

ARTFORUM

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Deborah Kass

Salon 94

By Jan Avgikos



Deborah Kass, *My Spanish Spring*, 1991–92, oil, acrylic, and Flashe paint on canvas, 76 × 63". From the series "The Art History Paintings," 1989–92.

How different the New York art world was when Deborah Kass produced her 1989–92 series “The Art History Paintings.” That fin de siècle period fostered all manner of discourse relating to postmodernism, feminism, queer theory, multiculturalism, intersectionalism, and more. A shared sense of urgency—to dismantle hierarchies, to reconfigure the canon, to recuperate the suppressed cultural trajectories of the twentieth century—prevailed.

Appropriation, pastiche, parody—these conceptual strategies turned ideology into aesthetic currency, and they underwrite Kass’s twelve-piece grouping of elegant, smart-alecky canvases. The artist rode that wave of resurgence into painting hard, defying the medium’s sexism and psychodramas. One diptych, *My Spanish Spring*, 1991–92, features a version of Robert Motherwell’s *Elegy to the Spanish Republic XXXIV*, 1953–54, which is stacked atop a cartoon rendering of a gentle bull named Ferdinand—a popular character from a 1936 children’s book that operated as a stealthy critique of Spain’s dictatorship under Francisco Franco—who prefers to smell posies rather than fight in the ring. Both images, of course, are inspired by resistance to authoritarianism. But Kass seems to ask, is Motherwell’s statement more powerful because it falls into the realm of high art? After all, *The Story of Ferdinand*, written by Munro Leaf and illustrated by Robert Lawson, so incensed Franco that it was banned until 1975, the year he died.

The nearly four-by-nine-foot *Untitled (First World, Third World)*, 1990, depicts Disney’s Dumbo, the flying baby elephant, gliding over an African savanna—a scene that is interrupted by a rendition of an Analytical Cubist painting (think Picasso’s 1911–12 canvas *Ma Jolie [My Pretty]*). The painting’s fragmented visual

clues point to the pachyderm rather than to the notorious abstractionist's imaginary lover. Kass is having sport with the seriousness of modernism while playfully promoting semiotic confusion. Like a number of the paintings here, it seems as though it were dreamed up by a hallucinating AI. Instead of the African tribal artifacts synonymous with the invention of Cubism, we are given a McDonald's Happy Meal version of wildlife in Africa.

Kass's blasphemies were often sharpened by her use of cartoon imagery. Deployed to challenge the hegemony of haute culture, they also served as quotation devices to capture the energy of Pop art, which invariably led to Andy Warhol, a kind of godfather to Kass's work. *In Before and Happily Ever After*, 1991, the artist appropriates Warhol's famous black-and-white painting of a nose-job ad (replacing a schnozz that looks "ethnic" with a perkier, WASPier one) and pairs it with a still from Disney's *Cinderella* (1950), depicting the moment at which the titular character discovers that the glass slipper fits only her! This isn't just a send-up of art; it's a pointed message about the cultural constructions of femininity.

In the diptych *Making Men 4*, 1992, the main attraction, in the upper register, is two male wrestlers clinched in a tight embrace. They are rendered in a sketchy style that recalls David Salle's canvases from the early 1980s. The lower section of the piece features white rivulets of paint that appear to have been flung across the black ground: a gushing reference to Pollock and his—ahem—seminal ejaculatory gesture. Spanning both sections of the composition is a third element, borrowed from a Warhol dance-diagram silk screen. In Kass's hands, the pattern of rhythmic footprints is overlaid to deliver a forceful kick to the balls of one of the grapplers. Let's think of it as pictorial payback to the patriarchy.

Perhaps the most surprising element of the series is its gay-male eroticism. *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 1991, pairs a masturbating male figure in the work's lower portion topped by a black field with white splatters. Superimposed over the entire composition is a line drawing of an early self-portrait by Picasso, whose lips are laid over the man's cock, as if the Spanish master were performing fellatio. *Emissions Control*, 1989–90, just over eleven feet long, presents a Dionysian orgy of elements. Comprising five different sections, the painting includes depictions of a pornographically erect penis, black and white drips, cataclysmically exploding buildings, a pale-pink vertical stripe, and a picture of vapor trails against a desert landscape with a little caption that reads THE END. Herein lies the polysemic appeal of these paintings. Kass mocks the male-dominated hierarchy of art history while identifies—and even empathizes—with gay male artists. Her queering of the canon is perverse, playful, and deviously intelligent.

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