

Deborah Kass with Terry R. Myers

by Terry R. Myers

Lecturer, critic, and independent curator Terry R. Myers recently spoke with artist Deborah **Kass**, whose forthcoming exhibition MORE feel good paintings for feel bad times will show at Paul Kasmin Gallery September 23 - October 30, 2010, about her life and work.

Terry R. Myers (Rail): I think the first show I would have seen of yours was at Scott Hanson Gallery in 1988. But of course it's the work from the early '90s that hits like a ton of bricks. I distinctly remember seeing the next show at Simon Watson's, which Laura Cottingham wrote the text for. I think for me that one was the transition. My criticism was first published at the end of '88, and so your show would have been—do you remember when it was in '88?

Deborah **Kass:** I don't.

Rail: Yeah, well it must have been earlier in the year, so at the time I probably saw it not really thinking, oh, I'm going to be someone who's going to write about art regularly. But by the time you had the show with Simon—which I think was 1990—I was in full swing. And now you are using language in your work, which of course is the thing that's most striking, probably, to any of us who watched you work on the Warhol project for as long as you did. So I guess the first question I have is, what was it like to end that project?

Kass: Oh, that's such a good question. It was like the end of the best relationship in the world, the end of a great partnership. I had reached a point where I really didn't want to show any more of the Warhol Project in New York because the show at José Freire in 1995 was called My Andy: a retrospective. I felt it would be redundant, even though I didn't think the project was finished. I continued it in my studio a few more years—the “Most Wanted,” the celebrity portraits, some commissioned portraits that were all part of the project. The work was being shown a lot across the country, so I didn't feel like there was an acute lack of visibility, except in NYC. I just wanted to make sure the project was conceptually complete. And by 2000 it had pretty much run its course, when I did the “Deb” paintings, which felt like a good way to finish. The “Debs” were the only time I painted me not as an Andy self-portrait but still painted like Andy. At the same time being this [laughing] nice Jewish lady, Elizabeth Taylor, and I thought that was the way to end. So I took a year to think and finish the loose ends during 2001. I started the new work at the end of that 12-month period in April 2002. Do I need to mention 9/11 was right in the middle of it? And I lived six blocks away. The first plane came over my building on West Broadway and it shook all over. We heard and saw everything. So, to answer: finishing up with Andy and moving on was poignant. That's how it was, in a word. It was a poignant thing, and I felt very, very grateful to have been able to collaborate with Andy Warhol for eight years, I really did. I felt like I learned so much from him.

Rail: Right, and when you look back—I don't want to assume here—are you surprised that it went on as long as it did?

Kass: Well no, it didn't really go on that long. It was eight years, and to tell you the truth I've been doing the “feel good” paintings for eight years now. Just as long. It is so weird to think in decades! I never had any expectations one way or the other when I started with Andy, I had no idea what would happen with it. I certainly knew I was going out on a limb that I had no idea how I would crawl back from. But that was part of the excitement.

Rail: Right, because I guess I'm thinking that, wow, Deb did the '90s with Andy Warhol.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Kass: That was my decade of Andy, absolutely. I started in '92 and ended in 2000 and then I started the new stuff in 2002.

Rail: It's like working on a dissertation. You get really into the subject and you realize that you're going to have to take the time to go through enough permutations to take it to where it needs to go.

Kass: To its conclusion, yeah, absolutely. I think that's true, and it was very much like a dissertation, you're right. And as such, you never know where it's going to take you. And that's the truth: you're not supposed to know.

Rail: Well, that immediately brings me to the first observation that I have written down here. I think that with the Warhol Project in particular, but also the new work, very much so, what I have most responded to in your work over the years is how it gets away with having it both ways.

Kass: Yes [laughs]. I love when that happens.

Rail: I think you figured out a way—and the Warhol project definitely set this up, although it was going on in the earlier work, the “Art History” paintings I guess is what you call them—to critique painting, even in some way to devastate it, but at the same time also make it clear that you love it almost like an obsessed fan.

Kass: Yes, that's right. I am an obsessed fan of post-war painting. And a few other things. But during my entire adult art life, starting with my freshman year at Carnegie Mellon in 1970, painting was officially “dead.” So in some way having it both ways was important to me from the start. Painting had to vibrate intellectually on a par with conceptual art when I was really young, and conceptual photography after that.

Rail: And I think that that's pretty unique, that—

Kass: Can I say something Terry? It's not only as an obsessed fan. Being marginalized as a painter and a woman has been an incredibly rich subject. Throughout the '80s, when the men of my generation were making paintings, women were not let into the market at all. Clearer-thinking women figured out to be photographers [laughs]. Photography was a marginal market—I don't think they figured this out because of this—it was less of a direct confrontation with men. The “Pictures” women all had deeply feminist projects. But they were having the conversation in a language other than painting. They could be more easily supported by male painters. Historically, though, I would argue now that, in fact, the “Pictures” women were making the most significant contributions throughout the '80s to art history. Just like the feminist abstract painters of the '70s.

Rail: Right.

Kass: This is what the *Painting Culture* show that I curated with José Freire in 1991 (and at U.C. Irvine in 1992) was about. Painting was a space that was somehow, I think purposefully, outside of the critical dialogue about representation that was happening in the most important work of the '80s and early '90s—how do I say this?—somehow painting got a pass, in terms of a critique of the construction of meaning. Everyone who was supposedly “rigorous” just hated painting. It was always to me the silliest argument to make, that the problem was painting. That let painting off the hook, and it let this idea of the male genius continue to prevail as some kind of absolute essential truth in painting, if nowhere else. The “Art History” paintings directly addressed that. Why shouldn't I be able to discuss these things in *painting*? Why can't it be the subject of a painting? It allows the language of painting to *grow*, it makes *perfect* sense. A medium *cannot* be the problem. It just can't. And in the end, a painter is someone who loves to paint; it's a pleasure issue. It's the pleasure argument. Why shouldn't I be allowed that pleasure, and by allowed I mean be part of the conversation. You know, like Lari Pittman says, “Ma, I want to paint!”

Rail: Absolutely.

Kass: So there, yes, you absolutely got it. And you know, love of painting, love of the history of painting, it's a love of the language of painting. But in my case interested in the values that language communicates, and deconstructing them. And the revelation that in the '70s women found a way to use New York School abstraction to speak differently meant that I should be able to do that. And that painting could and should be informed by the continuing feminist discourse of Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger, and Cindy Sherman. Right along with Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly, Warhol and Pollock.

Rail: Right, and I guess, just to defend myself for a second, when I say obsessed fan I drained all the negative meaning out of that, because I'm an obsessed fan of painting too. I always tell my students that I've been a painting nerd for a long time now. And when I started in the late '80s I had several—I shall keep them unnamed—critics, who expressed concern that I was far too interested in painting, and I'd better be careful.

Kass: Well, they were the same people who had problems with the fact that anyone painted, so of course I know exactly who they are. [Laughs.]

Rail: Right. And I was writing so much on painting when it was really dead—all those earlier deaths were just playing; this one was real. Right now I'm editing an anthology of writing about painting since 1981. When I was contacted about doing it, I said, well I don't want it to be yet another 1945-to-the-present selection of the expected texts. So I'm starting in 1981 because it's the year that Douglas Crimp publishes his essay "The End of Painting" and the Royal Academy in London does a show called "A New Spirit in Painting."

Kass: Perfect. And Doug Crimp has come around.

Rail: So I've been excavating the past 30 years and it's really making me think that, well, two things: One is that we may look back and see—and I'm not alone with this idea—that the 20th century avant-garde was a kind of momentary blip in the history of painting, and that despite how much modernism and the idea of progress did for painting, maybe it also got in the way, and ideas about originality and Greenberg's dictum to strip the things out of painting that you can find elsewhere, maybe that's pretty alien to painting in the end.

Kass: I suppose there is a reason to strip things down, but reasons change with the times. Can I make a really good recommendation to you?

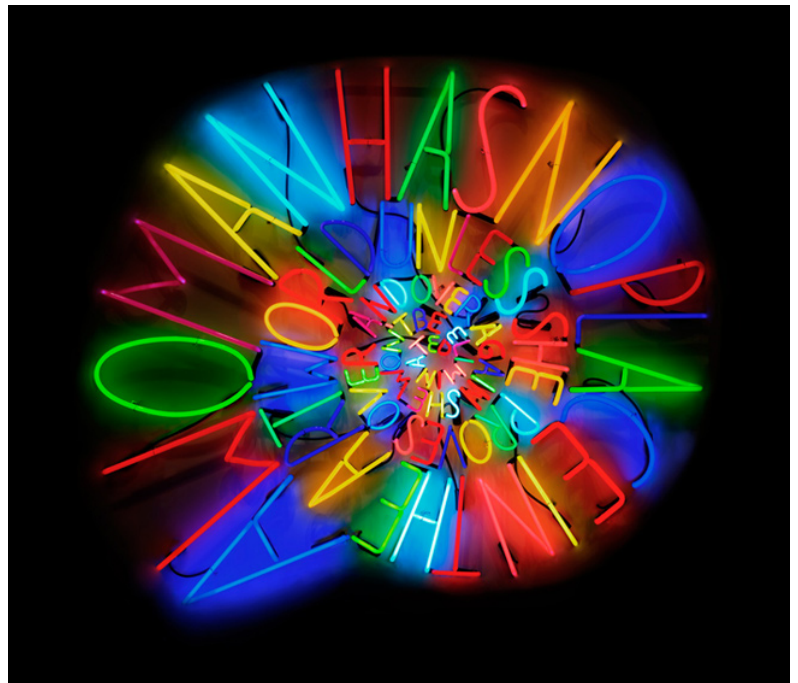
Rail: Okay.

Kass: I really cannot recommend Irving Sandler's book, *A Sweeper-Up After Artists*, strongly enough. You really should read it. Everyone should. And PS, I have fallen madly in love with Irving Sandler.

Rail: Oh yes, I saw that on your Facebook page. [Laughs.] I have read it, and I agree with you.

Kass: I want to give it to all my students at Yale. The mindset of Irving and the Abstract Expressionists seems so pertinent now—I never thought I would ever say this. But we are facing existential threats that are unimaginable, as were they. But it's not only how eloquent and profoundly insightful Irving is about Abstract Expressionists and their time, but also how he describes things moving along after them, in the most down-to-earth language, the change in content and the change in form. But I also love how he takes on Clement Greenberg.

Rail: Right, absolutely, and what I like about Irving, and he's a role model for me, is that he has always stayed in the thick of it. He didn't hold artists at arm's length. The title of his book is the name Frank O'Hara gave him. With that in mind, I'm coming to the conclusion that the last 30 years was a time of painting accepting its—and this is a strong word, but I think in these terms—its hypocrisy. Hypocrisy as in painting is all of these contradictory things at once. Its death and new spirit all rolled up in one. And I think that is how painters have understood it.



"After Louise Bourgeois" (2010). Neon and transformers on powder-coated aluminum panel. 66 × 68 × 5 inches, 167.6 × 172.7 × 12.7 cm.

Kass: I think that's true, and very perceptive.

Rail: This is one of the reasons why I'm on a big kick about art historians, because I'm convinced there are just too many of them who are not that interested in art.

Kass: It depends on who they are, to be honest, and frankly I have considered art historians my best support system, since they were very open to understanding and contextualizing my work from the beginning. They recognized what I was doing. So, I have a really different attitude; but then there are different art historians.

Rail: And you've got the good ones on your side.

Kass: The people who are consumed with making sense of the big picture are interesting, and they tend to be generous souls and make the biggest contributions. The others, who split hairs and then have an attitude about it, are problematic. The art world is a world that is made for people who want to be snobs, and my work is so deeply democratic that I have a real aversion to that. I'm interested in the people with the big overview. The world is a mess! I'm not looking to make fine distinctions—it's just not of interest—and the sort of snottiness that goes along with that is of even less interest. There are more important issues than someone thinking they are right about a historic moment, even if the moment is now. We need all the options on the table to survive right now.

Rail: Two things about that. One, your work proves that art history is a tool to be used; it's something to be known and something to be studied, but not an end in itself.

Kass: Absolutely. Aren't we supposed to learn from the lessons of all histories?

Rail: And the other thing, which you just reminded me of, I think it was 1996, I did an interview with Lari Pittman, and we got on about notions of the democratic and not being a snob, and we got hooked on the word "accommodation" in the sense that people didn't understand why they couldn't stand in front of a painting anymore like they did in, let's say the '80s with a lot of those male painters, and accommodate their desire to be elite and feel—Lari used the phrase—"damn smart." And your work breaks that down, and the double trouble, which I love, is that not only are you breaking it down, but you're making it a hell of a lot of fun.

Kass: Why, thank you! That's about it.

Rail: Let's switch to the paintings in the 2000s. We hadn't really been in contact for awhile, and when I heard about the show in 2007 it hit me, "Wow, it's been a while since I've seen what Deb is up to." And then to be genuinely surprised, like "Wow, okay, this is—"

Kass: This is different!

Rail: Yeah, exactly, but for me it made perfect sense and it pushed a lot of buttons in terms of—and I don't mean this in terms of a critique of the Warhol Project—but I feel that the work you started on after that is even more, I don't know, available, or to use your word, democratic, and it does it by bringing text into the work, and maybe that's surprising to a lot of people.

Kass: The people who were into the Warhol Project tended to get the "feel good" paintings right away. I wanted to do what I had been doing in the Warhol Project, just in a new way. Of course deepening and pushing is part of the process. It's the availability, to use your word, of my work that's really important to me. In my words, accessible, and that runs smack into the whole snob problem.

Rail: I love that, the snob problem. That's a good title.

Kass: [Laughs.] It's just a personality problem I think, being ungenerous. Andy had a lot of trouble with that in the beginning of his fine art career. I look back now because it's been so many years, right? Now it's like, oh dear, I've been showing for 30 years and I can see bigger patterns of what happened in the world and my place in it. I think this combination of accessibility and critique, which has been consistent in my work since the "Art History" paintings in the late '80s is a critique of power. This has sort of explained my weird career. I would also say that my generation, which isn't yours, but mine, are the sons and daughters of Mad Men and the great white middle class of that time—our fathers were the sort of all-powerful, autocratic, authoritarian males, that Virginia Woolf wrote about. The fact that the men my age and class grew up and found out that this power wasn't in fact their entitlement has driven them quite mad. Particularly when their entitlement collides with their mediocrity in middle age. They sort of explode.

Rail: When you were talking about your generation versus mine, I'm realizing I've been teaching now for 20 years, which is kind of mind boggling to me, but I caught the tail end of what you're talking about. But getting back to the use of language or text, which is a way to have it both ways: Text can be completely democratic, or not. Text can be completely personal, or not. It can be the most anonymous thing. Not to get too obscure here, but some time ago I discovered a bit of history in Edward Said's work in which he was discussing two competing groups of 11th century Islamic grammarians, and their debate about whether the meaning of the word is

somehow in its physical, visual depiction, or whether it is completely arbitrary. So that argument has been going on for a long time.

Kass: I think all arguments have been going on for a long time. Doesn't the Kabbalah address some of this, too?

Rail: Yes, this goes back to my earlier point about the avant-garde earlier, that the longer view of painting is a slower view, a cyclical view, and more and more I wonder in 500 years how will the 20th century be seen?

Kass: Let's hope someone is around in 500 years.

Rail: The other artist that I'll make a connection with here, which won't come as a big surprise, is Mary Heilmann.

Kass: Oh yeah!

Rail: Yeah, and you know that little book I wrote about her painting "Save the Last Dance For Me"? That title, as I say in the book, suggests that painting can be in the past, present, and future all at once, and that's what great painting does, it's past, present, and future all at the same time.

Kass: Ooh, I love that idea. It is really brilliant.

Rail: And, as I jokingly say in the book, or not so jokingly, the last dance of painting may never happen.

Kass: I think that's right. And let's hope not!

Rail: But there's a reason why painting needs that idea of the last dance. It's not an accident.

Kass: I think it's just a holdover from Modernism, and formalism, and Greenberg, and I think that's what that is, period. I think it's how painting has been perceived as an endgame, which has kept it in the realm maybe of football [laughs] so only men can play it, as opposed to tennis, which manages to have women champions, also. And I think that is the oldest, saddest paradigm, and it has almost killed us. And I once believed in my heart of hearts that the intersection of feminism and New York School painting in the '70s changed, it changed the game.

Rail: I have to say, that that text you published in the **Rail** ["The Seventies," September 2007] was so important.

Kass: Thank you.

Rail: We keep getting sidetracked, but that text is a direct reflection of your work, and the reason your work is successful, in my opinion, is because it's deeply connected, you know, it connects a lot of dots. Now I'm going to segue back to where I was going with Heilmann. To me, of course, the power of a pop song lyric is above and beyond. I'm not the Broadway person that you are, but I can deeply respect your knowledge of and devotion to it, because I have that in pop music. And you know Mary's work is so shocking when you first find out about it, it's like, wow, how is she getting away with this? One of my favorite moments in Heilmann's history is an interview she did with Ross Bleckner in **BOMB**, where he's going on about, you know, how she's only using geometry, and it's so anonymous; he's just marveling at how she personalizes it. I'm paraphrasing here, but my favorite part in the interview is Mary's response—the transcript just reads as "laughs."

Kass: Oh, absolutely! Mary and the '70s painters found fascinating ways to turn the idea of the universal in abstraction left over from the A/E guys, Colorfielders, Greenbergians, etc., and personalize it, to make abstraction speak for them. That is their contribution. To make the "universal" specific, emotional, personal, local. It was so radical! It's not like Broadway is my only frame of reference in music, not at all. It's actually sort of political to use Broadway; it goes right to the snob issue again. On the other hand, I think the whole idea of music and emotional resonance is just huge. For instance, I was listening to A Chorus Line over and over on the day I turned 47, and every time I got to track 3, "Everything Was Beautiful At The Ballet," and at the lyric "Daddy I would love to dance," I started crying. And I had been listening to this thing for years, and I didn't know why on that day of my birthday I just kept losing my shit. I sent my assistant home at noon, I was so completely undone. At seven o'clock at night, I was on the phone with a friend, and I realized that my father died at 47, and this was my 47th birthday. It's not like I didn't know my father died at 47, but I hadn't thought about it the entire year I was 46! I had utterly suppressed this fact that haunted me my whole adult life. And you know, once I started the new work, those words were on the very top of the list. I had no idea how to make that into a painting. It took five years, and then one night I dreamt the painting. It was a completely unconscious or preconscious emotional connection. It was only through doing the work for long enough, that I was able to develop a vocabulary to put that painting together in my unconscious, which isn't where my paintings usually come from.

Rail: What you just said connects so many dots that my mind is spinning at the moment. The idea of the unconscious suddenly be-

ing front and center is one thing, but the other thing that comes to mind is the way that these paintings look—again this goes back to having it both ways—the paintings look on the one hand very sort of effortless, like they just kind of happened, but there’s something about them, especially the ones that I saw in 2007, where you know that’s not true. But it’s not that they’re faking looking effortless, their looking effortless is a part of the fact that they took a hell of a lot of effort. That’s the way they—and you know I use this word very advisedly—feel. And again this is not meant as a critique of the Warhol project, but I think that with the Warhol paintings you couldn’t go there in the same way, as a viewer.

Kass: These paintings are all about feeling. They are the paintings of an older person, and that’s sort of what they were about to begin with. They were about turning 50. At that point you have a better perspective and a bigger point of view. On the other hand, I feel like I know so much less, since I thought I knew everything when I was younger. I was such a wise guy! It’s weird.

Rail: But so true!

Kass: Also, with the “The Jewish Jackies” and the “Yentls,” I was addressing an obvious absence in the multicultural argument, which of course was Jewishness.

Rail: Right.

Kass: It was something that nobody had addressed in the 40 or 50 years after the Holocaust, which I found disturbing. Identity and “the cultural politics of difference,” to quote Cornel West, were everywhere in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, but not a Jew to be seen! Unless they were queer, feminist, transgender, or black. And the question was always how to bring this into painting, this one big, glaring, capital-O other, that no one was addressing. And it was greeted with the usual ambivalence [laughs] that women, Democrats, and Jews only reserve for themselves.

Rail: Right. [Laughs]

Kass: So after that I felt I had done my civic duty. [Laughs]

Rail: Right.

Kass: But, I’ll just say about the new work, on top of it being about being of a certain age, female, paint loving, art history loving, show tune singing—it’s also really Jewish.

Rail: The Word, of course, as a concept, is right there.

Kass: In the beginning there was the Word.

Rail: Exactly.

Kass: So much of the Great American Songbook and Broadway scores were written by Jews. It was ultimately about becoming real Americans.

Rail: And that’s necessary, in my opinion. Yeah, you need the disco, that’s a requirement.

Kass: [Laughs] I definitely need the disco.

Rail: Yes [laughs].

Kass: Just to go back, I do now see this consistency in my work from the “Art History” paintings on. I feel like now I have three consistent bodies of work, in terms of content, but not form. You know, the one built on the other, built on the other.

Rail: In a way it takes you on this journey—the word I used before was “accommodation”—but a kind of democratic pathway that the Warhol paintings provide, vis-à-vis Warhol, to the subject matter. I remember walking in and seeing that first show at fiction/nonfiction and feeling that they celebrate Warhol and hold his feet to the fire at the same time.

Kass: I guess that’s true.

Rail: Right. Well, we’ve gone on now for almost an hour, and so far I have not used a word that I’m going to now use, which is “appropriation.”

Kass: Okay.

Rail: Of course it's there, and again I'm not the first to say this, but your appropriation is not like other people's appropriation. Your appropriation is much more like Kay Rosen's. I mean Kay's work is appropriation too, using words out in the world. And Mary [Heilmann], often speaks about how when she got to New York she was going to use other things in the world in painting.

Kass: Well, yes. My appropriation had to go another step otherwise I would just be making second-generation appropriation. I believe the art world is on about its fifth generation at the moment. Most of the Pictures women made work about the prevailing male gaze, women's roles, etc. I wanted to do something that was not necessarily absorbable into a male narrative. It was legible because it used Andy's style, which was so ubiquitous as to be a language. Thus Barbra [Streisand], who controlled her representation and guarded it like the military police. She was not absorbable into a male narrative or Gentile narrative. It was her narrative to create and do with what she wanted. Really, she is remarkable. You bring up Mary Heilmann and Kay Rosen, and it makes so much sense, it's boggling my mind. And it's not like I haven't thought of it, of course. Kay has influenced me. I put her in the "Painting Culture" shows. I was completely influenced by Mary Heilmann; I went gaga for her work in 1976: It was so non-reductive, offhanded, casual, relaxed, anecdotal—everything that abstraction was not supposed to be. Instead of sitting in a bar arguing, her paintings felt like a cup of tea and a rambling conversation. But coming from you, Terry Myers? It just makes so much sense. [Laughs.] It's exactly where the work is. It's absolutely fitting between those two women. As much as I'm making the paintings sit between Stella and Warhol, who were my big obsessions as a kid.



"YO" (2010). Oil on canvas. 71 1/4 × 66 1/2 inches. 181 × 168.9 cm

Rail: Right, right. Well, I do want this on the record, what I'm about to say—I was thinking this before we started but now it's just pounding in my head—is that I feel I owe you an apology, Deb, because I'm realizing I've been really remiss to not been as involved in your work as I need to be.

Kass: That's so sweet, Terry. The words every artist wants to hear.

Rail: No really, because you're absolutely right, that what you've been up to—well, let's just leave that as it is, because I do really mean it. Because the other piece of this that I have to put on the table here, and nothing against Kay and Mary, because anyone out there listening knows I adore both of them and adore their work, but of course we haven't talked about what you've done in terms of bringing—again, you mentioned gay identity in the '90s, which was a big topic—but the way you've brought that into your work is so important, and the way that continues in this work, I think, just has to be acknowledged and celebrated.

Kass: I've always said the following words the very few times I've given a talk: "As a very proud, out, gay man, I want to say the following..." I have an issue with the word and category queer because I think it obfuscates the material differences between men and women, which are so huge, okay? That said, I might be the queerest artist I know. First I impersonated a gay man for eight years. I came out publicly as an obsessed Streisand fan, and then dressed up as Elizabeth Taylor like a tranny. Now I have come out as a crazed show queen. I don't know where this came from, but even when I used to do the Warhol talk, there was always a boy who would raise his hand and say, "I'm the president of the GLBT club, and I'd like to know how you think your sensibilities intersect with those of a gay man." And my pat response was, "Well when I went to college, and I was completely obsessed with old movies, Bette Davis, Barbra Streisand, Broadway, Hollywood, modern art, and design, the only other people who shared my obsessions were gay men."

Rail: [Laughs.] Hell-oooo.

Kass: And why I went to school that way as a very precocious 18-year-old, I have no idea. It must have been a past life. [Laughs.]

Rail: That earlier piece you wrote in the **Rail**, about your early days, is fascinating to me. It's fascinating that you paid attention, that you were at the right place at the right time.

Kass: Well, I put myself there, Terry. I didn't live in Manhattan and no one I knew had any of the same interests. I honestly didn't know anyone else from Rockville Centre, Long Island, who put themselves on a train and went to the Art Students' League with her babysitting money. This was like an affliction I had. I had a disease, and it was called "I want to be an artist." [Laughs.] I wanted to do this since I was five, so the minute I could get on a train and go to MoMA, I went. And you know, I read everything I could possibly understand in the MoMA bookstore, which wasn't a lot, but I did my homework. But I was alone, in this little world of mine, trying to figure it out.

Rail: You were A Chorus Line. I mean come hell or high water it was going to happen. You were a Broadway show, Deb. Your story line is a Broadway show, right?

Kass: "God, I hope I get it. I hope I get it!" I really do like shows about shows. Yes, my story was straight out of Broadway and Hollywood. There are certain narratives, the kid with a dream, the underdog getting success, the handsome guy, the Ziegfeld Follies that formed me. Not to mention my favorite from the '60s, "question authority." But we have lived through 30 years of deeply conservative American politics, and in a world obsessed with power these are not popular narratives. Neither is the one about the sassy, ambitious, smart-mouthed gal.

Rail: You're getting to the crux of the matter here, in that your role is to not say anything, and in your new work you're using the language of speaking, of saying or not saying, of being quiet. I'd be interested in your response to this—and again this isn't my idea, many people have written about it—is that gay identity has to be enunciated in language. We live in a culture where it's required to be announced, hence crazy situations like Don't Ask Don't Tell. A gay person's relationship to "the Word," is significant.

Kass: Don't forget the movie *The Word is Out*. You know we just happened to catch Milk on television. And, I have to say, when Harvey Milk says to his political team. We were so riveted and inspired. "You have to come out! You have to!" I grew up in the '60s; questioning authority was a moral imperative. And my mother was a great FDR liberal. She was on the right side of every political argument her whole life and there were plenty of them. She taught me that it was my duty as a citizen of the world to articulate positions, popular or not, and sing out, Louise! And in my mother's movies and books, one was always rewarded for being brave. I didn't understand that you could actually be hurt for it. My God, I thought it was my civic duty to be Auntie Mame and enlighten the masses that "life is a banquet and most poor suckers are starving to death!"

Rail: That said, I want to ask you about the neon piece.

Kass: Oh puh-lease.

Rail: From Louise Bourgeois.

Kass: After Louise Bourgeois.

Rail: "After Louise Bourgeois", right. The decision to actually go ahead and make something in neon, I mean it looks very—I haven't seen it in person yet, but it fits.

Kass: It just seemed like the right thing to do. I made a painting with those words on it, and—

Rail: Should we say them? "A woman has no place in the art world unless she proves over and over again she won't be eliminated."

Kass: Right, which is a twist on what Louise actually said. It's one of the first drawings I did, and I had this concept of doing an ode to the great Louises. "Sing out Louise," "A Woman Has No Place," and from Louise Nevelson, "I'd Be Dead Without My Anger." And I always saw those in a separate room, called the Louise Suite. Anyway, the neon made sense—it just did. It was just a really natural outgrowth. It was a surprise.

Rail: But the creeping in of a [Bruce] Nauman reference is interesting, because I don't feel as much permission to go there with your earlier drawing of the phrase.

Kass: Well, maybe that's because it needed to be in neon! [Laughs.]

Rail: No no no, I mean I know that's an obvious thing, but that you did go to a new medium, but on the other hand I'm thinking now that you did make your Brooklyn Battery Tunnel film after Warhol's "Empire," you have done photographs, so... I guess neon is in its own way as much about jazz clubs and Broadway as it is Bruce Nauman or something.

Kass: Totally! The bright lights of the Great White Way! When it was being made at Lite Brite Neon, who does work for lots of artists,

I never saw anything plugged in; I didn't know what it would look like. When we plugged that thing in at the gallery I went crraazy! And I just designed it but didn't make it myself. It was like the opposite of being a painter. [Laughs.]

Rail: Right, right. [Laughs] That brings me to another question, the making of these paintings of the 2000s versus the making of the paintings of the Warhol Project, versus the making of the paintings of the "Art History Project." Are there differences?

Kass: Well, Andy was Andy: he'd shoot the subject, and he'd make the silkscreen and paint the background and so on. I did what Andy did. With the Art History Paintings, I had to be able to actually paint a lot of different ways. That was total fun. In the first "feel good" paintings, it was the same challenge—to paint in a variety of styles. These newest ones come out of the flat backgrounds of my Warhol paintings, which were essentially just beautiful fields. I would just stare at them all over my studio walls and think, I gotta do something with Ellsworth Kelly one day. [Laughs.] So I finally did. It was a bit hard to let these be just flat, gorgeous color. I think women think they have to work harder to make their paintings look more difficult because they're not allowed the simple kind of elegance that a man is. Although Mary and Kay both did a number on that idea, didn't they? People liking one's work has everything to do with being given the benefit of the doubt, and you are less likely to get that benefit if you're a woman. And more likely if you're a man. Making complex, difficult-looking work sometimes is an overcompensation.

Rail: Right, and again that puts you right back in this trio that we've created here with Mary and Kay. Mary's paintings were just a big F.U. to that way of thinking, and she went through a lot of hell because of it, as we know.



"OY" (2009). Oil on canvas. 71 1/4 × 66 1/2 inches. 181 × 168.9 cm

Kass: That's why I went gaga for her paintings at Holly Solomon's Gallery. Because they questioned authority, the gestalt of those times, the '60s and '70s, that I never got over. And my goddesses Levine, Kruger, Sherman never did either. I love these poles of Kay and Mary. They're artists I have spent years thinking about, all of them. These are people I really respect so deeply and yes, yes, yes, yes! There's something else I wanted to say, though. It was—I can't remember. Oh, I hope it comes back to me, because once I get into the fact that we're facing annihilation on the planet I can't help but think of Irving and Abstract Expressionists and really, oh!, really being able to use what we've learned in history to save ourselves now. We are facing an existential threat like we haven't since Khrushchev and Kennedy had their fingers on the buttons. I was of the generation in which we practiced ducking under our desks in case of a nuclear explosion in elementary school. That's how real this was. This was a regular drill, like the fire drills. The chronic anxiety, the post-traumatic stress of World War II, the Holocaust, and then the Hiroshima and annihilation, and then the Cold War. These were not abstractions. The anxiety was palpable, global, everyday, and was so enormous culturally! The Abstract Expressionists really explored it and made something great out of it. I feel like we're facing a very similar thing now. Two wars, 9/11, the world coming to an end, we've poisoned it, it's Doomsday. 2012, the Mayan calendar. And I think we need every resource we have ever had to deal with this. And it probably doesn't even matter. But what is the option? It's the ultimate existential question, how to survive ourselves. If it's Sondheim and music, or history and painting or whatever, we need it. We need it, we need it, we need it. It's not about splitting hairs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terry R. Myers is a lecturer, critic, and independent curator based in Chicago and Los Angeles.

read this article : <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2010/09/art/deborah-kass-with-terry-r-myers>