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Art as Social Critique — With a Little Help From the Rolling Stones and Katy Perry

By ALEXANDRIA SYMONDS DEC. 9, 2015



Deborah Kass: "No Kidding"

Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery

When you walk into "No Kidding," the artist Deborah Kass's exhibition opening tonight at Paul Kasmin Gallery, be prepared for a strange sensation: you can almost hear Kass's new mixed-media paintings in addition to seeing them. "The thing about music is that it's so democratic, and art isn't," Kass said when T visited her studio last month. Throughout the show, the artist alludes to popular song lyrics from a wide swath of eras, from the 1895 waltz "The Band Played On" to Fats Waller's 1929 "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue" to Katy Perry's 2010 "Teenage Dream." The references are diverse, but taken as a whole, their message is clear: a deep-seated, and deeply droll, cynicism about the present political and artistic climate, and about our capacity to fiddle while Rome burns. Other pieces in the show ironically deploy phrases like "GOOD TIMES" and, in several three-panel works, "WHO BLUE WHO," to much the same effect.

"I mean, I think things really suck; and yeah, it's a big conundrum to be compelled and identify and spend your life doing something when your values are so different than the world you live in," Kass said; her default tone is both wry and plainspoken. "I don't know how many people feel really in sync with the world as it is right now. And the people who support the art world are probably the people who do feel most in sync — they're the ones benefiting."

Among the pieces in the show, "The Band Played On" and "Prepare for Saints" (a riff on the title of Steven Watson's book chronicling the operatic collaboration between Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson) offer the most pointed critique of the art world specifically, rather than a broader political subject. Both paintings juxtapose their respective bits of text against the kind of paint-splattered background that has variously been called "crapstraction," "zombie formalism" and, as Kass prefers, "citational modernism" — aesthetically unchallenging work that has saturated the art market in recent years. "That's normcore painting, and that's what people are buying and trading now," Kass said, along with some slightly more colorful critique she opted to keep off the record. To pit the style against a phrase like "AND THE BAND PLAYED ON," then, is a deliberate, barbed statement about the kind of art-world navelgazing that ignores social struggle.

Kass, by contrast, is constantly influenced by politics. "Think about Ferguson, think about Black Lives Matter, think about abortion, think about Donald Trump," Kass said. "All this work from 2002 on is about politics. I, like Toni Morrison and Emily Dickinson and Audre Lorde and all the great people, think you're supposed to make art about the world; and this is art about the world. It's not optimistic. I'm just not, anymore." Several works in the show address these issues head-on: notably, "Black & Blue #2," a painting divided down the middle, with a black background and "BLACK" in blue neon on the left, and a blue background with "BLUE" in black neon on the right. (Many of the works on view in "No Kidding" incorporate neon — a first in Kass's career.) It's both a loving wink to Jasper Johns's play with language and color and a grim indictment of contemporary race relations; the Fats Waller song with which it shares a title laments the struggle of being a black man in America. Another canvas boldly proclaims "JUST A SHOT AWAY," a line from the chorus of the Rolling Stones' "Gimme Shelter" — a song that balances difficult subject matter with inventive form. "I would say that might be the aesthetic of my generation. That's what formed us, being able to do that," Kass said. "How do you make beauty political, how do you make politics beautiful?"

As for the painting inspired by "Teenage Dream," which declares across four Ellsworth Kelly-style bands of color that "WE'LL BE YOUNG FOREVER," Kass said she came to love the song after seeing it reimagined on "Glee." "I live for 'Glee!'" she exclaimed. "I would say it's not like my work, it is my work. They literally did the same songs I did for the same reasons." She identifies, she explained, with Ryan Murphy's tongue-in-cheek sensibility. And despite the seriousness with which most of the works in the show were conceived, there's a touch of the wicked jokester to Kass, too. "Katy Perry should buy this painting," she said, deadpan. "Please put that on the record! Attention, Katy Perry!"

"No Kidding" is on view through Jan. 23 at Paul Kasmin Gallery, 515 W. 27th St., New York, paulkasmingallery.com.