

ART REVIEW: A “Most Wanted” List from Deborah Kass

June 11, 2015 by Janet Goleas

Whether Deborah Kass is expounding on gender politics, critiquing the graphics of Athenian vases or skewering the art world’s male-dominated canon, the work of this Long Island-born artist pulls no punches.

Cheeky, smart and subversive, Kass has been questioning the status quo in popular culture and 20th century American art for more than three decades. At Pittsburgh’s Andy Warhol Museum in 2012, her first retrospective was widely celebrated for its incisive cultural parody and keen focus on the politics of identity.

Now on view at Sargent’s Daughters on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, the gallery offers a rare opportunity to see Kass’s renowned series “America’s Most Wanted, 1998 – 1999,” a prime example of the artist’s provocative repartee. Making its New York debut, “America’s Most Wanted” is adapted from Andy Warhol’s infamous Thirteen Most Wanted Men, a work originally commissioned for the 1964 World’s Fair.

Warhol’s first and last public art project, the huge mural was created, installed and summarily rejected within days of its appearance on site. The piece consisted of 25 four-foot-square panels featuring silkscreened mugshots of U.S. felons—22 fugitive men in all—all of whom were on the 1962 “most-wanted” list. Positioned on the curved exterior of the New York State Pavilion at Flushing Meadows, the work was quickly deemed inappropriate by then Governor Nelson Rockefeller, who, with Warhol’s approval, ordered the panels to be covered in silver paint. Later that year Warhol created and exhibited a smaller series of “Most Wanted Men” configured in diptychs.

Turning the tables as she is known to do, in 1998 Deborah Kass borrowed Warhol’s concept, replacing the criminal element with mugshots of some of the most influential emerging museum curators of the late 1990s. As Kass has noted, museum curators hold a special place in the art world because their interests are non-commercial. Artists want to be known by them, but they are often viewed as unapproachable—beyond the reach of the average studio artist.

Cast as fugitives here, we get a glimpse of them as if from the other side. Silkscreened on large-format canvasses, the grainy black and white images simulate the steely untouchability with which museum curators are often viewed.

Possessing a tongue-in-cheek gravitas, the works are riveting. Most are diptychs, with both frontal and profile views of each curator. Photographed in rudimentary fashion like police photos, the subjects seem to be a little world weary. In some cases, their portraits were roughed up by the artist’s brush; in others they stare straight ahead with a vacant gaze. The participants are somewhat anonymous, identified only by coded placards that reveal first names, their “precinct” (of the institution where they worked) and the date (of the photograph).

Young curators disguised as felons—priceless. Today the works frame some of the most standout professionals in the curatorial field. To the uninitiated, their identities are a bit of an inside joke, so here’s the punchline: they include



“Thirteen Most Wanted Men” by Andy Warhol, 1964. Installed at the New York State Pavilion at the World’s Fair.



“America’s Most Wanted, Robert S.” by Deborah Kass, 1998. Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, diptych, 48 x 40 inches.



“America’s Most Wanted, Paul S.” by Deborah Kass, 1998. Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, diptych, 48 x 40 inches.

Terrie Sultan of the Parrish Art Museum; Robert Storr, dean of the Yale School of Art; Dan Cameron, former Orange County Museum curator; Donna De Salvo, deputy director of the Whitney Museum of American Art (and former Parrish curator) and Thelma Golden of the Studio Museum in Harlem, among others.

Though often hotly political, Kass's works are discreet, with layers of meaning that require a complex delivery system, something outside the range of a simple ideology. Known for her appropriations of blue-chip male artists, for her linguistic tropes and succinct political observations, Kass shows here a touching allegiance to Warhol, perhaps art history's most significant stranger.

The quintessential insider/outsider, Warhol was perceived as an alien in his own broad and brilliant world, and Kass's affection for him is recognized in multiple appropriations of his body of work. In fact, her work from this period seems so in sync with Warhol's aesthetic it's as if the artists worked in partnership, re-imagining the world together.

In *The Warhol Project*, her acclaimed series from the 1990s, Kass's notorious sense of humor is deployed to address complex issues of ethnicity, feminism, gender identity and discrimination. While she dons Warhol's overcoat, the message underneath is distinctly her own.

In 1992, Kass embraced an unlikely heir to the world of contemporary art, Barbra Streisand. Streisand was also a Jewish girl from New York and her refusal to change her name—or her nose—paved the way for a generation of women to challenge the perimeters of popular culture. “Make room!” they screamed, and Kass began to translate their voices through the power of cultural symbols.

In deconstructing Warhol's cathedral of celebrity she inserted Streisand, switching out some of Warhol's most iconic portraits—Elvis, Jackie and Marilyn—with Barbra's image. Using humor to survive and conquer, Kass continued, cropping her own portrait into Warhol's famed Elizabeth Taylor series. Later, she dressed in drag to replicate his infamous Marlene Deitrich pose.

The conundrum was circular and expository: Kass, a lesbian, dressed as a gay man who is dressed as a woman. It was confusing and revelatory at the same time. Stepping over line after line became a powerful antidote to a world that seemed to accept the relentless discrimination of women, gays and all forms of ethnicity. Transforming her subjects through word and image, Kass, part warrior, forged a distinctive path.

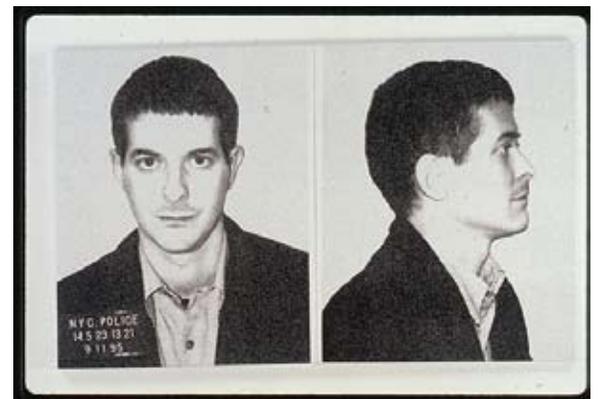
Moving forward like a latter-day Zelig, Kass parodied the work of some of her most lauded male counterparts, including Bruce Naumann, Kenneth Noland and Ed Ruscha. Notwithstanding the excruciating disparity between the financial rewards for men vs. women, her recreations have been provocative in regard to language, the first weapon in an insurgence aimed at cultural change. Cherry-picking words and phrases from popular tunes, Broadway musicals, other artists and the culture at large, Kass has dissected language, repatriating it to her mother tongue in radiant compositions that also scream to be heard.

Don't miss this rare opportunity to see Deborah Kass's “America's Most Wanted, 1998 – 1999” in its entirety, on view through June 28, 2015.

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“America's Most Wanted, Terrie S.” by Deborah Kass, 1998. Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, diptych, 48 x 40 inches each.



“America's Most Wanted, Dan C.” by Deborah Kass, 1999. Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, diptych, 48 x 40 inches each.



“America's Most Wanted, Thelma G.” by Deborah Kass, 1998. Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, diptych, 48 x 40 inches each.