

IMPULSE

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Editors' Selects: March 2025

Deborah Kass: The Art History Paintings 1989–1992

Salon 94 | 3 E 89th Street, New York

February 19th – March 29th, 2025



At Salon 94, feminist painter Deborah Kass presents large-scale works in *The Art History Paintings 1989–1992*, subverting narratives of legitimacy and legacy fraught with patriarchal influences. On her expansive canvases, Kass combines imagery that the art historical canon may consider “low-brow”—cartoons or wrestling manual illustrations—with specific allusions to artistic movements that almost exclusively lauded the achievements of white men. The third edition of H. W. Janson’s *History of Art* sits on a table at the entrance of the show, testifying to how, until very recently, a version of history that completely erases women was taught and propagated. In *My Spanish Spring* (1991–92), for instance, a Robert Motherwell rendition somewhat phallic in form shares a canvas with *Ferdinand the Bull*, a queer-coded 1930s character often interpreted as an antidote to the political violence of WWII and the Spanish Civil War. In *Making Men 2* (1992), two foot outlines from Andy Warhol’s dance diagrams are superimposed on two mid-wrestling young men, one of whom is almost grinning as the other grabs him by the neck. Irreverent in her reconsideration of masculinity as a force and structure, Kass told me about Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s 1985 book, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, and a 1981 Barbara Kruger piece that reads: “You construct intricate rituals which allow you to touch the skin of other men.”

The works in *The Art History Paintings 1989–1992* were created during a time of grief and anger following the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, but it was also when a proliferation of writings and theories fueled the rise of gender studies as an intellectual discipline. “There was a lot of pushback when I first made these paintings—things were different back then,” Kass said. “But I was feeling overall optimistic, and it’s different looking back today.” Notifications from my NYT app went off a few times when I made my way through the show. A sense of doom seemed to float in the air, but I felt once again grounded by Kass’s vitality, cheeky humor, and optimism. Though the show was not planned to respond to the new presidency, in the context of March 2025, it is especially salient and necessary.

— Xuezhu Jenny Wang

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