

Deborah Kass wrestles with Warhol's legacy ... at The Warhol.

This exhibition takes a bold step in placing Kass' Warhol-inspired pieces side by side with Warhol's own work.

by Nadine Wasserman | November 21 2012



Deborah Kass' "Blue Deb" (2000)

Art is often in dialogue with itself, as artists commune with their antecedents and peers. So to fully appreciate their work, it helps to know the references. Viewing the mid-career retrospective Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After, at The Andy Warhol Museum, is like playing an inside game of art history.

From the first, Deborah Kass' paintings were informed by artists such as Paul Cezanne, Marsden Hartley, Jasper Johns and Philip Guston. In the mid-1970s, painting was considered dead, but Kass chose it as her medium anyway. From her perspective, there were plenty of great painters around, particularly women such as Pat Steir, Susan Rothenberg and Mary Heilmann.

In the 1980s, hardly any female artists of Kass' generation were getting high-profile attention. Those who were, like Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman, were using photography and graphic arts to deconstruct the images from advertising and popular media.

Appropriation was in vogue, and Kass began using it. She developed a technique in which "quotes" — sections of a painting that referenced other paintings — were pieced together like a sentence. Her subsequent body of work questioned the art-historical canon and its privileging of white, male artists.

In 1991, Kass — who attended the School of Art at Carnegie Mellon University because Andy Warhol had — appropriated a Warhol piece for the first time. Riffing on his "Before and After" by pairing it with an image from Disney's Cinderella, Kass used the piece to consider issues of identity and identification. Warhol became a vehicle for her to delve further into issues of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and self.

Kass claims that Warhol and Barbara Streisand entered her consciousness simultaneously. Streisand, she explains, was the first star who looked like anyone Kass knew. And so she blended pop star and Pop icon into "The Jewish Jackie Series." Thus began Kass' Warhol Project, in which she reconsidered many of Warhol's signature pieces. It is here that Kass is at her best, and this exhibition takes a bold step in placing her pieces side by side with Warhol's.

Warhol's influence on artists and on our culture cannot be overstated: He has become a language unto himself. By using him and other cultural references, Kass expands on a discourse that defines not just herself, but the rest of us too.