

The Revolutionary and the Reformist: Deborah Kass and Robert Storr at the New York Public Library

By Zoë Lescaze 1/18 4:46pm



Deborah Kass, 'Blue Deb,' 2000.
(Courtesy the artist and Paul Kasmin)

As she watched a handsome room on the second floor of the New York Public Library's Stephen A. Schwarzman Building in Midtown steadily fill with people on Wednesday night, Deborah Kass looked pleased. "It's all friends—it's perfect," she told a bespectacled gentleman setting up stacks of her first monograph, *Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After* (2012), on a nearby table. Ms. Kass mingled amiably before the event—a conversation between her and curator Robert Storr held in conjunction with her recent mid-career retrospective at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, which closed last week. Ms. Kass wore black, down to her trademark velvet slippers bearing the words OY and YO in gold, just like her twin paintings of those words that play on Ed Ruscha's iconic OOF (1962), which is in the collection of MoMA.

She and Mr. Storr efficiently guided the audience chronologically through her development as an artist, starting with her participation in the 1972 Whitney Independent Study Program and finishing with her most recent body of work, "Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times."

Ms. Kass's early work, landscapes and more abstract paintings depicting geometric shapes, are rarely seen, but Mr. Storr asked her to discuss them. Though the artist deemed the period "Deborah Kass: The Confused Years," she nonetheless gave them credit for being "kick-ass, tough-girl paintings." Mr. Storr pointed out the boldness of the angular, projecting forms: "They're unpleasing shapes that don't mind being unpleasant one little bit."

Ms. Kass spoke of what led her to create her vivid Pop paintings, which appropriate the styles and imagery of (typically male) artists from Picasso to Pollock. In feminist literary criticism by the likes of Elaine Showalter and Nancy K. Miller, she found "everything [she] was missing in art history," she said. "It was through their reexamination of literary history that I could really reformulate art history for myself."

In her "Art History" series of the late 1980s and early '90s, Ms. Kass merged pop-culture imagery and famous paintings, pitting cartoons against Cubist masterpieces. The appropriation didn't always please the painters Ms. Kass tweaked, like David Salle, who she said "did not appreciate it." Asked for details after the talk, she told us, "Let's just say I went right to a dead artist after that."

That artist was Andy Warhol, and Ms. Kass worked in his mode for an eight-year project that she said felt like a "marriage." They've become perhaps her best-known paintings, in which she replaces Warhol subjects like Marilyn Monroe with Barbara Streisand and her other personal heroines—it was before "anyone else was doing fake Andys," she said. (The "My Elvis" series, which depicts Ms. Streisand in drag as her character Yentl, is the subject of an upcoming exhibition opening Jan. 24 at Paul Kasmin Gallery, Ms. Kass's Chelsea roost.) One suspects that Warhol, ever the arch appropriator, would have approved.

She has received some favorable responses from living artists. "I have very nice notes from Steven Sondheim," said Ms. Kass, who used his lyrics in her most recent series. "I'm totally fixated on him...I have him on tape saying I'm a great artist, and it's just too much!" she said. "It was really a highlight of my life. And I was much more interested in meeting him than Barbara, who I've yet to meet—I'm terrified of her!"

Though the conversation was peppered with such affirming anecdotes, serving as a kind of denouement of a highly successful year for the artist, the Q&A had some starker moments.

Answering one question, Ms. Kass insisted that she would never urge young women to pursue art. "It's a life of humiliation and pain," she said. "Nothing's changed. Nothing. So I've stopped giving visiting-artist talks because I'm too guilty to encourage girls, I don't want to encourage them."

This stance contrasts sharply with her own long determination to use a medium that has been dominated by men since the '70s. She also noted what she feels is a severe lack of institutional support for female artists today. "I've never been in a biennial," she said. "Everyone just assumes I was in that biennial [the so-called "multicultural" Whitney Biennial of 1993], but I wasn't."

Mr. Storr demurred on the subject of young women's prospects in the art world on the grounds that his perspective was different as a member of the establishment (a man and self-described "archetypal WASP," as well as a museum worker). He did, however, speak to his efforts to break down institutional prejudices from the inside, such as with his consistent advocacy for the representation of women artists as a curator in the department of painting and sculpture at MoMA, and his ongoing work to diversify the faculty of the Yale School of Art, where he is currently dean.

"I have a lot of institutional jobs, but that gives me a wonderful place to be a really big irritant, and I try to take every advantage of that position as often as I can," he said, drawing applause and more than one "Bravo!" "Being a reformist is much less interesting than being a revolutionary—it's really tedious—but sometimes you can actually get in there and push things along."

Ms. Kass and her silver Sharpie were kept busy signing books following the conversation. After collecting her inscription, one woman approached Mr. Storr for his autograph. Mr. Storr, who penned one of the essays in the catalogue, deferred once again to Ms. Kass. "This is Deb's book and I'm proud to be in it," he wrote.