

Has Deborah Kass Saved Warhol Appropriation?

by Emily Colucci on January 4, 2013



Installation view of Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After with views of Kass's Double Double Yentl (My Elvis), 1992 (All images courtesy of Andy Warhol Museum)

PITTSBURGH – In her mid-career retrospective [Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After](#) at the [Andy Warhol Museum](#), Deborah Kass accomplishes the seemingly impossible by breathing new life and critical ideas into the appropriation of Andy Warhol's work.

Before visiting the Warhol Museum, I approached Deborah Kass's work with a bit of trepidation since I recently attended the Metropolitan Museum of Art's jumbled and heavy-handed exhibition, [Regarding Warhol: Sixty Artists, Fifty Years](#) that somehow managed to strip all meaning from Warhol and his appropriator's works, including a work by Kass.

However, I was completely enthralled by Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After, which by raising issues of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and art history, seemed to be a feminist and queer theorist's dream.

The exhibition ranges from Kass's early landscape and art historical paintings from the 1980s and early 1990s, where Kass would mix the styles of modern art masters such as Cezanne, Picasso, and Pollock with cartoons to reveal the male-dominated imagery that pervades modern art and popular culture to her recent language-based series, feel good paintings for feel bad times.



Deborah Kass, "You Can't Stop the Beat" (2003)

While I understand and appreciate the significance of Kass's criticism of modern art history and absolutely love her recent campy use of quotes from musicals, particularly "You Can't Stop the Beat" (2003) from John Water's film Hairspray, I found the highlight of the exhibition was, surprisingly, Kass's The Warhol Project series of appropriation of Warhol's work completed from 1992 to 2000.

Kass's Warhol Project includes takes on a wide variety of Warhol's work from his self-portraits to his celebrity paintings to even Kass's playfully hilarious rendition of his 13 Most Wanted Men series featuring mugshots of art scene personalities such as [Robert Storr](#) and the Studio Museum in Harlem's [Thelma Golden](#).



Deborah Kass, America's Most Wanted, Robert S., 1998

Throughout the Warhol Project series, Kass deftly forges a queer, cross-generational artistic identification between herself, a Jewish-American lesbian woman, and Warhol, a Slovak-American Catholic gay man, which can be illuminated by queer theorist [José Esteban Muñoz's](#) theory of disidentification.

According to Muñoz who studies Warhol in relation to Jean-Michel Basquiat, certain queer artists and performers appropriate a mainstream cultural style in a manner that is neither a complete identification with or a refusal of, but a middle ground, called disidentification, which both questions the appropriated work and transforms it to the artist's own use.



Installation view of the Warhol Museum lobby during Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After

For example, the Warhol Museum's lobby features two nearly identical paintings side-by-side: Warhol's "Camouflage Self Portrait" (1986) and Kass's own "Camouflage Self-Portrait" (1994). While both portraits present a queer artist fashioning themselves against an overtly masculine, military pattern, Kass's self-portrait, with her hair teased up to reflect Warhol's wig, reveals the incredible difference in fame and notoriety between Warhol, a male art icon and Kass, a female artist whose image is certainly not as iconic.

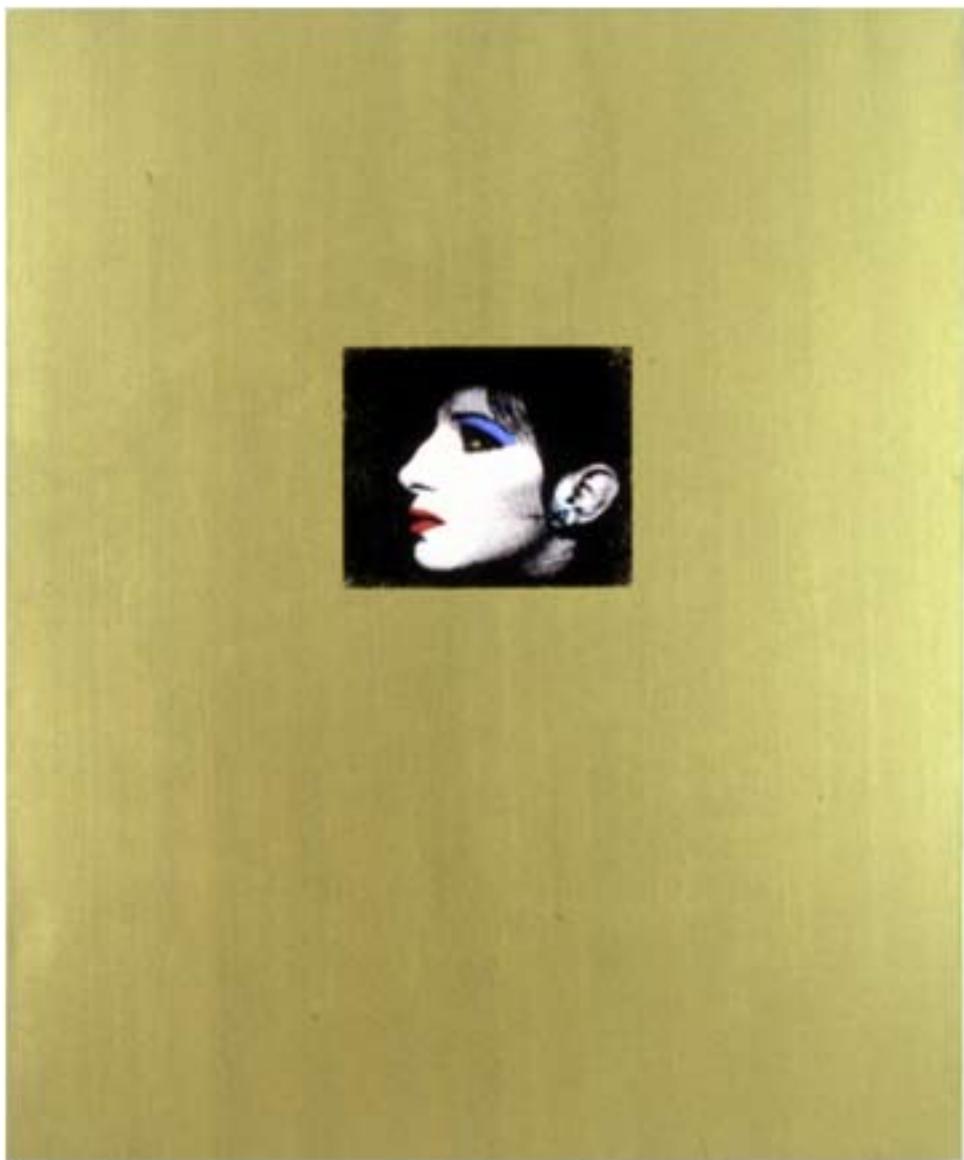
Rather than a complete identification with Warhol or a complete rejection of his work, Kass disidentifies with Warhol's powerful visual language and transforms it to her own use.

In addition to her self-portraits, Kass also completed a series of dynamic portraits of Barbra Streisand in the style of various Warhol celebrity portraits.



Deborah Kass, Double Double Yentl (My Elvis), 1992

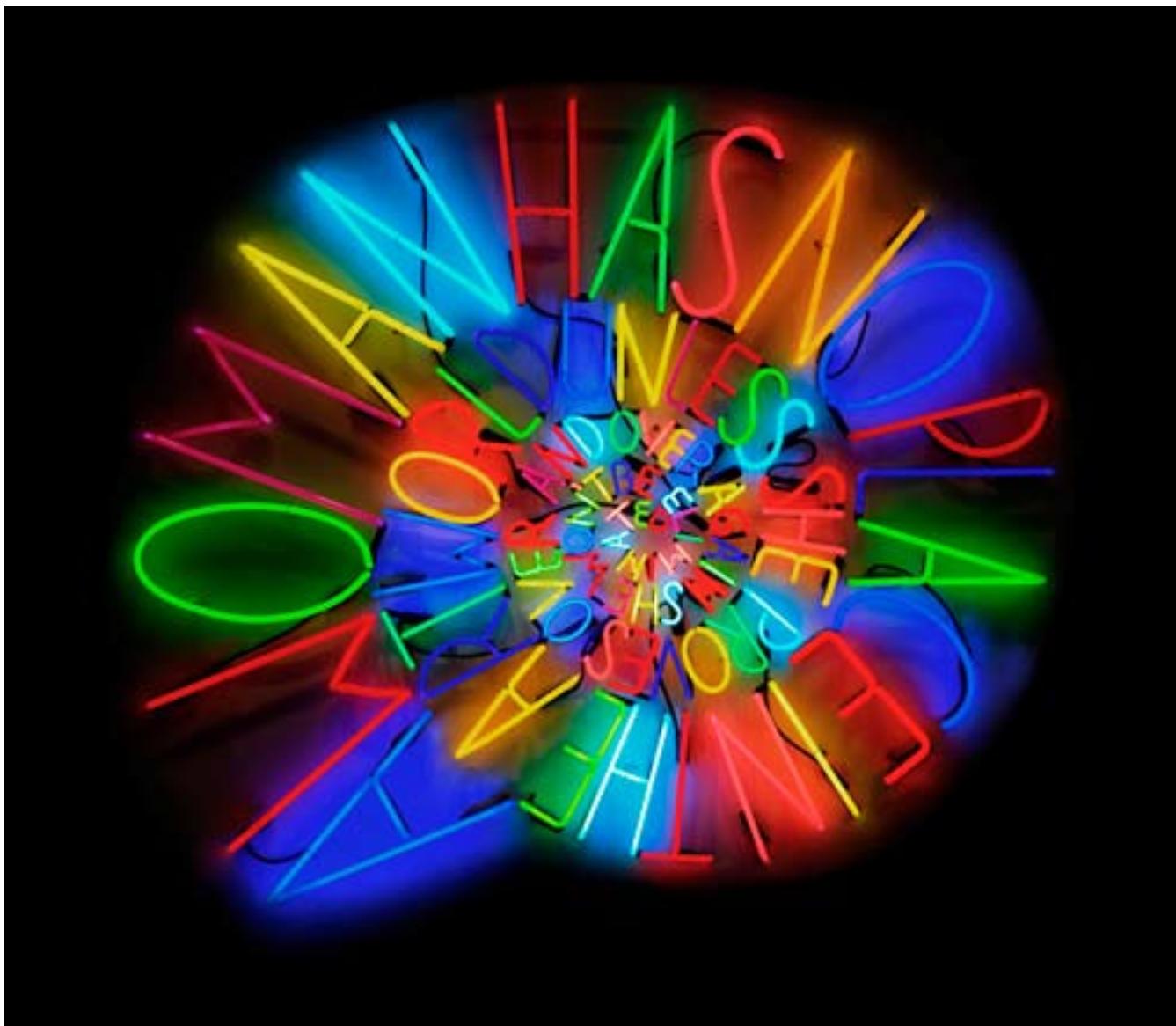
Employing the style of Warhol's Elvis paintings, Kass's "Double Yentl (My Elvis)" (1992) takes Streisand's image from the film *Yentl*, in which Streisand plays a woman who dresses and lives as a man in order to study Talmudic Law and attracts the attention of both women and men. Coupled with his portraits of Marlon Brando, Warhol's portraits of Elvis detail the absolute pinnacle of 1950s and 1960s white male masculinity. By replacing these stars with the image of Streisand dressed as a man, Kass twists the idea of celebrity worship, ethnicity, and masculinity.



Deborah Kass, "Gold Barbra (The Jewish Jackie Series)" (1992)

Another and perhaps my favorite portrait of Streisand by Deborah Kass is her "Gold Barbra" (1992) portrait. Obviously appropriated from Warhol's "[Gold Marilyn](#)" (1962), which always seemed so Catholic and gay to me from Warhol's diva worship to his golden near religious icon color choice. Playing with these aspects of "Gold Marilyn," Kass disidentifies with Warhol, reflecting his diva worship but replacing his WASP-y Monroe with an unquestionably Jewish Streisand.

While many critics right now seem completely tired of appropriation, particularly appropriation of Warhol, Kass's disidentification with Warhol thankfully re-invigorates both Warhol and appropriation by its duel acceptance and critique of Warhol's work.



Deborah Kass, After Louise Bourgeois, 2010

As Kass's neon work "After Louise Bourgeois" (2010) exclaims in an altered quote from French artist [Louise Bourgeois](#):

"A woman has no place in the art world unless she proves over and over again that she won't be eliminated."

Deborah Kass's retrospective proves exactly that.

[Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After](#) is on view at the Andy Warhol Museum (117 Sandusky Street, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) until January 6, 2013.

For those in New York, [Deborah Kass's](#) will open at the Paul Kasmin Gallery (293 Tenth Avenue, Chelsea, Manhattan) on January 24.

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