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Riffing on Forefathers and Mothers



Deborah Kass at her studio in Brooklyn. Her first retrospective, at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, features three decades' worth of personal samplings from postwar painting and culture.

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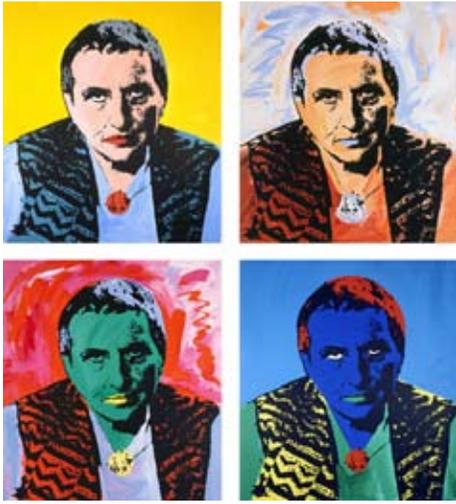
“COMING out as a Barbra Streisand fan was way more embarrassing than coming out as a lesbian,” the painter Deborah Kass said on a recent morning in her Brooklyn studio. “To be an artist of my generation willing to be unhip — artists were supposed to be like cowboys.” But in 1992 Ms. Kass, then 40, had the idea to borrow the format of Andy Warhol’s Marilyn Monroe and Jacqueline Kennedy silk-screens and swap in an image of Streisand that prominently displays her distinctive profile. Titled “Jewish Jackie,” the series is a loving and poignant homage to both Warhol — a sickly child from an immigrant family and a gay man who became one of the most famous artists of the 20th century — and Ms. Streisand, the multitasking performer and director who never changed her nose or name.

Ms. Kass’s “partnering with Andy,” as she called it, continued until 2000 in a series of works called “The Warhol Project” that was widely exhibited throughout the ’90s. Using his glamorizing treatment she celebrated her own pantheon of heroes, from Gertrude Stein to Elizabeth Murray and Pat Steir, painters who infused New York School abstraction with feminist imagery. Ms. Kass also made portraits of herself impersonating both Warhol and his Elizabeth Taylors (in a group she called “Debs”). “It was completely fun inhabiting someone else,” Ms. Kass said.

Her connection to Warhol continues in her first retrospective, “Before and Happily Ever After,” which opened Saturday at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh and features three decades’ worth of highly personal samplings from postwar painting and culture. She is also part of “Regarding Warhol,” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York through Dec. 31, which explores his influence on 60 contemporary artists; her “Double Ghost Yentl (My Elvis)” (1997), on view in the show, echoes Warhol’s use of Elvis Presley in a tough-guy stance with gun drawn, showing Streisand as the title character of that 1983 movie, with a book instead of a gun in hand. For Ms. Kass the character — a girl who passes as a boy so she can study among Orthodox Jewish scholars — seemed “a perfect metaphor for being a woman artist.” A selection from the “Yentl (My Elvis)” series will also be shown in February at the Paul Kasmin Gallery in New York, which has represented her since 2006.

“Deb is an expert at putting a smile on her viewers’ faces, but she packs a wallop behind those smiles,” said Eric Shiner, director of the Andy Warhol Museum, who organized the show. “It’s not so much her attempting to become Warhol or Streisand or any other subject that appears in the work, but it’s how she as an individual identifies with them. As a lesbian Jewish artist from New York who is in love with Broadway and popular culture, she is thinking about artists of that background largely being steamrollered by the canon of art history — and making sure her voice is heard.”

Over the last decade her voice has seemed to shout from works in her ongoing series “Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times.” She plucks phrases meaningful to her from the collective memory banks — of musicals, Yiddish, movies — and renders them in the style of recognized male artists she both admires and tries to one-up. In 2007 she used Kenneth Noland’s target motif to frame the words “Nobody Puts Baby in the Corner,” a line from the 1987 movie “Dirty Dancing” that precedes the star turn by the Jewish girl. In 2009 she co-opted Warhol’s camouflage patterning and Frank Stella’s radiating squares to spell out in eye-popping Day-Glo, “Daddy I Would Love to Dance,” from the moment in the 1975 musical “A Chorus Line” when a female character remembers dancing around the living room with her father.



Artwork by Deborah Kass/Paul Kasmin Gallery and Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

“Chairman Ma (Gertrude Stein),” 1993.

“I have that memory of dancing on my father’s feet to all the music my parents used to listen to,” Ms. Kass said. The piece, she said, “really felt like it brought together my relationship to art history and my relationship to culture and my relationship to my father.”

In person Ms. Kass, now 60, has the instant familiarity of the native New Yorker, quick with the one-liner, by turns funny, brash and confessional. She describes growing up on Long Island immersed in her parents’ nostalgia — watching old movies, listening to musicals and to the jazz collection of her father, a dentist who played the saxophone and clarinet. Exposure to “jazz musicians taking pop standards and doing them their own way,” she said, meant that “appropriation was natural for me.”

Her urge to riff on her forefathers was apparent as early as the third grade, when she created a comic strip called “Applesauce” and sent the drawings to the “Peanuts” creator Charles M. Schulz. (He wrote back, “Keep at it, for you can never tell what it may develop into.”) In high school she used her baby-sitting money to pay for Saturday classes in Manhattan at the Art Students League. Afterward she would wander the Museum of Modern Art, where she first fell in love with Cézanne and de Kooning, Oldenburg and Stella but did not see work by many female artists, let alone any that reflected herself.

She attended the Whitney Museum Independent Studies Program in the summer of 1972 — Julian Schnabel was a classmate — and received her B.F.A. in painting from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh in 1974 before moving to Lower Manhattan. She made feverish landscapes, exhibited in her first solo show at Baskerville + Watson in New York in 1984. But as her male contemporaries, including Schnabel, David Salle and Eric

Fischl, became market phenomena while showing at Mary Boone, it became apparent to her that painting remained a boy’s club.

In her “Art History Paintings,” begun in the late 1980s, she questioned assumptions about genius and masculinity in canvases that juxtaposed styles from Jackson Pollock to Salle. Even when focusing on women, as in her 1989 painting “Call of the Wild (for Pat Steir),” in which she put motifs used by Ms. Steir and Lee Krasner (Pollock’s long overshadowed wife) adjacent to an armless Lucy from “Peanuts” in mid-scream, she approached the issue from a negative perspective. “It was about the outsider women crying, ‘Let me in!’ ” said Ms. Steir, a longtime friend of Ms. Kass’s.

“I had been dealing with my absence, and I really wanted to deal with my presence,” said Ms. Kass, who had her Streisand epiphany in 1992 after unleashing a feminist rant on a male art critic. “I remembered the first moment at age 13 I recognized my presence in popular culture, and it was Barbra. She was this creature who was so utterly familiar to me, unlike every other Hollywood star. She understood the power and the glamour of her difference in a profound way, and she took charge of her representation in a way very few actresses ever got away with.”

Ever since, she has fully embraced what she distanced herself from in her 20s and 30s: her suburban upbringing, her middle-class Jewish identity, her love of the show tune. “A lot of Broadway has that immigrant narrative of America as a place where you can become something else against all odds,” said Ms. Kass, who began her first Broadway canvas — “Sing Out Louise,” the opening line from “Gypsy” — in 2002, as she turned 50 and was despondent about what she saw as George W. Bush’s assault on the middle class. “Really, I’ve only been striving to get to the middle class all these years.”

Today, enjoying a new level of institutional support, Ms. Kass seems to have moved further than that. And she is well positioned for eternity, as well. Her partner of 19 years, the artist Patricia Cronin, carved their likenesses in a beautiful embrace for a piece called “Memorial to a Marriage,” now cast in bronze as a tombstone holding their spots in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. “We’re around the corner from Miles Davis and Herman Melville and Fiorello La Guardia,” Ms. Kass said. “This is the ultimate company.”

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