

# Hot Coffee with feminist icon - artist Deborah Kass



Deborah Kass is a big name in the feminist canon of contemporary American artists. A politically active artist never shied away from making statements through her works, but also by being actively involved in Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign. Among Kass' important series are *The Warhol Project* - the artist reimagined Warhol's iconic works by addressing issues of representation and identity and *America's Most Wanted*- series includes images of cultural and political figures, questioning their stereotypical roles and values. Kass' Art Historical Paintings made a breakthrough through an explicit critique of the male-dominated art canon in the 1990s. Kass's work has been exhibited widely in solo and group exhibitions at major institutions, including the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Jewish Museum in New York. Her works are part of many prestigious collections, such as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. It is an honor to feature Kass as part of Hot Coffee Conversations and to ask her a few questions.

**Nina:** *Imagine you are in your favorite coffee or tea spot. Where is it? What are you drinking? What are the three things you see right now?*

**Deborah:** At my dining room table in Brooklyn. I see MSNBC, a 6-foot-tall Yentl painting and a vase brimming with glamorous rubrum lilies from my garden.



Deborah Kass, **How Do I Look?** 1991. Oil on canvas, 50 x 100 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.

**Nina:** **What role did trauma or intergenerational trauma have played in your work?**

**Deborah:** I will leave that to historians and therapists.



Deborah Kass, **Portrait Of The Artist As A Young Man**, 1991

Oil, enamel, acrylic on canvas. 84 x 66 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.

**Nina:** You have achieved major breakthroughs with your Art History Paintings and as I know you are now revisiting them in a way. How would you reevaluate these works at this historical moment?

**Deborah:** Looking at the Art History Paintings, produced 30+ years ago, they look incredibly fresh, prescient and relevant, while also referring specifically to the time and context in which they were made. I am very excited to show them in 2025. In these works I was actively examining structural misogyny in the histories of modern and contemporary painting during and after the 80s, a decade that saw virtually zero visibility for a generation of female painters, mine. This stood in stark contrast to the interest in and representation of women painters in the 70s at the height of second wave feminism, the (only?) decade when women had real political power. If you don't believe me just look at Artforums from the 70s and 80s and compare them. Or Whitney Biennial lists. How could it have changed so fast? One reason, maybe the most important: the election of reactionary Reagan and the explosion of a new wholly unregulated art market based on new money created by his neoliberal tax structure. The questions I posed in these paintings are: How has painting itself been complicit in structural misogyny and white male supremacy? How have we been trained thru art history, the canon, contemporary art, critics, museum and paintings themselves, to imagine genius, power, and value as exclusively the province of white men? How do you make a painting out of these concerns?





Detail, **Untitled (First World Third World)**, 1990. Oil, enamel, flashe on canvas 45 x 105 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.

**Nina:** As a person who over time has depicted strong feminist figures such as Barbra Streisand, Gertrude Stein, Cindy Sherman, and others, where do you think the current feminism is when it comes to visual art? Do you believe it has been diluted by the demands of the market?

**Deborah:** There are many definitions of feminism at work in the art world/ market. There is the argument that women and POC's current visibility in galleries and auction houses is an indication of progress. Maybe. But the Burns Halperin Report in Artnews puts that argument to bed. Things are still bad for women and POC despite a few obvious market darlings.





Deborah Kass, **VOTE HILLARY**, 2016. Silkscreen on Stonehenge 320 gram paper 42 × 42 inches. Edition of 250 50 APs. Image courtesy of the artist.

**Nina:** You have always been an active artist politically, what role could an artist play in the current political crisis taking place in the U.S. as well as globally? Can art change anything in our pre-apocalyptic world?

**Deborah:** As someone who never says no to creating public service announcements in the forms of political billboards, prints, and posters I am a cynic on this issue. Happy to do anything to help, but it feels like preaching to the choir. The market rules. It fiddles while the world burns.



Deborah Kass, **Yellow Deb**, 2012. 7-color silkscreen on 2-ply museum board 24 x 24 inches, edition of 60. Image courtesy of the artist.

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