

In his sixth exhibition at Sadie Coles HQ, John Currin presents a group of five new paintings. In these, his enduring themes and preoccupations – sexual personae, social types, and historical painterly genres – appear in surreal new guises. The majority of the paintings depict a pair or couple, echoing the tradition of the marriage portrait. But incongruous elements have infiltrated each picture. Whimsical headdresses, animals, food and other visual non sequiturs push the compositions into ambiguous territory, a realm suspended between lucid realism and dreamlike allegory.

In Currin's latest paintings, the graphic sexuality which has marked his practice for the last decade is sublimated into playful, sometimes absurdist symbolism. In a portrait of two embracing women, one of the figures holds a paintbrush laden with creamy pigment, a fleck of which has dripped onto the other's shirt. This strange gesture, in which the 'frozen moment' of painting seems to melt, rebounds against the placidity of the women's expressions. One of them wears a veil-like headdress, casting her in the role of an odalisque. Here and throughout the works in the exhibition, Currin captures the tones and textures of real life with acute sensitivity – using multiple layers of paint to evoke patterned fabrics, translucent flesh, or the lustre of porcelain or ripe fruit. The picaresque or make-believe mood of each picture is thereby offset by an insistent realism, a sense of the tangibility of things. Symbols are also literal objects.



Another portrait shows a smiling woman in a transparent blouse; a baguette is furled into her hair and topped precariously by an upturned jug. Currin adopts familiar conceits of art history (the female nude, the still-life object) and twists them into an ambivalent spectacle or masquerade. The headdress is a cocked hat in the vein of Judith Leyster's or Frans Hals's portraits of jovial Dutchmen. It is also a stack of sexual puns. It reflects and accentuates the subtler elements of the uncanny threading through the picture, as manifested by the woman's guileless state of exposure, her swelling belly, and her misaligned gaze. The crow which perches on her knee, and the gnarled walking stick on which she rests her hands, introduce an air of Gothic playacting.

Elsewhere, a more blithe and carnivalesque note is struck. One work shows an elderly couple embracing. They are decked in evening dress and smiling obliviously, as if captured in a party snapshot. Yet the man's head, seemingly crowned by a paper hat, has in fact been topped with an upended ice-cream cone. The woman has a gleaming fish tied around her face, and a cornucopia of grapes and high-heeled shoes spills from her head. Currin introduces the awry – occasionally perverse – transpositions of dreams to a banal scene of leisure and contentment. Echoing the theatrical follies of commedia dell'arte paintings, these strange objects also add a note of wistfulness to the scene, covering the elderly pair with emblems of the ephemeral.

John Currin was born in Boulder, Colorado, in 1962 and obtained a B.F.A. from Carnegie Mellon University (1984) followed by a M.F.A. from Yale University (1986). He lives and works in New York. He has exhibited internationally with recent major exhibitions including those at Museo Stefano Bardini, Florence (2016); DHC / ART Foundation for Contemporary Art, Montreal, Canada (2011); and in 2003 a mid-career survey of his painting which travelled to the Serpentine Gallery, London, the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. The same year, a travelling exhibition of drawings was organised by the Des Moines Art Center. His work has also been included in group exhibitions including Absentee Landlord, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (MN), USA (2012); Celebrating the Golden Age, Frans Hals Museum, Amsterdam (2011); and What is Painting? - Contemporary Art from the Collection, MoMA- Museum of Modern Art, New York (2007).

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