

TRUE

BY WILLIAM J. SIMMONS
PORTRAIT BY KRISTINE LARSEN

TO

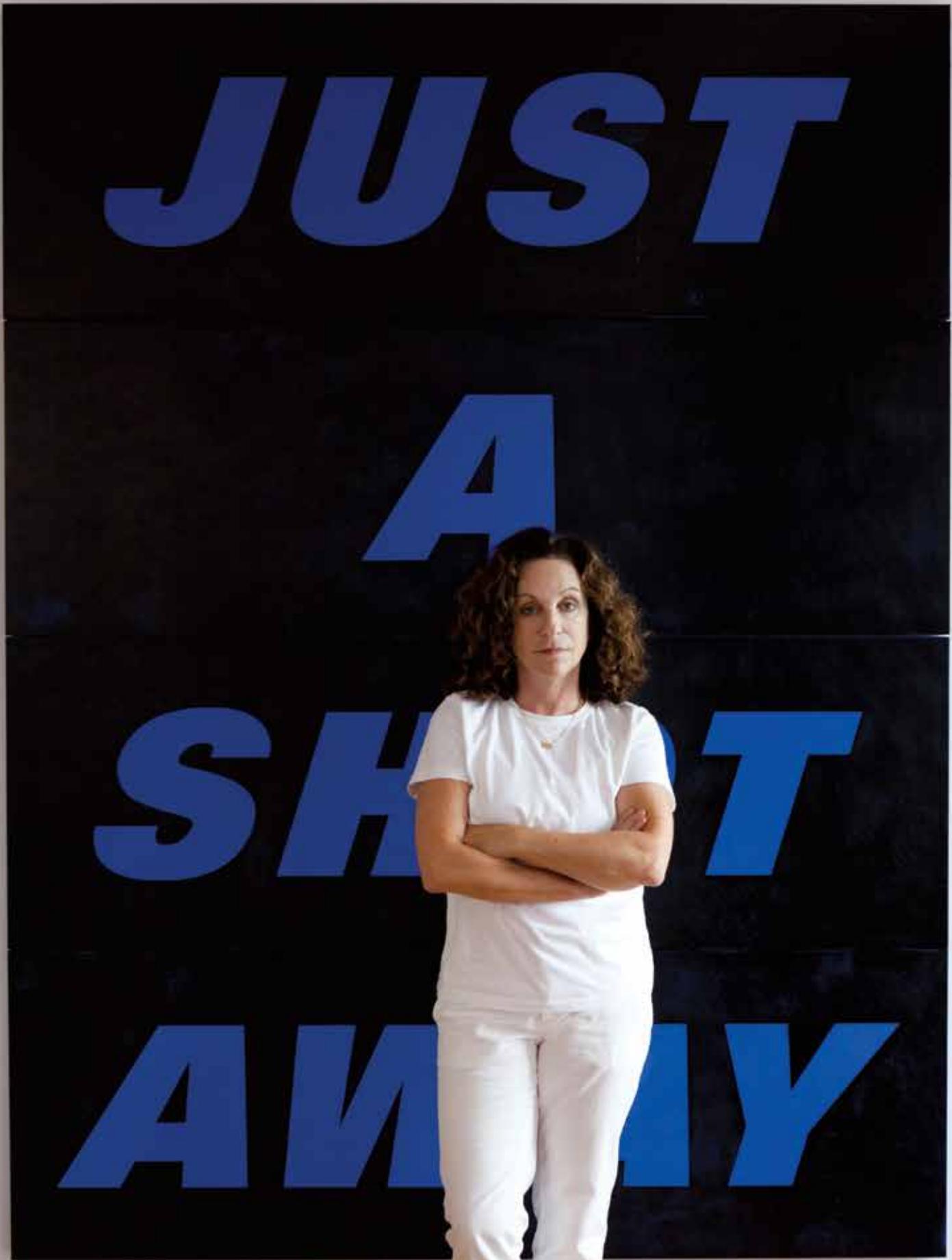
FORM

DEBORAH

KASS

SHAKES UP

THE CANON



Deborah Kass
in her Brooklyn
studio, 2015.

“THE ONLY ART THAT MATTERS IS ABOUT THE WORLD. AUDRE LORDE SAID IT. TONI MORRISON SAID IT. EMILY DICKINSON SAID IT. I’M INTERESTED IN THE WORLD.”

Deborah Kass is taking stock—a moment of reflection on what motivates her work, coincidentally taking place in her Gowanus studio the day before the first Republican presidential candidates’ debate, which overflowed with sexist, racist, and transphobic rhetoric. “I’m not interested in me,” she says, “and the world is a mess. There is a general feeling of being bruised and helpless, with real limitations to our effectiveness.”

Kass’s statement is not confined to social circumstances; in her practice, she also hopes to emphasize the formal innovation and deftness—not to mention art historical rigor—that have characterized her career since the 1970s. A self-described closet formalist, Kass, in her newest body of work, “No Kidding,” which opens at Paul Kasmin Gallery in New York on December 9, has given herself chromatic and technical parameters of specific colors and regimented sizes, thereby formally distilling the

Silver Deb, 2000. Silkscreen and acrylic on canvas, 40x40 in.



intensity of her social and art historical themes. The result is a set of tall, sobering, black-and-blue canvases adorned with equally hefty neon lettering, akin, perhaps, to macabre monuments or even something more sinister in the tradition of pulp horror movies. This is less a departure than a fearless statement that affirms and illuminates her entire oeuvre—a tiny retrospective, perhaps. Fueled by an affinity for the medium and its emotive and intellectual possibilities, Kass has created a template for a disruptive artistic intervention into age-old aesthetic discourses. As she almost gleefully laments, “All these things I do are things that people denigrate. Show tunes—so bourgeois. Formalism—so retardataire. Nostalgia—not a real emotion. I want a massive, fucked-up, ‘you’re not sure what it means but you know it’s problematic’ work of art.” At the core of Kass’s practice is a defiant rejection of traditional notions of taste.

For example, what of Kass’s relationship to feminism, queerness, and painting? She is, for many, a pioneer in addressing issues of gender and sexuality; still, the artist herself is ambivalent about such claims, as is her right. Kass’s engagement with Andy Warhol has been specifically pinpointed as an arena of gender play; her “America’s Most Wanted” series of silkscreened portraits, shown recently at Sargent’s Daughters on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, is a feminist intervention into the interplay of masculine gazes enacted by Warhol in his subtly homoerotic *13 Most Wanted Men* mural, which was rejected by the 1964 New York World’s Fair. Warhol reluctantly chose to have his installation obliterated by his characteristic silver paint rather than replace it, but in her iteration, Kass revived *Most Wanted Men* with art world superstars rather than hardened criminals, thereby reinventing Warhol’s gay male mythology through new visual and political modes. She has also posed in drag as Warhol and silkscreened self-portraits in his style, as in the humorously titled *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 1991. More than anything, her delightful appreciation of pop culture and celebrity has all the earnestness of camp, as Susan Sontag originally defined it in 1964, the same year as Warhol’s disastrous attempt at public art. Still, Kass’s work transcends comparisons made by critics who do not dig deeper than the most obvious tenets of Women’s and Gender Studies 101.

Nevertheless, while an artist does not and should not have complete control over the discussion that surrounds his or her imagery, when it comes to issues of self-identification—be it sexuality, gender, or religion, to name a few themes Kass addresses—or deeply held convictions about one’s place in the world, a variety of factors must be balanced in order to promote a holistic view. In contrast to most of the existing literature, she says, “I am much more interested in who people are than in what people are. I want to know what they are doing in the world.” This is not to say that Kass is invested in the post-gender rhetoric that often runs amok in the art world, art history graduate programs, and beyond. It is rather to insist on a more nuanced, gender-based intervention in the canon.

Surprisingly, Kass points to the straight male artist par excellence—Frank Stella—as central to her choice to become an artist after viewing his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1970. “Frank Stella’s show at MOMA confirmed my life path,” she says. In the ’80s, she moved into quasi-Cubist landscapes and genre scenes that exhibit signs of the chromatic experimentation that would fully emerge later in her career. She then created her incisive “Art History” series, in which she juxtaposed Jackson Pollock’s paint drips and Pablo Picasso’s portrait of Gertrude Stein with references to Disney and *Peanuts* cartoons. This transitioned into the much-lauded “Warhol”

DEBORAH KASS AND PAUL KASMIN GALLERY, NEW YORK



Good times.
2015. Mixed
media, 72 x 72 in.



series and continued into “Feel-Good Paintings for Feel-Bad Times,” which, as the name suggests, sets the stage for her new work. Stella isn’t the only surprising point of reference in Kass’s oeuvre: “When I looked at the wall of backgrounds I had painted for the ‘Yentls’ [“The Jewish Jackie Series,” 1992–93], I said, “This looks like Ellsworth Kelly’s studio.” The juxtapositions in the series are confounding and thoroughly postmodern: Imagine that Yentl, a cross-dressing Jewish girl (played by Barbra Streisand), meets Warhol, the token gay modernist, and the two mingle alongside Kelly, a pioneer of hard-edged abstraction.

There is pressure on women artists, it seems, to hew to a rejection of formal advancements in favor of some inherent identity-based sensibility or thematic repertoire. But one’s journey as an artist can exist in an uncertain and ever-evolving interspace between and among materials, histories, and mutable processes of self-identification. Many cited by Kass as favorites, such as Nicole Eisenman and Kerry James Marshall, have been working at the intersection of transhistorical and transgender modes for some time. What one often forgets is that these acts of transgression have strong historical precedents, though they may not be recognized as such.

In fact, Kass has rightly theorized that this admixture of the personal and the political represents a central and understudied collision in a crucial moment of post-modernism: “I’ve always talked about the intersection of feminism and postwar painting in New York,” she says.

“Someone has got to do a Ph.D. dissertation on it. Joan Snyder, Susan Rothenberg, Pat Steir,

Harmony Hammond, Elizabeth Murray, and Louise Fishman—all these women are real abstract painters and somehow infused that with politics.” Kass’s position vis-à-vis feminism and queer theory thus reflects the beautiful ambivalence necessary to truly understanding the replete nature of any artistic output. She carries a feminist formalism in her very marrow, even as she refuses to be limited by any gendered or sexual associations. Hence, the unflinching formal, historical, and social candor of “No Kidding” that, some have forgotten, has its roots in Kass’s whole body of work, from her deliciously flamboyant landscapes (imagine the courage necessary to paint these in the climate of the hyper-Conceptual 1980s) to 2015’s *Young Forever*, which quotes Katy Perry lyrics in block lettering atop color-block panels in an ode to discourses of painting, female stardom, and the quixotic desire to escape this dark planet.

Kass represents a mutually beneficial relationship between identity politics and artistic production that elides neither content nor form nor history. “The difference between Stella and Elizabeth Murray—they are both formalists—occurred to me when I discovered feminism,” she says. “I saw Murray and what she did with formalism, what she did with Frank Stella, what she did with Cézanne. She was the person who signified cracking open formalism with feminist content.” It is exactly this intelligent and rigorous urge to insert, forcefully if need be, lived experience into an impersonal and static canon that marks Kass’s career. There is also, interestingly, a “cracking open,” to use her terminology,



ABOVE:
Day After Day,
2010. Oil and
acrylic on
canvas, seven
panels, each
72 x 36 in.

RIGHT:
Enough Already,
2012. Neon and
transformers,
18½ x 14 in.



of content with formalism—an act of cross-pollination. Consider *Happy Days*, 2009, in which Kass takes on the monochrome (pioneered by the figureheads of post-painterly abstraction for whom she has deep reverence). Kass reconfigures this monolithic art historical discourse with five panels, each marked lightly in the style of Jasper Johns’s subtle stencils to read “Happy Days Are Here Again,” the title an iconic Barbra Streisand song from 1963. Despite its foreboding black rectangles and the severity of the monochrome, the piece manages to evoke a darkly joyful Technicolor sensibility. She points with irony to the masculine or technocratic seriousness of the works she resuscitates with characteristic humor, defying convention throughout the life of an artwork, from its material inception to its sociopolitical reception.

She explains these complexities via the history of music. “It’s because I listened to jazz as a kid,” she recalls. “Jazz is interested in variations on themes”—or identities, for that matter—“and I thought that’s what great art was. I do that visually. I heard John Coltrane and Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis and Lester Young playing in my house whenever my father was home. Sarah, Billie, Ella, Carmen. Everyone was doing the same songs; they were just doing them differently from each other. And they were equally different. I realized I’ve done the exact same thing—I took pop standards and did them my way.” Perhaps one could call Kass’s advancements an ostensibly genderless “syncopated formalism,” marked by unexpected but nevertheless lyrical rhythms, as well as a constant sense of displacement that jars the listener or viewer into attention.

Returning to the two-toned new works in “No Kidding,” Kass reminds me, “*Black and Blue*. Go to the source. It’s a wish to get the fuck out of here.” It comes as no surprise that some inspiration came from the Rolling Stones, who, incidentally, fueled the early years of the feminist sex wars in the late 1970s and early 1980s. One might look into these dark paintings and see not a purely, unequivocally evil world but, rather, a morally ambiguous, kinky one. The Stones, moreover, have their roots in jazz and the blues, foundations that are so dear

to Kass as well. The best material, history could confirm, comes from such blending of genres.

Aside from her social and historical inspirations, Kass emphasizes, “I wanted to make a really formal show,” combining the sheer weight of our contemporary melancholia with a painterly vocabulary, something that may or may not have anything to do with gender and sexuality at all. In characteristic Kass fashion, she combines adroit art historical knowledge, brazen sentimentality, and biting irony into a single entity, amounting to a cohesive, conversational, and reflective set of paintings. With their flatbed picture plane and combination of words, industrial materials, and humble paint (she had to buy only two colors), the works in “No Kidding” resurrect the best of Jasper Johns and perhaps give new life to Johns’s tragic muse, Hart Crane, with the series’ sublime, poetic presence. After all, the archetypal queer aesthete, too delicate for the world, is always black and blue, fueled by deep and irrevocable wounds.

Kass would take no issue with this comparison; instead, she welcomes it. “Stella, Johns, Andy—what would I do without them?” she says. “I have no interest in formal innovation, just as I have no interest in style. I’ve thought, like Andy, ‘there are so many good styles out there, why do I need to make a new one?’” Despite her insistence to the contrary, something singular nevertheless comes through this new work: an uninhibited attempt to redirect our vision—indeed, to redirect the discourse surrounding painting as a whole. “No Kidding” is both somber and generative; it allows for sustained thought about the nature of painting in an environment that has once again declared the medium’s irrelevance, even as the series supports a dialogue about the potential for community building in the face of a gathering worldwide darkness. “You know the Adrienne Rich book of poetry *The Dream of a Common Language*?” she asks. “This is my dream of a common language. I know it’s not a common language. It’s not, but it’s the common language of my fantasy. It’s my common language with those guys, those painters, those great songwriters. But it is a dream.” MP

Quadruple Silver Yentl (My Elvis), 1997. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 in.