

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

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DEBORAH KASS

Meeting Deborah Kass last November 2013 at Paul Kasmin's Gallery on 10th Avenue in Manhattan was a real blast! And why should that come as a surprise, given that she's a child of Aries, born on April 9, 1952, in San Antonio, Texas?

After majoring in painting, Kass received her bachelor of fine arts degree from the Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, before continuing her studies on the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program and at the Art Students League of New York. She is widely known for her mid-career retrospective Deborah Kass, Before and Happily Ever After at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pennsylvania. A catalogue published to go with the exhibition featured essays by respected art historians of the caliber of Robert Storr, Eric Shiner and John Waters.

The artist's first major body of works, the Art History Paintings, interposed frames taken from Disney cartoons with slivers of painting from Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock, Jasper Jones and other contemporary sources. Her fascination for the work of Andy Warhol came later, touching on notions of Americanism and popular culture. Her «drag act» reinterpretations of classic Warhol images feature Barbra Streisand. Kass had had the ultimate eureka experience with Streisand in the movie version of Yentl the Yeshiva Boy. And Streisand was, interestingly, one of the few iconic figures to wave aside the artistic overtures of big money – giving Kass a tremendous opportunity to create her own likeness of her hero in various colors, taking full artistic possession of all the connotations of the imagery.

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Kass went on to reincarnate other iconic formats too, notably Kennedy's grieving wife in the Jewish Jackie Series from 1992. Others included Marilyn Monroe, My Elvis, Cindy Sherman, Elizabeth Murray, Pat Steir, Robert Rauschenberg and his family, and of course the grand homage to Gertrude Stein. Sadly, my brief sketch cannot hope to keep pace with the manifold pictorial mischief of all of Kass' remarkable paintings. Her Partnering with Andy, as she called it, continued until 2000 in a series of works which she called The Warhol Project. The fruits of this creative period have been widely exhibited: To see them is to love them.

Since just after the turn of the millennium, Kass has devoted herself to «feel good paintings for feel bad times». Picking up on the signature works and styles of some of the 20th century's most iconic artists, she reworks them with a dash of Broadway here and a slice of a Frank Stella cover there, all seasoned with a block capitals snippet from the Broadway show A Chorus Line: «Daddy, I would love to dance.»

In the hands of Deborah Kass, Ed Ruscha's MoMA-owned 1962 classic OOF becomes OY and YO - or, at Christmas time, an overwhelming JOY.

Kass' work has been exhibited at the Venice Biennale, the Istanbul Biennale, the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Jewish Museum, New York, and at the National Portrait Gallery and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Ms. Kass is a Senior Critic on the Yale University MFA Painting Program.

Deborah, your deadpan messages show such strength of character - yet such playful rhythms too! It has been terrific getting to know you. Let's do dinner on my next hop to your corner of Brooklyn!