed thing, and very underutilized.

**WW: And it's incredible to see work that speaks on so many levels to micro-**





**aggressions that are so deeply ingrained in our culture.**

**DK:** Look, I was brought up to think I could be anything I wanted. That's how my mother brought me up. No one warned me that there was a problem. It came as a shock to me. I was so naive. And I understood I couldn't run for president of my junior high; I had to run for vice president—and I was—because only boys could be president. But that was about it.

So the advances of the civil rights movement and feminism was something I took for granted until the wall came down. Or the ceiling came down. I'm still reeling and it was 1980. Elizabeth Murray once said to me once, "Your generation ruined everything." I said, "My generation of *men* ruined everything."

CATIE KECK | JULY 23, 2015

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