

# IMITATION OF ART

## John Currin's sleight of hand

By Lance Esplund

Discussed in this essay:

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Every few years another new painter is heralded as a modern master on the level of Rembrandt or Velázquez, and he or she is passed the crown for "saving painting"—not only for saving painting but also for making it relevant again and up-to-date. Recent royalty has included the contemporary artists Eric Fischl, David Salle, Gerhard Richter, and Jenny Saville. John Currin, who, at forty-one, was graced with a mid-career retrospective at the Whitney Museum last winter, is the reigning King *du jour*.

The press release for the Whitney's exhibition designates Currin "one of the most important and provocative artists of his generation," and he is constantly compared in the catalogue and the press to French, Italian, and Flemish masters. Reviewing the retrospective for *The New Yorker*, Peter Schjeldahl declares that Currin "has rehabilitated fallen practices of visual storytelling, restoring to painting its ancient functions of illustration and rhetorical persuasion." Arthur Danto, in *The Nation*, commends him for evolving "from the role of Bad Boy of the art world into what very few contemporary painters have the gift, let alone the taste, to aspire to—a master of high Mannerist

aesthetics." Even before Currin's show could be seen in New York, *The New York Times Magazine* ran a profile of



the artist, by Deborah Solomon, in which Currin's technical skill and virtuosity are given as proof that he "revives the grand manner of the past." And Mia Fineman, writing in *Slate*, affirms the consensus by assuring us

that "everyone is unanimous about one thing: John Currin can paint."

Currin is a figurative artist who paints illustrative and distorted nudes, portraits, and contemporary genre scenes that are puzzled together from photographs, comic books, old-master reproductions, porn, and fashion magazines, and his surfaces can vary within a single canvas from slick to encrusted to leather-dry. Currin's handling of flesh—which is rendered as smooth and artificial as a mannequin's or as flimsy and thin as cellophane or as caked-on rough as a stucco wall—has been lauded as that of a master equal to Cranach, Balthus, and Courbet. And if you were to look at *John Currin*, the catalogue for his Whitney retrospective, in which Cranach's *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (c. 1530) is reproduced together with Currin's pastiches of Cranach, the superficial similarities between the two would seem obvious. But it is only on the level of the superficial that any similarities between the old masters and Currin can be made.

The breathless claims made by critics and art historians on Currin's behalf betray a rather cursory way of looking at painting, one that mistakes technical flourishes for craftsmanship, any whiff of the old masters for the old masters themselves. Before his retrospective, I had seen very few of Currin's paintings in the flesh. One of the benefits of photographic reproduction for an artist, especially for a mediocre one, is that it fuses paintings that do not cohere and provides uniformity where uniformity is lacking. Problems great and small can disappear: color notes that jar and screech, brushstrokes too thick or thin, surfaces too oily or dry, all get lost in translation. And the leveling off imposed by photography also can rob great paintings of those very same subtleties—subtleties that set masterpieces apart.

In Cranach's *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, Judith is surrounded by a field of black. Standing behind a narrow strip of table, she holds the upraised sword in her right hand and

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Holofernes's severed head, steadied on the table, in her left. Cranach's field of black—like smoke, then liquid, then solid—moves behind, in front of, and through the forms. And those forms, in turn, move and interact at varying speeds within the malleable blackness. Black is not merely a backdrop for Cranach; it is an organic rhythmic force in the painting. Black on Judith's left presses against and wraps around her, rotating her body to her right. Black penetrates her abdomen, arms, and the table. Blackness opens her up like a tunnel, as if she had given birth to Holofernes's head. At times, Cranach's black feels deep, cool, and airy, as if we were looking down into a well. At other times, black—glossy as lacquerware or soft as velvet—comforts, swallows, and envelops. And at other times still, black, with the swiftness of a sword, snaps back flat to the plane. Judith's sword not only cuts through and opens the blackness; it is a stand-in for Holofernes's body and a supporting pillar to the space. And Holofernes's head—held taut within the rectangle of the canvas by Judith's hand, the sword, the table, and that pliant darkness—appears ready to be catapulted toward us and is the bridge, or entrance, to the painting. For Cranach, black is both stage and womb, in which his characters and dramas develop. But in Currin's pastiches of Cranach—standing, lifeless nudes on fields of black—black is an inert and aimless void. Black is merely black.

In most of his paintings, Currin isolates his figures against flat fields of color. Whether he uses yellow or pink or black or blue to serve as a backdrop, the color field suffocates the very bodies it surrounds, rendering space nonexistent. Currin piles details upon details: he tells us that one form is in front of another, that there are so many wrinkles in a cloth, clouds in a sky, or blades of grass on a hill, that a gay couple is happy, that a man is aroused, that a woman is smiling. But faces always feel masklike and convey no emotion. Curves suggest movement, but no movement is felt. Forms in Currin's paintings, one overlapping the other, may imply deep space, but the forms in the distance collapse against those in the foreground, collapsing the space along with them.

Space in a painting is like a pliable, woven field in which all forms—a figure in the foreground, a distant tree on the horizon, the space in between the figure and the tree—must be equal-



ly considered and fully realized by the painter. Certainly, painting is as much about inventing impossibilities and contradictions (as when, for example, two entwined lovers, their limbs and bodies seemingly dissolved or melded together, create a third figure, a strange amalgamation of the two) as it is about conveying clearly the autonomy and separateness of the figures and the spaces between them, but an artist must be in control. He must be able to orchestrate space. Things cannot be allowed to fall where they may.

Currin would like us to believe that he is in control. His calculated choices—the artists he appropriates, the distortions in his figures, how he stands in a photo-op—have been noted by Robert Rosenblum, in his essay for *John Currin*, and by critics, in reviews, as if these choices proved Currin's aesthetic taste and intellectual prowess. Rosenblum marvels that in the “distorting mirror” of Currin's paintings, “a new race is being born before our eyes.” And, in a way, distortion is the only element that is vaguely interesting in his work. Currin is well known for his paintings of young women and silver-haired matrons with basketball-size

breasts: *The Magnificent Bosom, Jaunty and Mame, The Bra Shop, The Farm, Big Lady*, and *The Wizard*. We can see that the breasts on the figures are huge. They spread to the edges of the canvas. Each breast is caressed with the brush. Around and around it goes. The breasts have shadows, modeling, and highlights. (“My God!” I heard a viewer at the Whitney exclaim. “They're bigger than her head!”) And yet Currin's paintings prove that size isn't everything: at the very moment when volume is most at stake, the breasts deflate. Shadows dent and puncture the surfaces of Currin's figures, whose breasts flatten out when they should be at their fullest. His bodies have volume only near their contours. He cannot carry us across a form. Distortion and exaggeration are merely gimmicks that do not feel like honest expressions of his hand.

In fact, little in Currin feels honest. There is an awkward contrivance in his paintings. Every move is without rhythm and is fraught with artifice, as if the painting were a series of calculations, made at a distance. And because distortion is sensational rather than essential, the paintings feel forced. When exaggeration and distortion are the rule, we come to expect them and they surprise us not at all.

What can happen when viewers look at a painting is they can stop too soon. They can cease to listen to the painter once they have recognized the fruit on the table and the highlight on the fruit or Christ on the Cross and the sadness of the Virgin. They can stop at the mere naming of the forms and sentiments and deny themselves the rich, layered experience of moving from form to form within the painting. This is what leads viewers, when faced with abstract art, to demand, “But what is it about?” When viewers pay more attention to what they already know about fruit, or Christ on the Cross, than to what the artist is communicating through his exploration of a theme (the theme of fertility and abundance, for example, or of sacrifice and redemption), they are treating paintings like simple illustrations or pieces of prose rather than poetry. Paintings are more than a sum of the recognizable images within them. Paintings, like poems, speak

through metaphor. This is the language of art.

In critics' assessments of Currin's work, so much emphasis is given to the meanings of Currin's choices that the tradition of painting is reduced to a set of signs devoid of personal expression. When Michael Kimmelman, chief art critic for the *New York Times*, salutes Currin for going "through a Picabialike patch of doing intentionally terrible paintings, [including] the cantaloupe-breasted pin-ups [that] toy ostentatiously with different modes of putting pigment to canvas, particularly with the bad-is-good approach," he is implying that the "style" of a painter (the "look" of a Picabia or that of a Vargas girl, or even that of a Dürer or a Van Eyck) can be appropriated, tried on like a hat. Everything that is unique to an artist is reduced to a set of mannerisms, gestures, and tics to be impersonated, and the experience of a painting is reduced to the recognition of its influences.

This approach to Currin, and to art, is but a symptom of a disposition that has been cultivated for years, beginning at least as far back as 1863, when Manet, with his paintings *Olympia* and *Luncheon on the Grass*, turned artists into dandies, muses into sluts, and odalisques into whores. Manet appropriated the art of the past with new intent, which was to shock the public. And with his slapdash approach to painting (producing works that resemble, in places, an out-of-focus photograph), Manet challenged the separation between "high" and "low" and the notion of a painting as a stage. He also narrowed the distance between painting and viewer, sped up the experience of art, and made a clear break with the past.

Within the first few decades of the twentieth century, abstract artists had done away with the figure in painting and sculpture, and by the forties and fifties the Abstract Expressionists had replaced the easel painting with the heroic, mural scale. In the sixties, Warhol produced work that merely reflected commerce and popular culture; in the seventies, Photo Realism substituted the truth of a painting with the truth of a photograph. And long before the changes wrought by the Abstract Expressionists and Warhol, Marcel Duchamp, with his "Readymades" (the objects such as the urinal, the bicycle wheel, and the snow shovel he brought almost directly from store shelves to gallery pedestals), had done away with the very notion of "Art," nullifying core notions of beauty, personal taste, uniqueness, and art with a capital A.

In an industrial age, Duchamp's challenge was, to be sure, a provocative one: printing, photography, film, and

the assembly line, as well as the ubiquitous experience of art through photo-reproduction, suggested the question of whether the handmade object would survive at all. But Duchamp had also replaced the experience of the art object with the mere concept, the idea. And it was the influence of the conceptual art of Duchamp, the artistic path of least resistance, that eventually stuck. Following in the tradition of Duchamp was easy to understand, easy to teach, and easy to do, and it had the added advantage of novelty. Art became more about politics than aesthetics, and Duchamp's ironic posturing offered an avant-garde stance that still holds to this day. Wedded to painting, however, Duchamp's cynicism does not make for a very good bedfellow. Prop a shovel in the corner of a gallery and call it art. Fine. But this kind of clever subversion becomes more difficult when dealing with a tradition like painting.

By the time I was an art student in the 1980s, painting, especially figurative painting, was being shunned as the art world increasingly embraced photography, video, performance art, and installation. Many people believed that painting from life was merely mimetic and an activity better suited to the antiquated concerns of days gone by. Contemporary issues called for nothing less than contemporary media. There was a sense that if you were painting seriously, let alone painting still lifes or nudes, then you had some explaining to do. Your choice of medium, by extension, reflected your world outlook. I remember very well a class critique, in 1983, during which a sculpture professor (who advocated working with lasers) shook his head as he asked



me, "Why, in the Jet Age, are you still smearing oils on canvas?"

Critics were often surprised when an artist chose paint instead of a more "relevant" medium. If an artist chose to paint, it probably meant he was making a statement about Painting and what It stood for—be it nostalgia or the elitism of "high art" or the idea of "illusions" or, in the case of the nude, the sexist stance of the "male gaze"—and critics were quick to search for and interpret the signs. Currin, who chose to paint for the cynical reason that it was subversive, was not the exception. When asked in the catalogue interview whether his art "started out as reactionary," Currin answers in the affirmative: "I was playing into the context of the early 90s, when it was very easy to exploit people's inhibitions about painting."

Many critics and art historians by then had removed themselves from the role of being arbiters of taste. After the widespread influence of Duchamp, taste, seen as the last bastion of the old guard, had become politically loaded; and aesthetics itself became suspect. Nor did these art professionals seem to understand the tradition of painting, which they were treating as the visual equivalent of text instead of poetry. Art criticism became the interpretation not of paintings but of ideas. And after a few decades of artworks such as Piero Manzoni's canned *Artist's Shit*, Vito Acconci's masturbation performances, Jeff Koons's gargantuan topiary, Tracy Emin's tampons, and Chris Ofili's elephant dung, it is perhaps understandable that critics and curators, tired of the same old thing, occasionally hunger for some traditional beauty and painting in the museum. Or at least some semblance of it. Enter John Currin.

I suspect that one of the main reasons critics see Currin as more than the weak painter he is, is because he entertains them as he covers all the bases. Currin is not a stuffy, old, dyed-in-the-wool figurative painter who pooh-poohs anything done since the nineteenth century. On the contrary, Currin's paintings, with their clever clues to and appropriations of European art and American popular culture, provide critics and art historians

with titillating Pop exercises. Currin devours everything with an equal appetite. He will test your abilities to recognize quotes from Norman Rockwell and *Conan the Barbarian* alongside references to Hans Baldung Grien and Botticelli. His paintings are both old and new, traditional as they mock tradition. Painting that, for insider art aficionados willing to pay attention, acknowledges both the uptown scholar and the downtown hipster in each of them. Schjeldahl puts it this way: "Currin hooks us by rewarding capacities for knowledge and experience which most major art of the last half-century repressed. . . . It is pleasant to know things. It is a delight to find one's knowledge anticipated and engaged."

In an art world obsessed with newness, sex, celebrity, and politics, Currin goes into the musty old storehouse of the museum and never dirties his hands with the past. Robert Rosenblum reminds us that Currin is an artist who goes to the museum and looks at El Greco, Velázquez, Carracci, Corot, and Ingres. But Currin does not linger. He has said in a 2003 interview that he prefers to look at a painting "for twenty or thirty seconds and then move on," adding, "when I go to the Metropolitan, I don't stand and gaze at a painting for fifteen or twenty minutes. I have tried it, but it's excruciating." In my own experience, it is only after fifteen or twenty minutes with a Velázquez or an El Greco, as with anything complex and layered, that the painting truly begins to reveal itself. Currin's impatience as a viewer tells us a lot about what he expects, puts into, and gleans from a work of art.

Currin treats the museum like a shopping mall. He gives only a cursory glance to the artists he references and appropriates. He goes into the Metropolitan Museum of Art and takes a little bit of Manet's looseness, a little bit of thickness from Van Gogh, and a distended belly from the sixteenth century, but he leaves formal invention, structure, rhythm, and metaphor at the door. And critics and art historians are right there cheering him on: rough patches applied with a palette knife (Courbet applied paint with a palette knife) are said to be equal to the hand of Courbet; elongated torsos and necks (Parmigianino's figures are elongated)

are said to be equal to the bodies of Parmigianino. A reclining figure laid out in the foreshortened position of Mantegna's *Dead Christ* is said to be equal to that of Mantegna. Cottoncandy flourishes of paint are supposed to suggest that Currin is sensitive to beauty and attentive with his touch, qualities evocative of Tiepolo. And grotesque paint-encrusted faces let us know that he is unafraid of realism, ugliness, and expressionism. This road is taken absurdly further so as to declare that the ugly application of paint translates directly into ugliness as its subject. Rosenblum believes that Currin, "a young Frankenstein who [makes] his monsters not only from the old masters but from the humanoid fantasies of contemporary America," is, through his fake and grotesque amalgamations, exploring the range of ways in which contemporary Americans transform themselves "from the natural to the synthetic" or how they "enjoy surrogate experiences (a range that would include nose jobs, face lifts, breast implants, computer alteration, electronic communication, video games, and virtual sex)." This "mirroring" of the world has its roots in Duchamp and the nonsensical art of Dada, a group that, disgusted by the events of a world at war, created a nonsensical art that was a literal reflection of a nonsensical world. For critics who crave a little beauty and tradition—but not so much that it breaks with Duchamp and their beloved irony—Currin does an extreme makeover of the old masters, providing the dead-white-male-weary art world with paintings that, as they dress down the Renaissance and dumb down art, keep perfect pace with our sex-obsessed, MTV-watching times.

Artists have always taken from other artists. Painters want to become painters precisely because they fall in love with the works of Fra Angelico, El Greco, Mondrian, or Cézanne. And the tradition of "copying," or drawing from, other artists—making the same moves they made, discovering the same spatial relationships and rhythms they discovered, moving through and uncovering the same forms and structures and metaphors—is the surest way for painters to learn their craft. "Copying"

allows artists to gain a level of insight—not only about singular works of art and a specific artist's hand but also about the activity of composing—that is impossible by any other means. That is why Michelangelo drew from Masaccio, Renoir drew from Michelangelo, Matisse drew from Renoir. But to draw from other artists does not mean merely to imitate. To “draw” implies everything the word stands for: to pull or to drag or to draw forth, as from the earth, a vein, or a well. When a teacher tells a student that he should first learn how to draw before he becomes a video artist, much more is implied than learning how to compose form and space within a rectangle.

When a figurative artist such as Balthus goes into the museum to draw from the past, he certainly is aware of the present. He embraces the tradition of painting so that he can make it uniquely his own. And in doing so, he pumps new blood into the vein, fresh water into the well; for other painters, he becomes seed, fruit, root, and soil. What Balthus and Matisse and Vermeer know is exactly what a painter goes into the museum to find out. Robert Rosenblum is quick to inform us that Currin “knows his old masters inside out,” and I am sure that Professor Rosenblum knows his old masters, too. But their particular kind of knowing, which focuses on the surface of a painting over its substance, isn't really “knowing” at all.

Balthus looks at Piero, Courbet, Masaccio, and Titian, and he fuses qualities of each of them into himself. But the artists never seem like they've been imitated; they are always born anew. Looking at Balthus's paintings, one realizes that his influences—from ancient fresco to Courbet's fruit to flesh in Titian—reveal themselves organically, like qualities of the parents we can sense within the movements and expressions of the child. An artist's love of art becomes him, and it is in this way that painting, from painter to painter, from painting to painting, thrives as a living tradition.

When Balthus paints the dreamy, dark, and woodsy *Reclining Nude* (1983–86), a picture of an adolescent girl, between sleep and waking, on a bed, he varies the feeling of her flesh to resemble marble, fruit, earth, and

fire. In places, she looks like fallen sculpture; in other places, like moonlight on water; and in other places still, like petrified stone or damaged fresco. There is something beautifully vulnerable, innocent, and wounded about her, as if she has given over or has given up. Her cheeks, full, round, and aglow, are ripe and sanguine. Yet the heaviness of her seemingly buried body is defied by its impossibly weightless drift. It is as if she hovers between birth and gestation, between being grounded and floating, and she corkscrews upward like a twisting root or like an animal roused by its prey, activating the blackness with the stir and burn of her body. In this painting, as in others, Balthus treats adolescence as a metaphor, as a theme. For Balthus, the universal idea of passing between worlds, of being neither here nor there, applies as much to the passage of man, from child to adult, as it does to the passage of culture and art, from ancient to modern.

Balthus, who died in 2001, said in a 1994 interview that he never wanted to be an “artist,” adding, “I have a horror of the word. . . . What I believe is that the people who paint today are not the same people who painted let's say 200 years ago, or 300 years ago. . . . They're all artists today. What I find terrible is that need of expressing oneself. Why express oneself, why not express the universe?”

Painters do, however, still exist—those who have kept the tradition of painting alive through the reinvention of forms and universal themes. Among them are Ellsworth Kelly, R. B. Kitaj, and Leon Kossoff; as well as the lesser-known contemporary abstract painters Pat Adams, Salvatore Federico, Bill Jensen, Deborah Rosenthal, Joan Snyder, Trevor Winkfield; and the representational painters Gabriel Laderman, Stanley Lewis, and the late Louisa Matthiasdottir. The mission of these artists is to paint, not to titillate and entertain; to engage with the poetic, universal language of painting instead of the fashionable chatter of a fickle art world. And, as such, their works, along with the tradition of painting, will endure. ■

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