

Singing on the Edge of Extinction: A Q&A With Painter Deborah Kass

By Andrew Russeth

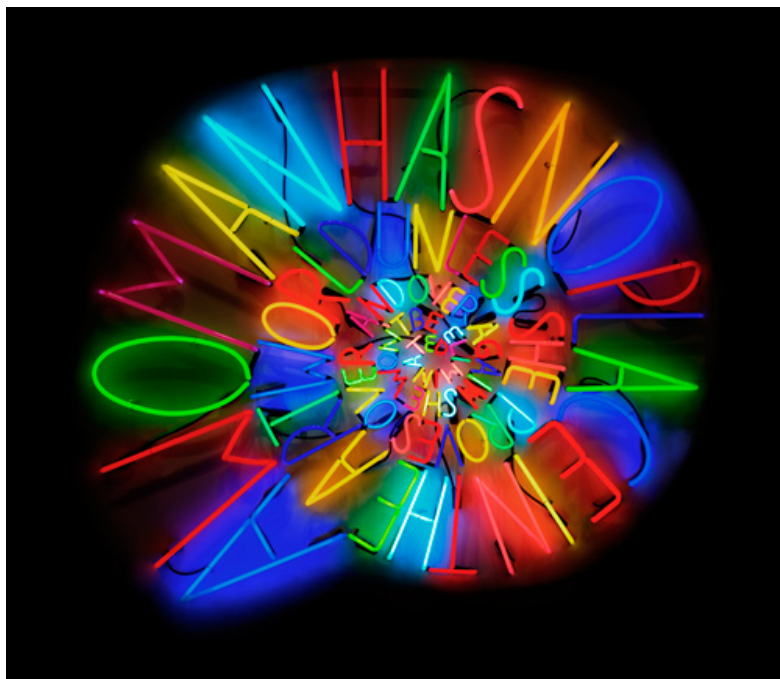
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“MORE Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times,” Deborah Kass’s current show at Paul Kasmin, may contain some of the most ebullient art now on view anywhere in New York. Expanding on a project she first showed at the gallery in 2007, Kass plucks the signature works and styles of some of the 20th century’s most iconic male artists and joyfully reworks them, sometimes with a dash of Broadway. **Andy Warhol**’s camouflage print is spliced together with a **Frank Stella** grid and covered, in block letters, with a snippet from “A Chorus Line”: “DADDY I WOULD LOVE TO DANCE.” **Ed Ruscha**’s MoMA-owned 1962 classic, “OOF,” becomes, in Kass’s hands, “OY” — and “YO.”

In a catalogue essay for the show, no less a dignified figure than **Yale School of Art** dean Rob Storr is so taken with Kass’s revelry that he eschews scholarly footnotes in favor of linking to YouTube videos of iconic Broadway songs. “[I]nstead of directing readers to the collected works of Clement Greenberg, Rosalind Krauss or the usual Frankfurt School sages and Parisian professors, I am provided a more useful bibliography,” he writes. “Forget your troubles, c’mon get happy, it’s only a click away.”

There is a less playful element at work in these paintings, too. “SAVE THE COUNTRY NOW,” one painting reads, each word printed on a separate monochrome, while another stretch of **Ellsworth Kelly**–style canvases are lined with another mysterious (**Bruce Nauman**-poking) line: “DAY AFTER DAY AFTER DAY AFTER DAY.” With their meticulously production and ambiguous, deadpan messages, the works occupy a liminal space between respectful homage and aggressive appropriation, a territory Kass explored in the 1990s with her “Warhol Project,” in which she systematically remade many of that Pop artist’s greatest hits: Barbra Streisand as Yentl Mendel replaced Warhol’s Elvis, contemporary curators become his “Most Wanted Men,” and Kass herself became the subject of his self-portraits.

Earlier this month, Kass sat down at Paul Kasmin gallery with **ARTINFO** to talk about her latest work, her journey through the New York art world, and the art world’s sudden interest in feminism, which has been central to her practice for four decades.



“After Louise Bourgeois,” 2010. All artworks by Deborah Kass.

Photo by Christopher Burke Studio, courtesy the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery



Artist Deborah Kass

Frank Stella has clearly been an important artist for you. Can you talk a little bit about your relationship with his work?

I saw his first retrospective when I was seventeen, in high school. He was an incredibly young guy to get a retrospective. I had been haunting MoMA for years, trying to figure out what any of the art might have to do with me, and I never got a satisfactory answer, but I was falling in love anyway. I loved Cézanne, I loved Oldenburg, and I loved de Kooning. Rothko was a little intense for me, though.

What did you get out of the Stella retrospective?

It was a fantastic show. The works were set up chronologically so that you could totally see how he got from A to B. The logic and the materiality of the structure were very clear. I had my diary — I was a very intense teenager — on that day, and I was writing in it. I had read Clement Greenberg. I am not sure how much I absorbed, but I guess I absorbed something. I totally got what Stella was doing, and I just thought, “If I can understand this guy’s thinking, then I can absolutely be an artist.” That was good, because I was already going to be an artist, and had already been accepted into art school. I was so relieved. It was profound.

Did your parents approve of your planned art career?

Oh God, no. My father was a miserable dentist, who hated what he did because he really was a musician. And he died very young.

What did he play?

Sax. He played alto, soprano, and tenor, and he played clarinet. He also played flute, but he really played the sax. All the hip Jewish guys played sax.

Did your parents take you to museums?

No, not really. Once, maybe twice, but I did go to the Met with my father at some point, because of this Picasso and Gertrude Stein event that was really big for me, when I was about ten. But it was not — in any way, shape, or form — part of my life. I drew all the time, so he took me to the Met one day. Art was in no way part of my life, but music was.

How did you actually go about combining the Stella squares and the Warhol camouflage? They are amazingly intricate.

Well, it involves a lot of tape. A lot of tape. You plan out the letters, and then you tape the inside of the letters for one painting, and then you tape the outside of the letters for the other painting. You do the Stella ones, pull off all the tape, retape it, and then do the camouflage. It is utterly meditative, and a really fun thing to do. I remembered the shapes from when I did the Warhol stuff. It had been years but, doing it again, it came back to me. It was like, “Oh, right, I remember that shape. That was such a cute shape!”

When you appropriate artists, do you study their process? Did you try to paint in the same way Stella did?

No, I probably should have, but frankly I don’t paint the Stellas because I can’t paint in the lines. I have an assistant who does that. The fact is, I am doing it almost like Sherrie Levine. She worked from reproductions also. In this weird way, it’s a nod to Sherrie. You paint the way you think it looks. In the book it looks one way, but in real life it’s much sloppier.

Your Stellas are crisp. Those corners are sharp.

That would be my genius assistant, who can paint in the lines. I can paint the funny shapes, but I can’t do those perfect edges. I just can’t paint in the lines. It’s funny, all of Andy’s camouflages are printed, but I hand-painted every single blob because I couldn’t afford to make screens or do it any other way. My labor was cheaper.

What was going through your head with that combination? Why Stella and Warhol?

That’s a good question. I’ve always wanted to make a painting called “Frank’s Dilemma.” Seriously. Sometimes it just happens that way. The thing with painting is that everybody wanted to figure out how to do something between Pollock and Stella. But the real issue for me is actually between early Stella and Warhol. The issue, as I have come to know it histori-

cally, is that, for instance, Stella called the Pop artists “those guys.”

So he was really separating himself.

Exactly. But growing up in my generation, you had formalism and you had Pop Art, but you didn’t distinguish. It was just information, and it was all coming in the same way. That’s how that painting happened.

So putting them together, then, is showing your refusal to make that distinction?

Yes. And, also, they’re my daddies. That particular lyric, “Daddy, I would love to dance,” and those two paintings make a triangle. It is about my desire to be part of what they’re a part of it. Sherrie Levine used to say, “I appropriate male desire,” but she never identified the desire. I think the desire was ambition and greatness. For women of my age, it was still not very cool to be overtly ambitious.

It’s still not necessarily very cool.

It’s not attractive on women. But in my generation, even less so. You certainly weren’t supposed to be some crazy little Barbra Streisand figure in “Funny Girl.” That was my model of female ambition, so I was all over that, and it didn’t go over very well.

How much were you thinking about the context in which these works would be displayed? Paul Kasmin shows Frank Stella, and he’s done shows of Warhol. You’re showing these works in a space that has featured the people you’re appropriating.

My experience with a lot of artists — male, living artists that I have appropriated — hasn’t been so great. But it really is homage. It truly is. I can’t predict how they are going to react. Do I know how Ellsworth Kelly or Frank Stella will deal with this? No, I have no idea.

Did you see many Broadway shows as a child?

That was also something that didn’t really happen in my family. I went to some by myself, though. I was just a little culture vulture. That is what I was interested in. The albums were standard in the Tri-State area suburbs. All the parents had “My Fair Lady,” and everyone had “South Pacific.” They all went to see them. It was a night in the city. You went to see a show, and these songs were popular songs. Frank Sinatra sang a lot of Rodgers and Hammerstein stuff. They were made popular, so they were not only show tunes, but they were part of the American songbook. They’re part of what I consider one of the greatest contributions America has made to the world. It might be our most important cultural export, along with some good art.

Is that how the various quotations function in your work? They’re sort of working to hold things together?

I kind of feel like we need to put all of our tools on the table to see if we can come up with some sort of inspiration that will spark something better. But it’s not that I think that painters are going to save the world. I really don’t think that.

But culture can play some type of role.

Yes. And these works are very emotional. There is emotion in the mix, which also seems really, really, really important. I think we have to deal with our feelings. I just do. I think they’re very complicated now, and art has to be a part of it. We are at the brink of extinction yet again, and we are in a complete existential crisis that we have not seen since post World War II, which produced so much great culture.

Still, you are able to go and make really beautiful paintings. That seems the ultimate paradox. If we are all on the edge of extinction, we should all be....

Singing.

Singing. I was actually going to say fighting or something like that.

It’s so out of our control. This is really emotional — this is really intense. I have no solution obviously. Who does?

There’s not a lot of art that talks about feelings.

Yeah, I think that's true. I'm sort of blown away that I'm here. I really am. My work has dealt with marginalization and exclusion and absence. Now it's pretty emotional, and it's pretty surprising to me. But what's it going to be about — decoration? What's it going to be about — theory? Even when I was doing them, I was saying, "I'm taking two very cool things — appropriation and Pop — and completely injecting them with emotion, with hotness."

That's definitely here. Why are you doing that?

I think this is a time that really requires feeling, just to get through it, and to really understand it. When the market was so good, there was a lot of decorative work happening that didn't mean anything, but it was fabulous. It looked so good.

It looked so good.

It was great looking, but it never really meant anything.

But your work is really great-looking, too. It's not just formalism. It is deeply pleasurable painting.

But it is also certainly formal painting.

No, I agree. But it is super accessible. I came to the opening, and a couple was looking at your neon work. One woman looked at it really quickly. I'm not sure she had enough time to read the whole thing, but she shouted to the man she was with, "This is fabulous!" She loved it, and I can understand that. The works pops.

I made formalism kind of Pop, and I'm throwing a lot of emotion on top of it. That is the triangle. It's really bizarre. It's a weird thing. But I'm really happy with it.

Can you talk a little bit about your experience in New York over the years? You have also written extensively about the art world you grew up in, 1970s New York, and the market for art made by women at the time, which is something I was almost completely unaware of.

It's never talked about. I'm on a real mission to get that written into history, because it needs to be. It's not like there was a fantastic art market in the 1970s, but there was a market for women. They had real painting careers. They didn't teach. People like Pat Steir, Joan Snyder, and Elizabeth Murray. They were real survivors, in their element, and they were important in that decade. I am on a mission to bring New York school painting up to, and through, feminism.

It seems like people are becoming interested in that period again, that legacy of feminism, between the Jewish Museum's "Shifting the Gaze" show and "Seductive Subversion," the female Pop artist show now at Brooklyn Museum. Why do you think feminism is becoming a popular topic again?

I really believe it's a result of recession. This is the third major recession of my life. In the first one, in the seventies, I didn't know what a recession was. I didn't care. I was just being a waitress and having a good time, working and making art. In the early nineties, when there was a real recession, it was really hot then. It is popular again now. That is what links all these times together.

The economy causes it? That the economy hits, and we feel the need to reevaluate how we're doing?

I think so. It's much cheaper entertainment. I think the primary thing is the recession, but I also think that Hilary Clinton has a lot to do with it. Her run had a lot to do with it. Her 18 million cracks in the ceiling. And Sarah Palin, for better or for worse. Women really being high profile in politics is part of it. That being said, when women are doing well in politics, and we have a black guy as our president, you have to look at the art world. It's insane. It's insanely retrogressive politically. There are no politics. It's just a market.

But young artists are starting to call themselves feminists again. It seems to be coming back around. How can we keep that going?

I don't know. It's an unregulated market, and it's a huge market, and it wasn't that way in the seventies. It was a tiny little world then. I have a friend that says there were maybe sixty people in the art world in the 1960s, and they came to every opening. There were maybe five hundred in the seventies. It was nothing like this monster. The machine really started with Reagan, and my generation was the Reagan generation of artists: the eighties.

You write about going to places like Gordon Matta-Clark's legendary Food restaurant in SoHo, which is something that I think my generation fantasizes about, having that close-knit community.

Everyone's lusting after the genuine experience of New York. That's what it was. It was local, and it was great. But you'll probably think about your life now as really more exciting later. Take all of those stories with a grain of salt, because maybe everyone remembers their twenties as fabulous. Even though I was tortured all through my twenties, and I really liked my thirties better. But it was the 1980s then, when there was a realization that feminism had virtually no effect on what was becoming the art world. In fact, women painters of my generation were utterly ignored.

Right. The big headlines were for the male painters coming of age, Julian Schnabel, David Salle, and so forth.

It was as if no women my age painted, which was ridiculous. It was very painful. But that was that. In the 1970s, the best and most interesting painters were women, and then it all stopped.

Which leads us nicely into your neon work, which is based on one of your paintings, which Louise Bourgeois: "A woman has no place in the art world unless she proves over and over again she won't be eliminated."

It's not an exact quote. It's titled "After Louise Bourgeois."

Right. What exactly did she say? How did you change it?

Her line was "A woman has no place as an artist unless she proves over and over again she won't be eliminated," and I thought that was so incredibly unfair to women artists. I know she's a feminist icon, but that is not a feminist statement. And I thought, "To whom does a woman need to prove herself over and over?"

Are you a fan of her work?

Oh yeah. How could you not be?

And she was a sculptor, not a painter. Your discussion about the invisibility of female painters is fascinating to me since I was educated in an environment in which the idea of contemporary painting was considered deeply questionable. From your generation, the academy has always been most interested in the conceptual photographers.

Right, absolutely. That has always been an issue. In 1991 I curated a show called "Painting Culture" at José Freire. I included artists like Sue Williams, Marilyn Minter, Kay Rosen, Kathe Burkhart, and Mary Weatherford, and it was about women who painted with an eye on the culture. It was very well received at the height of the recession, but it went nowhere. We weren't packaged like neo-expressionists were. No magazine swept in and made a market. It was just a really smart show that addressed something very specific.

The idea was to create next generation of female artists, continuing on from the people you followed in the seventies?

Yes, there had been Elizabeth Murray, Joan Snyder, Pat Steir, Mary Heilmann, Susan Rothenberg. Then in the 80s it was Barbara [Kruger], Sherrie [Levine], Cindy [Sherman]. To me, it made perfect sense; it was a straight line. It didn't matter that they were using photography. They were doing the feminist analysis of culture in a more specific way, they were deconstructing power. Painting was absolutely out of that. There seemed to be no place in painting for that conversation, and there was no place in painting for that conversation because it was too — as they said at the time — "over-determined." That didn't stop men from making millions of dollars from paintings, but it stopped women from getting anything.

Those female painters you mentioned are all established now, though. They have entered the pantheon.

Yes, but it took twenty years, and it is just starting. Artists like Marilyn [Minter] are new phenomena. My point is that the arguments about painting somehow only seemed to apply to women. Rosalind Krauss and October had no interest in Julian Schnabel. They didn't care what he did, and he didn't care what they were doing. That let painting off the hook, and the whole history of painting continued to be about men.

And yet you decided to become a painter.

I thought it was such a specious argument, and I had the argument with people constantly. I used to have this Adrienne

Rich quote: "This is the oppressor's language, yet I need it to talk to you." The debate about painting kept painters marginal, and women in particular. But the medium was not the message. The message was the message, and I saw no reason to not be a painter. At the same time, I was thrilled by the work of Barbara, Sherrie, and Cindy. Then, in the mid-1990s, money came back in the market.

It's interesting to hear you talk about that period because it seems like we are entering a similar period, at least partially. Collectors are buying again. At the same time, we aren't seeing a full-fledged recovery. The title of your show is "MORE feel good paintings for feel bad times." Is that optimism or pessimism?

They're feel-good paintings for feel-bad times. They absolutely, I hope, go both ways. They have to cut both ways. You have to look at "OY" and go "OOF." And then "YO" is kind of a response to it. It's "Yo, Picasso," but it's also "Yo. Yo, dude." One is about biting your fingernails and the other is assertive, like I am.

"Do you want to funk with me?" as another one of your canvases says.

It's very double. It can be read in different ways. It's really an extremely fucked up time, in case you haven't noticed. It's pretty bad.

Do you ever doubt the use of playing a role in the art world in such a time?

It's always been a fucked up time. I've had 30 years of fucked up times.

Since Reagan.

Since Reagan it's been a fucked up time. That's absolutely right. And being in the art world is exactly the same as being in the real world in a fucked up time. Why would it be any different? It shouldn't be. It's the world. It's just another manifestation of the problem. But listen, there's got to be a solution. I don't know what it is, but I'm definitely nostalgic for optimism.

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