

Everyone in Their Twenties Looks Gorgeous: Deborah Kass on Her New Show at Sargent's Daughters

by PADDY JOHNSON on MAY 20, 2015



Deborah Kass, "America's Most Wanted, Paul S.," 1998.

Who's heading out to Deborah Kass's opening at Sargent's Daughters tonight? She'll be showing two years of paintings from her series "America's Most Wanted" (1998-1999), which draws on Andy Warhol's similarly named series, "13 Most Wanted Men." Kass, a long-time feminist and spokesperson for the arts, has our interest.

The inspiration for this show began 70 years ago. In 1955 Andy Warhol produced a screenprint series picturing 13 of the New York Police Department's most-wanted men for the world fair. The images appeared glamorized, even sexy, and thus, immediately sparked controversy. They were covered in silver paint by fair officials who deemed the work inappropriate for a mass audience.

Four decades later, the dust may have settled, but the impact had not been forgotten. Deborah Kass began remaking the series, but with a twist—she replaced the criminals with famous curators. These art-world figures, known for their allure to artists, looked a little worse for wear under Kass's lens. In fact, they all look a little as though they'd been run through a washing machine.

With the years 1998-1999 from that series on view tonight, (the full series ran from 1992-2000), it seemed a good time to speak with the artist about what makes this show particularly worthy of reflection today. Her answer was characteristically honest and direct.

When I made these paintings I was young and desiring of the approval of these people and the institutions they represented. What young artist does not want to be acknowledged by their contemporaries who are curators? It is an ambition most artists have, as I still do.

Seventeen years later, it is interesting to note the histories of these particular people. What have they done, achieved, become, stood for? Also I didn't want to show this work back then because I beat them up a bit in these paintings. Now they just look young and adorable. Every last one of them.

Of course, the subjects themselves never had to endure actual black eyes—they were just painted on. But they look good regardless—probably because, to anyone who is beyond their twenties, everyone that age looks gorgeous.