

In his latest show at Sadie Coles HQ, John Currin presents a new series of paintings centred on the female nude. These latest works combine the explicitness of his pornographic paintings of the last five years with a new level of psychological realism. In contrast to those works, which drew upon 1970s magazines, the majority were painted directly from life in the artist's studio. They show reclining women who appear ambiguously caught between the art-historical trope of the female nude and an appearance of earthy naturalism.

Paradigms of ideal womanhood (milky skin, alluring smiles) run up against incongruous details such as underarm hair and overabundant flesh. Otiose strings of pearls and expanses of lustrous fabric offset the ephemeral bodies in the fashion of *memento mori*. At the same time, there is a knowing parallel between the awkward artifice of the women's postures and nakedness, and the phoney luxury of their accoutrements and surroundings.

Reflecting these shifts between the generic and the individualised, Currin has punctuated the anonymous series with a small portrait of his wife. But as with other models, her expression conveys an air of ethereal inscrutability. The women's smiles are frequently as enigmatic as the timeless 'archaic smiles' of Greek statuary, while elsewhere their expressions are slipping into barely-concealed grimaces – as if directed back at the notional prurience and voyeurism of the viewer.

An element of caricature recurs in many works, linking them with the faintly grotesque personae of Currin's earlier output. In a large-scale picture – a tableau, in contrast to the single portraits which dominate the exhibition – a nude woman sits flanked by suited, leering men and a half-naked female companion. Through this compressed narrative, which suggests a modern-day reworking of the chauvinistic scene in Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* (1863), the artist throws light on the sordid underbelly of contemporary American society.

Currin has spoken of pornography in art as a "cliché of transgression". The transmutation of 'rude' pornography into the 'polite' idiom of old-masterly painting is furthermore a foil for an underlying element of subversion in his works – their strange dualism of 'bad' drawing and virtuoso painting. His figures' elongated limbs and awkward postures introduce a note of expressionism – echoing the more overt distortions of Otto Dix or George Grosz. In one painting, a figure is curled almost into the posture of a praying mantis on top of a bed of green plush.

Currin's new body of work responds to the grand sweep of art history in a dual spirit of caricature and veneration, playing upon the conceits and absurdities of painting at the same time as affirming its vitality. Through his often-explicit content, he unravels the elements of sexuality or tawdriness which lurk implicitly within many masterpieces of the Renaissance and after. A host of unresolved tensions – virtuosic painting and awry drawing; elegance and vulgarity; sincerity and irony – are at work in Currin's latest works. Beneath their surface bravura, the canvases re-examine some of the enduring and vital contradictions of western painting.

John Currin was born in Boulder, Colorado, in 1962 and obtained a B.F.A. from Carnegie Mellon University (1984) followed by an 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 DHC / ART Foundation for Contemporary Art, Montreal, Canada (2011); and in 2003 a mid-career survey of his painting which travelled between 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, USA (2012); *Celebrating the Golden Age*, Frans Hals Museum, Amsterdam (2011); and *What is Painting? - Contemporary Art from the Collection*, Museum of Modern Art, New York (2007). A major monograph on John Currin was published by Rizzoli in 2006, and a book on his recent work was published in 2011 by Gagosian Gallery.

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Open Tuesday – Friday 10 – 6pm, Saturday 12 – 6pm

