



Interview with Deborah Kass



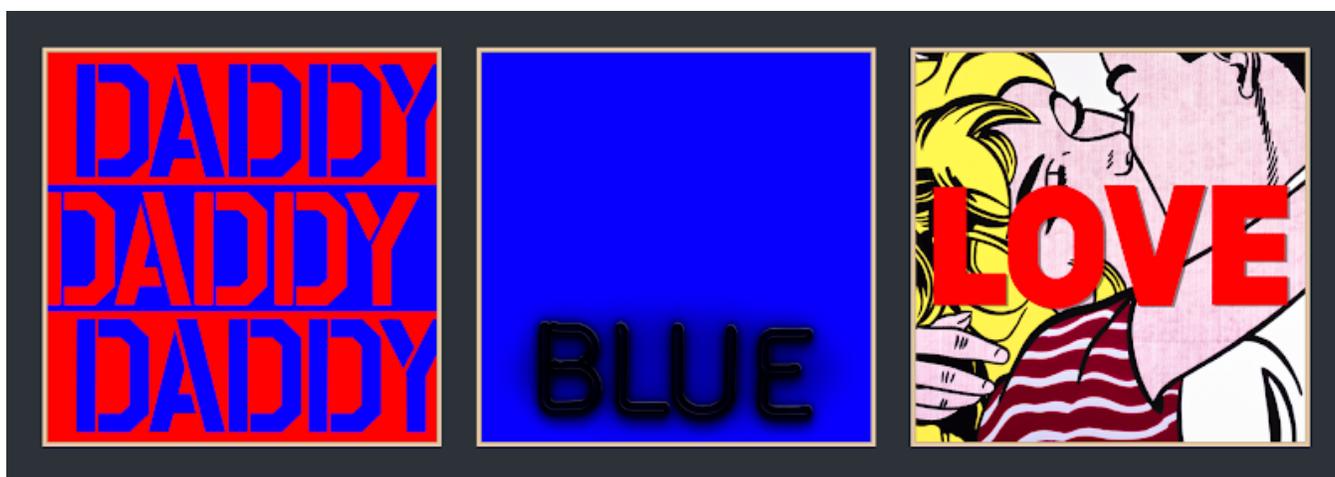
Deborah Kass in the Studio. Courtesy of Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

By **JOHN BARRYMORE** January 9, 2024

Deborah Kass is an American artist whose work explores the intersection of pop culture, art history, and the construction of self. Kass works in mixed media, and is recognized for her paintings, prints, photography, sculptures and neon lighting installations. In her 2000's series *feel good paintings for feel bad times*, Kass reimagines paintings of iconic, predominantly male artists—Kenneth Noland, Ed Ruscha, Frank Stella—by inserting text from pop culture aphorisms ripped from film, pop music, and Broadway musicals.

Now, over a decade later, Kass returns to this body of work for her first digital show: **feel good spins for feel bad times**. Canvases from Kass' *feel good series* are digitally broken apart, each word floats singularly, untethered to its source text. Portraits from Kass' series *The Warhol Project* are also present. It is no coincidence that this series—whose conceptual foundation relies on appropriation—is revisited during a time when artistic transformation is being challenged and the unsettling promise of a future of machine mimicry is upon us.

Like Pop Art itself, Kass' *feel good spins* is unapologetically in your face. The algorithm that reconfigures Kass' text is costumed as a slot machine. Each participant—a gambler of sorts—is invited to take a spin in order to generate a new work. Text and images are brought together and are reconfigured as novel triptychs in Kass' signature bright colors and bold typefaces. Beautiful, strange, poignant, messy or disquieting, in *feel good spins for feel bad times*, each work surprises as a bet placed on the trailblazing Deborah Kass is always a sure win.



Courtesy of the artist.

Whitehot: The title “feel good spins for feel bad times” is a riff off your work “feel good paintings for feel bad times.” How do these two works relate?

Deb Kass: The feel good paintings are the source of most of the imagery for feel good spins. Like the times in which *feel good paintings for feel bad times* was created (the George W. Bush administration), we are again in some truly treacherous times now. Much much more dangerous than then.

WH: How has your experience been working with Arsnl.art, known for blending innovative and traditional aesthetics?

DK: Incredible. When I went into the collaboration with ARSNL saying “I have no experience and no understanding of digital space. No imagination.” But I had worked with some of the Arsnl team through their parent company, Artists Rights Society, which I have been a member of for over a decade. I trusted the Arsnl team to guide me through the process. I worked with them through ideas with them through trial and error I started to understand. They have been the best collaborators. And we have all had a ball!

WH: Why did you choose the format of a slot machine, “Kass-ino”, to generate these triptychs?

DK: Well the future America seems like a gamble at this point. Which way will it go? Democracy or autocracy? White male supremacy or equality? Freedom for the few or for all? We need more than chance and luck. We need political will. But in my Kass-ino, will can't help you. It's all chance and luck.

WH: What are your favorite combinations?

DK: Any triple.



Courtesy of the artist.

WH: What is a Diamond Deb?

DK: Diamond Dust Deb is a silk screen print. The “Debs” are part of my Warhol Project, which began in 1992 and concluded with my self-portraits. The Diamond Dest Debs are an edition of 40 and measure 24 x 24 inches. I loved the idea of bringing something physical into the show, and what says jackpot better than diamonds!

WH: What does appropriation mean today?

DK: Depends on who is doing the appropriating.

WH: When interacting with “feel good spins for feel bad times”, what’s the biggest takeaway you want the audience to have ?

DK: The game of life is one big gamble. **WM**

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