

# ARTFORUM

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Deborah Kass, *Daddy I Would Love to Dance*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 78 × 78".

## Deborah Kass

KAVI GUPTA GALLERY | ELIZABETH ST

The vertical text-based painting *Just a Shot Away*, 2015, commands the entrance hall to Deborah Kass's inaugural solo exhibition at Kavi Gupta, a mainstay of Chicago's West Loop for nearly twenty years. Rendered across a variegated black ground, the stacked cerulean text is culled from the rock anthem "Gimme Shelter," the opening track on the Rolling Stones' 1969 album *Let It Bleed*. The graphically composed painting and its appropriated stanza set the stage for a scintillating collection of works that graft borrowed language—funny, banal, upbeat, and grim—onto Minimalist-inspired compositions with bright Pop flourishes. Kass's eleven works here, made between 2008 and 2020, fill three capacious galleries with fields of saturated color, glowing neon text, and ambitiously sized canvases that toy with the aesthetics of ersatz spectacle and commercial glitz. Among the handful of sculptures on view is a scaled-down version of

*OY/YO*, the punning public artwork in Big Bird yellow that made its debut in 2015 at Brooklyn Bridge Park in New York. It shares a space with an altered quote from Louise Bourgeois, fashioned from neon, that's twisted into a Naumanesque spiral: A WOMAN HAS NO PLACE IN THE ART WORLD UNLESS SHE PROVES OVER AND OVER AGAIN SHE WON'T BE ELIMINATED. This depressing statement is dressed in candy-coated hues.

Since the late 1980s, Kass has built a feminist painting practice out of reclaiming the authority of signature artistic styles. By parroting techniques or copying acclaimed motifs attributed to celebrated male artists such as Walt Disney, Pablo Picasso, and Andy Warhol, Kass has until recently remained strategically consistent, appropriating art-historical signifiers in order to upend biased forms of power and influence. Yet she eventually abandoned these image-based recontextualization tactics—similar to those employed by Sarah Charlesworth, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, and Sherrie Levine—in favor of works that primarily incorporate everyday language and clever wordplay. For example, *Daddy I Would Love to Dance*, 2008, is a psychedelically concocted acrylic painting proudly bearing on its surface the titular phrase (the words are culled from a song in the 1975 musical *A Chorus Line*). Its Day-Glo palette and geometric *mise en abyme* are borrowed from Frank Stella's polychromatic canvas *Concentric Square*, 1966. Kass's homage to the Minimalist master is not only winkingly queer (her rainbow field possesses a discotheque fabulousness that Stella's doesn't), but it also expresses, per Kass, her "absolute desire to participate" with high culture in a grand way, "wanting to be a part of history, wanting to talk to history, to dance with it."

*EVERYBODY*, 2019, is a nine-piece painting organized in an expansive grid of three rows that holds the south wall of the main gallery. On the top of each vivid monochrome canvas sits the work's title, spelled out in neon capital letters. A loose riff on Ellsworth Kelly's multipart painting *Color Panels for a Large Wall*, 1978, Kass's piece is also a commentary on the practice of appropriating voices in the pop-music industry. Compelled by the fact that Black diva and gay icon Martha Wash was never credited by the Italian music group Black Box for her vocal contribution to their 1990 hit "Everybody, Everybody," Kass continues to protract the already fraught principles of authorship, copyright, and originality.

Hanging side by side, the paintings *Don't Stop*, 2019, and *Don't Stop 3 (Yellow/Yellow/Yellow)*, 2020, glow with the words—you guessed it—DON'T STOP. Ghostly versions of the phrase are also painted in a wide sans serif typeface beneath the neon tubing that overtakes the works' surfaces. Because the expressions in both pieces are the same color as the ground—a textured, brushy surface that absorbs light—they are only detectable by their smooth and slightly reflective paint application. The titular feel-good mantra is shamelessly prevalent in pop music: Think of Michael Jackson's "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough," Queen's "Don't Stop Me Now" (both 1979), or Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'" (1981). The sentiment is clichéd—often maddeningly so. But perhaps at this frightening time in history, familiarity breeds more comfort than contempt.

— Michelle Grabner

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