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ART IN REVIEW

Deborah Kass: 'My Elvis +'



Deborah Kass's "Double Double Yentl (My Elvis)," from 1993, silk-screen and acrylic on canvas, at Paul Kasmin.

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Paul Kasmin

515 West 27th Street, Chelsea

Through Feb. 23

It sounds like a subplot of a bad movie satirizing the high-art world: a feminist Jewish lesbian creates imitations of Warhol's "Elvis" paintings, substituting the image of Barbra Streisand in the guise of a young male Talmudic scholar from the movie "Yentl." In reality, at Paul Kasmin the installation of the series, which Deborah Kass initiated in the early 1990s, makes for an exceptionally elegant, thought-provoking show.

Each of the 14 works, most of which are 6 feet tall and from 3 to more than 10 feet wide, features the silk-screened black- and-white image of Streisand's Yentl in cap, glasses and long overcoat. Some have flat red or blue backgrounds. In others Yentl is multiplied horizontally to ghostly effect in photographic multiple exposures.

I like to imagine this as an update of Shakespearean comedy, like "Yentl" the movie. The artist paints the image of her love, but who — or what — is it she loves? Is it the boy in the girl, or the girl in the boy? Or is it the ambiguity itself that most compels?

Ms. Kass's impersonation of Warhol adds another layer. She is, in a sense, donning a male disguise herself — as she has done repeatedly over the past two decades in witty imitations of works by blue-chip father figures like Barnett Newman and Frank Stella.

The feminist commentary on male favoritism is obvious, but more intriguing is the drive to merge male and female. Metaphysical questions arise: why must we all be born either male or female? Are our souls gendered? Is sexual duality a trap or a gateway to transcendence?

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