



She

Candice Breitz

Glenn Brown

George Condo

John Currin

Jeff Koons

Yayoi Kusama

Chris Ofili

Jenny Saville

Cindy Sherman

Rebecca Warren

Lisa Yuskavage

She

Picturing women at the turn of the 21st century

Curated by **Jo-Ann Conklin**

Essay by **Ian Alden Russell**

David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University

Foreword

Spanning a period of twenty-four years — from 1989 to 2013 — *SHE* presents a broad-ranging selection of contemporary representations of women. The exhibition, which is drawn from a private collection, includes works by eleven of the most highly acclaimed artists working today. Within these paintings, sculpture, and videos are both convergences and divergences in style, concept, and intent. Some artists, notably Jenny Saville and Cindy Sherman, examine the position of women in society from an overtly feminist viewpoint. Others, such as Lisa Yuskavage and Rebecca Warren, wrest control of explicit sexual imagery from the hands of men. Yet others, such as George Condo, Glenn Brown, and Jeff Koons, show little to no concern with the politics of gender; instead they continue on the art historical path of depicting women as objects of beauty or desire, albeit to differing and individual ends.

Jenny Saville's massive and masterful paintings of obese women challenge conventional ideals of female beauty, while Cindy Sherman's *History Paintings* expand her critique of representations of femininity into the art historical past as she reworks portraits by Rembrandt, David, and Fragonard (included here). Candice Breitz focuses on Hollywood's portrayal of motherhood. Compiling clips from recent films in her video installation *Mother*, Breitz presents a less-than-flattering picture of the exasperation, insecurity, self-blame, and anxiety that these filmic women express about their maternal abilities.

John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage unapologetically embrace and exaggerate images made by and for men, from advertising to pornography. While Currin admits to a chauvinistic fascination, Yuskavage attempts to take possession of this previously male venue. Similarly, Rebecca Warren's sculpture *L* channels the comic imagery of R. Crumb's outrageously sexualized women. Working in unfired clay and bronze, Warren has developed a signature style of joyous and exuberant lumpen figures (often presented on light pink plinths) that have transformed her precedents from Crumb to Degas and Rodin.

The exhibition's discourse on gender is compounded by issues of race in the works of Chris Ofili and Yayoi Kusama. Reversing the spelling of "a negro," Ofili created *Orgena*, an icon of African beauty related to his *Afromuses* series. Confronting racial and gender discrimination in 1950s New York, Yayoi Kusama embarked upon her conceptual exploration of self-obliteration. She is represented here by a lesser-known painted self-portrait from a series that dates back to 1982.

Women are frequent subjects in George Condo's work (evidenced by his 2005 exhibition *George Condo: One Hundred Women* organized by the Museum der Moderne Salzburg and Kunsthalle Bielefeld). However, Condo is not particularly interested in

feminism. The same can be said of Glenn Brown. They are both, instead, deeply concerned with painting — the simple and not-so-simple application of pigment to canvas. Applying their idiosyncratic and highly identifiable styles to images of women, they parse the satirical, the humorous, and the grotesque.

For Jeff Koons, like Condo and Brown, "woman as subject" is secondary to formal concerns. His *Gazing Ball (Ariadne)* is a spectacular sculpture — a juxtaposition of a Classical figure reproduced in gleaming white plaster and a deep blue, reflective, gazing ball. In other works from the *Gazing Ball* series, Koons combines his gazing balls with plaster mailboxes, birdbaths, and snowmen. For Koons, women and mailboxes are the same; both are fodder for his world of Pop — no more, no less.

The works of art in *SHE* are lent from an anonymous private collection. I extend my sincere thanks to the collector for sharing these important contemporary artworks with the students of Brown and RISD, and the Rhode Island community. Such acts of generosity significantly enhance the programs of the David Winton Bell Gallery and Brown University. My thanks also to members of the collector's curatorial staff, who assisted with every aspect of the exhibition.

It has been a great pleasure to discuss the exhibition and individual works with essayist Ian Alden Russell, who has sensitively negotiated a wide range of artistic concerns in an intelligent and informative catalogue essay.

Special thanks to Edgar Laguinia at Glenn Brown's studio, Melissa Brice at George Condo's studio, and Amy Silver and Katherine Hughes at Jeff Koons's studio. Thanks also to Liz DeMase at Zwirner Gallery; Caroline Tilleard and Alix Greenberg at Skarstedt Gallery; Helen Cowdrey and Ariel Fishman at Matthew Marks Gallery; Michael Plunkett and Caroline Elbaor at Metro Pictures; and James McKee, Benjamin Handler, Harriet Mitchell, and Eugenia Ballve at Gagosian Gallery.

Jo-Ann Conklin

Director, David Winton Bell Gallery

Curator, *SHE: Picturing women at the turn of the 21st century*

Looking at Pictures of Women

Ian Alden Russell

I grew up as the only boy in a household of women in Richmond, Virginia. My mom, a single mother, was a feminist activist in the 1960s who transformed her activism into a career that championed domestic violence legislation at state and federal levels. During those years my mother, who embodied what I thought it meant to be a woman, would take me to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. I loved the galleries, getting lost in canvases and conversations with my mom about landscapes, history, and why people in paintings and sculptures had no clothes on. Alternately looking at Old Masters and my mother, these childhood tours planted the seed of a question that occurs to me every time I visit a museum: “how is it that my mother’s self-image as a woman is so different from the images of women in art history?”

I was daunted when Jo-Ann Conklin first approached me to write an essay for *SHE*. The task of framing the work of eleven major artists whose lives and careers span over eighty-five years, touching on almost every medium, movement, and conceptual turn from 1960s Pop onwards, was a tall order. It was, however, the curatorial theme for the exhibition that I found the most challenging. The history of the image of the female figure in art is fraught; until the later 20th century, it has almost exclusively been created, critiqued, and authorized by men. Like my mother’s career, the works in this exhibition owe much to the groundbreaking thinking of second-wave feminists. But like my mother’s life, the art world has not stayed still. As much as the faulty culture of patriarchy still tells me to view art through the male gaze, the values I learned from my mother help me transcend this legacy and be mindful of including multiple ways of thinking about, embodying, and representing women. A scene from Chris Marker’s 1962 short film *La Jetée* returns me to the moment when I was awoken by the project of shifting the agency of the gaze away from one dominated by men. We see a still image — a close up of the Woman’s face, reclining, resting, eyes closed. Until . . . she awakes.

La Jetée tells the story of the Man, played by Davos Hanich (voice-over by Jean Négroni), who is tasked by his post-apocalyptic society with travelling through time

“to call past and future to the rescue of the present.”¹ The key to his travel back in time is an image of the Woman, played by H  l  ne Chatelain — the object of an obsessive memory from his childhood, which he pursues as an anchor for his time travel. Self-defined as cin  -roman (a film-novel), the film is composed entirely of still photographs with voice-over. Almost as in a slide show, we are taken on a journey back and forth through time and memory — structured and held static by the gaze of the Man. That is until the still image of the Woman’s sleeping face becomes a moving image. Her eyes open in real time, and she blinks. We are now watched, confronted. For a moment, the stability of the Man’s gaze is broken. Where she had been a passive subject, the Woman now gazes at us, disrupting the sense of order in the flow of still images in the film. The aesthetic break from still to moving image provokes a visceral response: “. . . a gasp, a collective bodily intake of breath in every auditorium and theatre and lecture hall It is a gasp close to an experience of the erotic or the religious or both.”² It is the moment we are shaken into a realization of our participation in the Man’s penetration of time and his pursuit of the image of the Woman as both a visual possession and a source of salvation.

The works selected for the exhibition *SHE: Picturing women at the turn of the 21st century* resonate in various ways with this moment from *La Jet  e*. The exhibition presents a selection of artists who have approached the female figure from 1989 to 2013. Within the works there are both convergences and divergences in relation to style, medium, form, concept, and intent. Tensions quickly become evident when we consider the work of Cindy Sherman, arguably the most iconic feminist artist, in the same interpretative frame as John Currin, whose sexualized images of big-breasted women have drawn harsh criticism for their brash chauvinism. The challenge is compounded when we turn to the gender and race critiques in Chris Ofili’s exploration of Afrocentrism or Yayoi Kusama’s performances and self-portraits. Each of the eleven artists responds to the representation and figuration of women in their own way. The intentions and interpretations range from feminist critiques to incidental observations — from feminism as critical subject to woman as compositional subject. Artists such as Glenn Brown, George Condo, Jeff Koons, or Cindy Sherman explore appropriation as a way of reckoning art history with contemporary art. Candice Breitz, John Currin, Chris Ofili, Rebecca Warren, and Lisa Yuskavage concern themselves more with images from popular culture, while Yayoi Kusama and Jenny Saville work from negotiations of their own self-image to render critiques of gender norms and ideals of beauty. We may wonder: are the artists here, like the Man in *La Jet  e*, appropriating subjects to compose new images? Or do the works (and, in turn, their source materials)

have agency? Where do they position us in relation to the gaze? Are these works passive subjects of our gaze, or do they look back at us? As in *La Jetée*, when the Woman opens her eyes, stares at us, and blinks, so too do the works in this exhibition force a consideration of the gaze and how we have represented and continue to represent the female figure in artistic production.

Appropriating Art History

Many of the works in the exhibition seduce us into a feeling of comfort or familiarity through their use of art historical or popular cultural source material. George Condo often borrows styles from other historical periods. His recent oil on linen, *The Banker's Wife* (2011), is a grotesque, cartoony, and quasi-cubist portrait of a nude woman.

The style of the composition feels very familiar; the grotesque geometric distortion of the woman's face recalls Picasso's canonical late cubist portraits, and her smile welcomes us. There is, however, a style and color palette that feels distinctly different. In an interview with Ralph Rugoff, Condo described his practice and style: "What I'm thinking about is . . . that a single painting can have multiple language properties acting simultaneously to create a single entity. . . . I make sketches and sometimes I'm involving a number of images from different paintings, with slight variations at times. I think of them as themes and variations, composites of various psychological states painted in various different ways."³ More succinctly, Condo has said, "the only way for me to feel the difference between every other artist and me is to use every artist to become me."⁴

Women are a frequent subject in Condo's work, exemplified by his 2005 retrospective exhibition *George Condo: One Hundred Women*, organized by the Museum der Moderne Salzburg and Kunsthalle Bielefeld.⁵ One such work, *The Banker's Wife*, might elicit nostalgia for cubist aesthetics, yet the distortion and fragmentation of the woman's face and body in Condo's portrait presents an ambiguity of self that feels more current and contemporary. "I describe what I do as psychological cubism," says Condo. "Picasso painted a violin from four different perspectives at one moment. I do the same with psychological states. . . . I'll put them all in one face."⁶ In *The Banker's Wife*, then, there is both a distorted, malformed face as well as a smiling invitation that perhaps deflects our interrogation or eases our discomfort with the portrait. The title of the work introduces a chauvinistic dimension to our frame of interpretation. The woman is not given her own identifier. She is named only in relation to her partner, "the Banker," relegating her identity to a submissive role. Painted in 2011, it is difficult not to question the choice of title in relation to the displeasure felt within the United



Jean-Honoré Fragonard
Marie-Madeleine Guimard, c.1769
Oil on canvas
32 1/2" x 25 1/2" (82 x 65 cm)
Musée du Louvre, Paris



François Boucher
A Lady on Her Day Bed, 1743
Oil on canvas
22 1/2" x 26 7/8" (57.1 x 68.3 cm)
©The Frick Collection

States for the banking establishments at that time and the popular criticism of and distaste for the financial industry. We might suggest that in *The Banker's Wife*, Condo has found a way to deliver a cutting critique of contemporary politics couched in Picasso's style.

In the works by Glenn Brown and Cindy Sherman, there are complements to Condo's approach to appropriation. Brown and Sherman, however, directly appropriate from specific art works. Brown's *Filth* (2004) is based on Jean-Honoré Fragonard's portrait of *Marie-Madeleine Guimard* (c.1769), a French ballerina. Brown adheres to the Rococo composition closely, but significantly shifts the palette — from the fresh yellows and reds in the original to sicklier, putrid tones: her skin yellow-green, her hair copper. He has seductively tilted her hips as if she is offering herself, and altered her gaze from one of contemplation to something more pert and suggestive. The sexual agency of the elegant and modest dancer has been uncovered. And what are we to make of the ribbon around her neck? Originally blue-grey, it has become a morbid, red death cut. These manipulations and distortions create a grotesque composition and a sense of unease. In uncovering the elegant and modest dancer as harlot, Brown has seemingly rendered the art historical image of femininity as a sexually aggressive, animated corpse.

Cindy Sherman's *Untitled #193* (1989) from her series *History Portraits* also appropriates and interrogates Rococo painting. The series of photographs depict Sherman as the subject of portraits painted by Old Masters such as Rembrandt, Boucher, Liotard, Rubens, and Caravaggio, amongst others. The series explores the representation of the wives and mistresses of artists and patrons.⁷ According to a reading by Christina Döttinger, *Untitled #193* is Sherman's adaptation of François Boucher's portrait *Madame Boucher* (1743).⁸ Sherman has loosely adopted the reclining posture, floral patterned wall covering, and embellished draping costume of the original. Most notable, however, is Sherman's use of fake

breasts and over-abundant make-up that transform her portraits into “a laughable and disturbing appearance that [plays] with the tensions between portrayal and reality.”⁹

In comparing Brown and Sherman’s approach to their Rococo source material, one can see compelling parallels in style and effect. Brown borrows compositional forms directly from the masters.¹⁰ Working from photographic reproductions of works, he creates images that at a distance (or in photographic reproduction) appear to have richly textured surfaces. As such, they evoke the painterly brushwork of the artists he is “copying.” In person, though, the surfaces of the oil on panel works appear perfectly smooth, almost slick. Traces of Brown’s hand are only present in the most minute of strokes. Yet it is the accumulation of these small strokes that constructs a simulacrum of the original artists’ gestures. The result is a well-crafted trompe-l’oeil of the artist’s hand. Sherman, by contrast, places herself at the center of the work, transposing the formal arrangements of the source paintings into a photographic self-portrait. The bodies become deformed through the use of rubber breasts. The high definition and sharpness of the photographic image throw the artificiality of her composition into high relief. In *Untitled #193* and *Marie-Madeleine Guimard*, both Sherman and Brown play with the integrity of the composition in their source material while also commenting on our expectations for fidelity and authenticity. The result is two strikingly different surfaces — one that tricks us into seeing depth (Brown) and one that overtly declares its fabrication (Sherman), thereby placing the frame around our gaze and our expectations of both the woman in the portrait and the women in the original images. The cutting distinction between Brown and Sherman’s appropriation of Rococo paintings of women is that for Brown the woman is simply a subject. His interest is painting and surface. In this respect, the woman is denied agency and is treated almost as still life, as nothing more than flowers that are captured by the male gaze. Sherman, as a renowned feminist artist, has placed herself and her femininity at the center, seizing the composition from the history of the male gaze. Her subject is not a simply a portrait of a woman. Rather, it is a pointed declaration of a woman taking the frame of the gaze. She reveals the fabrication of the portrait and, in so doing, critiques the history of the construction of the female figure in art.

Complementing the direct appropriation from art history found in Sherman and Brown, a piece from Jeff Koons’s *Gazing Ball* series adds a literal consideration of the gaze. The series features slightly larger-than-the-original copies of Classical figurative sculpture, as well as more typical Koons tropes of banal, everyday objects such as a mailbox, birdbath, or snowman. The sculptures are bright white plaster, echoing the plaster cast collections of significant Classical statuary that many museums once held,



Sleeping Ariadne, 2nd century CE,
After Greek original, 2nd century BCE
Vatican Museum

as well as kitschy replicas for tourist souvenirs and home decoration.¹¹ Adorning each sculpture is an almost floating blue glass sphere. The stereotypically reflective “Koonsian” surface enfolds the reflection of the viewer and their gaze, as well as the entire surrounding space, into the sculpture.¹²

The source for *Gazing Ball (Ariadne)* (2012–2013) is a commonly copied Roman sculpture known as *Ariadne Sleeping* (2nd century CE, and based on a Greek original from c. 2nd century BCE).¹³ Appropriating a Classical female form, one could read this work, and the wider series, as an intentional act by Koons to insert art history into his art, or to insert himself into art history. While this referential intentionality is certainly at play, the addition of the blue sphere suggests another reading. *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith said the ball is something “that you might find in a suburban birdbath [which] almost reduces the sculptures to yard ornaments.”¹⁴ Carl Swanson argues that these were “simple mirrored balls that were somehow, magically, transfixing middle-class status symbols. . . . People put them in their yards because they enjoy the visual aspect of the ball, but they really do it for their neighbors. And it really helps emphasize a place. It’s like a point, and everything is kind of reflected from that point.”¹⁵

The *Gazing Ball* series is distinctive as it marks a return to the human figure by Koons after his controversial 1990 series *Made in Heaven* that featured statues and paintings of himself and then wife Cicciolina. More relevant to Koons’s *Ariadne*, however, are his other recent appropriations of female figures from art history. There is *Balloon Venus* (2008–2012) — a large-scale sculpture based on the so-called “Venus of Willendorf,” an eleven-centimeter tall Paleolithic figurine found in Austria in 1908 — and *Metallic Venus* (2010–2012), a high chromium stainless steel copy of a nineteenth-century Hungarian porcelain, which in turn references the ancient Roman statue *Callipygian Venus* (that literally translates as “Venus of the beautiful buttocks”). Speaking about the latter work, but equally

pertinent to the *Gazing Ball* series, Koons said, “you see your own reflection, because the piece is affirming your own existence, but you kind of get lost in this richness of color, almost like velvet.”¹⁶ It is interesting in this respect to consider Koons’s appropriation of the *Sleeping Ariadne* more fully. Ariadne was the mistress of the labyrinth, mythically helping Theseus negotiate the labyrinth to defeat the Minotaur. In this vein, we might ask: is the gazing ball Koons has placed at Ariadne’s waist a gift to guide us through the maze of our own gaze, or is the orb a labyrinth made to ensnare our Narcissus-like obsessions with self-image?



Yayoi Kusama
Self-Portrait (OHBTY), 2011
 Acrylic on canvas
 63" x 51¼" (162 x 130.3 cm)
 © Yayoi Kusama. Courtesy David Zwirner,
 Victoria Miro Gallery, Ota Fine Arts,
 KUSAMA Enterprise

Alternative Images of Beauty

Reflecting on self-image, both Yayoi Kusama and Jenny Saville work with the idea and image of self to address wider issues relating to the representation of women in art. Born in Matsumoto, Japan in 1929, Yayoi Kusama, now eighty-five, has been producing work for nearly seven decades. Moving to New York in the 1950s, Kusama was initially met with ostracism by the mainstream art community. As Francis Morris noted, “excluded by gender and race from membership of the inner circle of American Pop, Kusama began to play on this sense of otherness or ‘difference’ as a defining aspect of her persona as an artist.”¹⁷ By the mid 1960s, Kusama had put herself at the center of not only her work but also the radical New York underground art scene, exploring performance, video, and immersive installation as platforms for an increasingly cosmological art practice.¹⁸ For example, a 1962 photographic self-portrait pictures Kusama, nude, with polka dots placed on her skin and hair, reclining on a couch that has been reupholstered and covered by fabric phalli that accumulate on the floor around her. In a 1968 interview, Kusama said, “my performances are a kind of symbolic philosophy with polka dots. . . . Polka dots can’t stay alone; like the communicative life of people. . . . Polka dots are a way to infinity. When we obliterate nature and our bodies with polka dots, we become part of the unity of our environment. I become part of the eternal and we obliterate ourselves in love.”¹⁹

Yayoi Kusama’s painted *Self-Portrait* (2008) is from a series of self-portraits that date back to at least 1982. Kusama presents an image of herself composed of and covered by her signature brightly colored dots and net patterns. This work by Kusama falls somewhat outside of a strict discussion of appropriation, but it is noteworthy for its use of internal references to repetitive patterns and the conceptual exploration of self-obliteration that span her long career from her emergence as an early feminist performance artist in 1960s New York to her return to prominence at the end of the 20th century.

Jenny Saville’s art also stems from a critical engagement with her own self-image. In the early 1990s, Saville began to paint portraits of women with generous, sometimes obese or visually distorted figures. Amongst these she included self-portraits or added her face onto other bodies. Early in her career, Saville was inspired by artists such as Joan Semmel, Jana Sterbak, and Cindy Sherman, whom she credits with “increasing [her] willingness to explore her own body and suggest a new realism while challenging her need to paint an alternate version of the female body.”²⁰ Large-scale canvases depicting these female figures garnered Saville critical attention in the early 1990s as a painter whose work defied dominant aesthetic conventions of beauty. It must be said that this critical reception focused mostly on the scale and spectacle of her paintings, both missing her tremendous technical abilities with paint and the subtle negotiation of ambiguous and transitional figurative forms.²¹ Her brushwork is lush, and the surface of her paintings is “fleshy”—leading to later acclaim for her ability to almost transubstantiate oil paint into “pasty white British flesh.”²²

Saville’s works draw on images of the female figure found in the malls of America, in Glasgow, and in her own mirror. Her painting style has also been informed by encounters with and explorations of cosmetic surgery.²³ Where Kusama’s work was propelled by experiences of prejudice based on gender and race, Saville is often credited with producing work exploring feminism and fattism—presenting aesthetic rebuttals of normative ideals of beauty and the female form such as in her painting *Hybrid* (1997). The 9' x 7' oil on canvas depicts a collage of images of generous female figures stitched together into a single hybrid figure. The piece references her use of photographic source material (from medical books, magazines, the internet, and films), which she knits together to build sensual, tactile surfaces. Describing her process, Saville noted, “working from photographs helps me have a model of an idea in my hand, it’s like scaffolding.”²⁴ *Hybrid* references a pivotal moment in Saville’s career when she observed multiple cosmetic surgery procedures.²⁵ “The first face lift I saw was absolutely amazing,” she remarks, “because the doctor literally pulled the face off and then, it was a deep tissue one, you could see how thick the flesh was.”²⁶ Her visual understanding of the thickness of



Chris Ofili
Untitled (Afromuse) (58)
(Study for Orgena), 1998
 Watercolor and pencil on paper
 9 5/8" x 6 3/4" (24.3 x 15.7 cm)
 © Chris Ofili.
 Courtesy David Zwirner, New York

Untitled (Afromuse) (68)
(Study for Orgena), 1998
 Watercolor and pencil on paper
 9 5/8" x 6 3/4" (24.3 x 15.7 cm)
 © Chris Ofili.
 Courtesy David Zwirner, New York

flesh is evident in her heavy application of paint. According to Barry Martin Weintraub, one of the doctors she observed, "her interest in the maneuverability and positional alteration of flesh and human tissue is very much evident in her recent paintings. The skin of her painted surface seems to retain a vitality comparable with live flesh."²⁷

Chris Ofili also confronts prejudice and normative ideals of beauty. Born in England, Ofili rose to prominence as part of the YBA (Young British Artists). His work is concerned with issues of black identity and experience and frequently employs sources from art history and popular culture — ranging from Masters to pornography — in an exploration of Afrocentrism and racial stereotypes. Ofili's artistic practice was transformed during a travelling scholarship to Zimbabwe in 1992. He began to incorporate multiple different materials in his paintings — paint, resin, pins, beads, glitter, and elephant dung — creating layered collages upon which he would paint repetitive dots, effecting an almost beadlike textured surface. This style can be seen in *Orgena* (1998), a large-scale portrait of a black woman wearing brightly colored fabric, beaded and metal jewelry, and generous eye shadow and lipstick. Breaking with gallery conventions, the work stands atop blocks of elephant dung sealed in polyester resin and leans against the wall.²⁸

The title *Orgena* is "a negro" spelt backwards, and this telegraphs his intention to confront racial stereotypes of blackness. *Orgena* elaborates upon Ofili's series of small watercolor portraits entitled *Afromuses* (1995–2005). One hundred eighty-one in total, the *Afromuses* were the result of a regular practice to get started in his studio. There is a rigid consistency to the format of each portrait. All the women face us frontally or are depicted in three-quarters profile, while all the men are in profile, perhaps looking at the women. What distinguishes the portraits from one another are not the faces but the hairstyles, clothing, make-up, and jewelry. This series provides a context for interpreting

larger works such as *Orgena*. These large-scale paintings present alternative images of beauty and the female portrait. In this way, they can be seen as similar to Saville's work. In Ofili's own words,

beauty is a simple exploration of line, form and shape, on a formal level. . . . But also the beauty is about a kind of joy and love of painting and an enjoyment of form and the female form as a symbol of beauty. There's a track by Nas called *Fried Chicken* (2008), which I think is about describing the beauty of a woman through the metaphor of fried chicken — one would not normally put the two together. In a way I'd like to be able to get to a similar place where I can describe beauty through other means.²⁹

Considered together, Ofili's large-scale portraits and the *Afromuses* form an exploration of figuration and the constructions of race within increasingly diverse societies. Noted by Thelma Golden, director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, "Ofili's arsenal of references includes figures from religion and popular culture, such as Adam and Eve, Nefertiti, Kathleen and Eldridge Cleaver, Thelonious Monk, or Erykah Badu and Common."³⁰ Working with popular culture, Ofili's paintings expand upon the critical discourse surrounding the art historical conventions of beauty dominated not only by Western traditions but also by Caucasian figures.

Compositions from Popular Culture

In keeping with Ofili's interest in popular culture and Saville's collaging of women's bodies in *Hybrid*, works by Candice Breitz, John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage, and Rebecca Warren return the discussion to appropriation by composing images from fragments of popular culture.

Breitz's *Mother* (2005) is a six-channel video installation of chopped, edited, and looped clips of iconic Hollywood actresses in memorable roles relating to motherhood and femininity. The cast of *Mother* includes Faye Dunaway, Diane Keaton, Shirley MacLaine, Julia Roberts, Susan Sarandon, and Meryl Streep appropriated from the films *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), *The Champ* (1979), *Mommie Dearest* (1981), *The Good Mother* (1988), *Postcards from the Edge* (1990), *Father of the Bride* (1991), and *Stepmom* (1998). *Mother* was first realized and shown with the companion piece *Father* (2005) — another six-channel video installation that focuses on Hollywood portrayals of masculinity and fatherhood. In both pieces, the protagonists have been extracted from the context of the original films and placed against a black background so that all we are left with is the actors themselves. Breitz has meticulously edited and arranged clips of their dialogue, looping them in short series of repeated lines of dialogue or sounds and physical gestures. With *Mother*, she creates a cacophony

of sighs and breaths, sobs and laughs. She stitches tropes of femininity and motherhood into a cast of hysterical women who appear fixated on the emotional stresses and anxieties associated with fulfilling society's image of a good mother. Like a Greek chorus, a consistent thread of non-linear dialogue runs throughout, revealing Breitz's ability to choreograph the din into an affective orchestration that evokes and critiques our relationships to iconic images of women.³¹ Breitz describes her process of "re-animating actors" as being "more about feeding on cultural corpses, seizing a piece of inanimate footage and trying to revive it. . . . The re-animated actors who perform for me in *Mother + Father* never acquire the fluid movement and full consciousness that we associate with 'life.' Like Frankenstein's monster, they jerk and twitch their way through the narrative."³²

Mother + Father is a continuation of Breitz's ongoing work relating to the relationships formed between celebrities and fans, as seen in works such as *Babel Series* (1999) or *Him* (1968–2008) and *Her* (1978–2008).³³ By decontextualizing the actors and orchestrating their repetitive performances of tropes of maternal or paternal behavior, Breitz reveals the way our consumption of Hollywood icons informs our own performances of gender identities. Reflecting on *Mother*, Breitz pondered, "are my feelings coincidentally just like these Hollywood feelings, or are Hollywood feelings based on my feelings? Did that Hollywood father just say the same thing that my father used to say to me? Does that Hollywood actress feel the same way about her mother as I feel about mine?"³⁴

The influence and impact of the popular media on the ways in which we view and consume images of women is continued and elaborated upon in works by John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage. Both members of the 1986 graduating class from Yale University School of the Arts, Currin and Yuskavage's works share many similarities. Both painters create exaggerated, at times malformed, sexualized portraits of women derived from advertising and pornography. Both artists have also been the subject of controversy and debate with regard to their depictions of women. However, where Currin is complicit in the aesthetic objectification of women, Yuskavage attempts to disrupt this process. Known mostly for his paintings of women with anatomically impossible, enlarged breasts, Currin occupies a fraught position with respect to contemporary representations of women. He often works from art historical sources from Fragonard and Boucher to Norman Rockwell, and popular sources from R. Crumb to advertising. In doing so, Currin has produced an extensive body of work that perpetuates the historical sexualization of the female body. He makes no effort to hide the libido that is present in his work. As he explains, "when I hold a brush, it's a weird object . . . as if part of the female sex has been taken and put on the end of this thing that is my male sex to connect with a yielding surface."³⁵ In this sense, Currin's practice could be read as a brazen manifestation of late

20th-century chauvinistic objectification of the female body in American culture. His work presents an uncomfortable moral problem in our consumption of images of women.³⁶

In many ways, Yuskavage's paintings go beyond the limits of Currin's exaggerations and exploitations of the female figure. Her paintings take the male gaze to an absurd conclusion where women are reduced to only torsos with enhanced buttocks and breasts and crippled with stump-like legs or arms or other deformities. Norman Bryson argues, "Yuskavage does not place herself above the system or beyond its reach; her goal is just the opposite — to conjure the system in its full power, to record its operations without flinching, to fully inhabit its spaces, to be immersed in all of its currents."³⁷ In the artist's words, "I don't work from an elevated place looking down; if they are low, then I am in the ditch with them, I am trying to dig us out together."³⁸ Yuskavage's *Night* (1999–2000) is one of a group of works that appear more familiar to the viewer. Based on images from men's magazines, these works depict women in a somewhat cartoon-like style that pushes the composition further into a space of fantasy and fabrication. In *Night*, a woman is depicted with long, flowing hair, over-sized breasts, erect nipples, puckered lips, and deathly-thin arms. The figure pulls up her dress exposing her exaggerated, round buttocks. There is also an ambiguous cartoon female in silhouette that haunts the far background of the image.

Yuskavage's works of this period generally draw on source imagery from 1970s *Penthouse* and, perhaps, *Playboy* magazines. In this respect, she shares a similarity with Currin who also draws heavily from 1970s magazine advertising. Currin's work included here, *Entertaining Mr. Acker Bilk* (1995) is based on a Crow Light whiskey advertisement from the 1970s. It is one of a small group of works that include the figure of a man. Currin has replaced the dark-haired man from the whiskey advertisement with a more effeminate, fair-haired dandy. The whiskey glass has been removed, but the exaggerated masculine hand is still dominantly present in the center of the image. More pertinent to the discussion here are the changes he makes to the woman. In the advertisement, the woman is clothed in a dark turtleneck and denim shirt. She is the girl next door, a fresh-faced picture of outdoorsy wholesomeness. In Currin's appropriation, she has become one of his iconic, buxom women, her breasts spilling out of a strapless dress and wearing copious rouge, eye shadow, and mascara. This charged transformation of an advertisement is very much a continuation of Currin's sexualization of women projected onto historical imagery — something for which he makes little apology:

I dislike the idea that an image of a nude woman may stand for a certain idea of sin or temptation or perversity, or the opposite, of overcoming your inhibitions. It's a kind of cliché freedom. . . . And when I see other men doing nudes, they have to be really good. Otherwise,



Robert Crumb
Girls, Girls, Girls
 From *The R. Crumb Coffee Table Art Book*, 1997
 © Robert Crumb, 2012
 Used with permission from Agence
 Littéraire Lora Fountain & Associates, Paris

I just feel like, what is this supposed to stand for? If it's not even as good as photographic porno, why paint it at all?³⁹

Rebecca Warren's sculptures also engage in the dialogue established between Yuskavage's and Currin's work. Both Warren and Yuskavage have co-opted images of women created by and for men and transformed them for their own ends. Warren's *L* (1999) is a complement to the cartoony and grotesque figures of Yuskavage. *L* is a clay sculpture of two exaggerated striding legs in platform high heels, joined by a pelvis and exposed vulva and standing on an MDF sheet with wheels. Like her earlier sculpture *Helmut Crumb* (1998), *L* is based on a figurative form taken from the world of R. Crumb. In R. Crumb's *Girls, Girls, Girls* (1997), we see Crumb's process of reducing a monstrous and sexualized female figure to minimal components, a pair of nude legs in platform heels connected only by a vagina.⁴⁰ Warren's use of Crumb's image creates a tension between a man's struggle to come to terms with an empowered feminine sexuality and a woman's agency to transform material into an image of her sex.⁴¹ Where Crumb's illustrations are fraught, Warren's are joyous and flowing. They display the energy and presence of the sculptor in the worked texture of the clay.⁴²

Warren's sculptures interrogate femininity and surface, reveling in a tactile, almost sensual, control of material. When asked by Julia Peyton-Jones and Hans Ulrich Obrist about her exploration of the female figure in sculptural form, Warren replied,

you can get very carried away with the idea of the surface of the clay and the shapes and the marks of the artist. A state arises where these body parts almost suggest themselves in that movement; it's almost as if the tits add themselves. Also these additions can interrupt that reverie in some way. . . . I think interrupting the surface is a way of interrupting other things that are in place and taken for granted. If these interruptions are provocative, then they play on the permission that I myself as a woman or as an artist am supposed to have been given from elsewhere. Well, from where?⁴³

Warren's play with the question of permission to render the female figure reveals something of the underlying tension inherent

in representing women in contemporary art. Her primary focus, however, is on the enjoyment of material expression. She focuses on the clay and her hands and not the fraught reflexivity associated with the permissions her gender may or may not entail. However, Warren does admit that her work does not escape this problem: "for whatever mysterious reason, you'll find that I'm rarely included in exhibitions with other women and I'm often included with male artists who've done something I thought was quite interesting and liked."⁴⁴

Conclusion

As is seen in the work of the eleven artists exhibited in *SHE*, however the subject is approached, depicting the female figure is weighted by visual and cultural history. The artists shown here have found various compelling ways to work with and through this fraught history. The act of appropriation is present in many of the works as a means of making art history accountable to the contemporary moment. Popular culture also offers vital source materials for critiques of the troubled nature of our gaze and its relation to our appreciation of the female form. For example, in Glenn Brown's *Filth*, the woman is incidental — no more than the subject of a composition. By contrast, in *Night* by Lisa Yuskavage, the depiction of women is the subject and concern. In Cindy Sherman's *History Portraits*, these projects become one and the same — woman is subject and woman as subject. While the hand, persona, and style of each artist is present, the source materials — whether found images or the artists' own self-images — are also present. The exhibition moves away from an exclusively male-dominated composition of the female figure. In some works, the figure of the woman is relegated to a passive presence, while in others the bodies are endowed with more agency. The tension between the works is unresolved, like the wider issue of gender equality. Collectively, the works in *SHE* remind us of this unfinished negotiation and the importance of our participation (and our inherent implication) in the processes of reconciliation. As in the iconic moment in *La Jetée*, *SHE* gazes back at us, implicating both the artists and ourselves in the reconciliation of conflicting approaches to the depiction and representation of women at the turn of the 21st century.

Ian Alden Russell

Providence, Rhode Island, September 2014

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jo-Ann Conklin for the opportunity to reflect on these works and the lives of these artists. I would also like to thank Alexis Lowry Murray and the rest of the staff of the David Winton Bell Gallery for their help in the editing and preparation of the text. I also owe a great debt to Peter Hocking and Jane Androski for their support, camaraderie, and critical feedback throughout the writing of this essay.
 — IAR

Candice Breitz



Glenn Brown

20

Filth, 2004
Oil on panel
52³/₈" x 37" x 1¹/₈" (133 x 94 x 2.9 cm)
Private Collection

© Glenn Brown. Image courtesy Gagosian Gallery



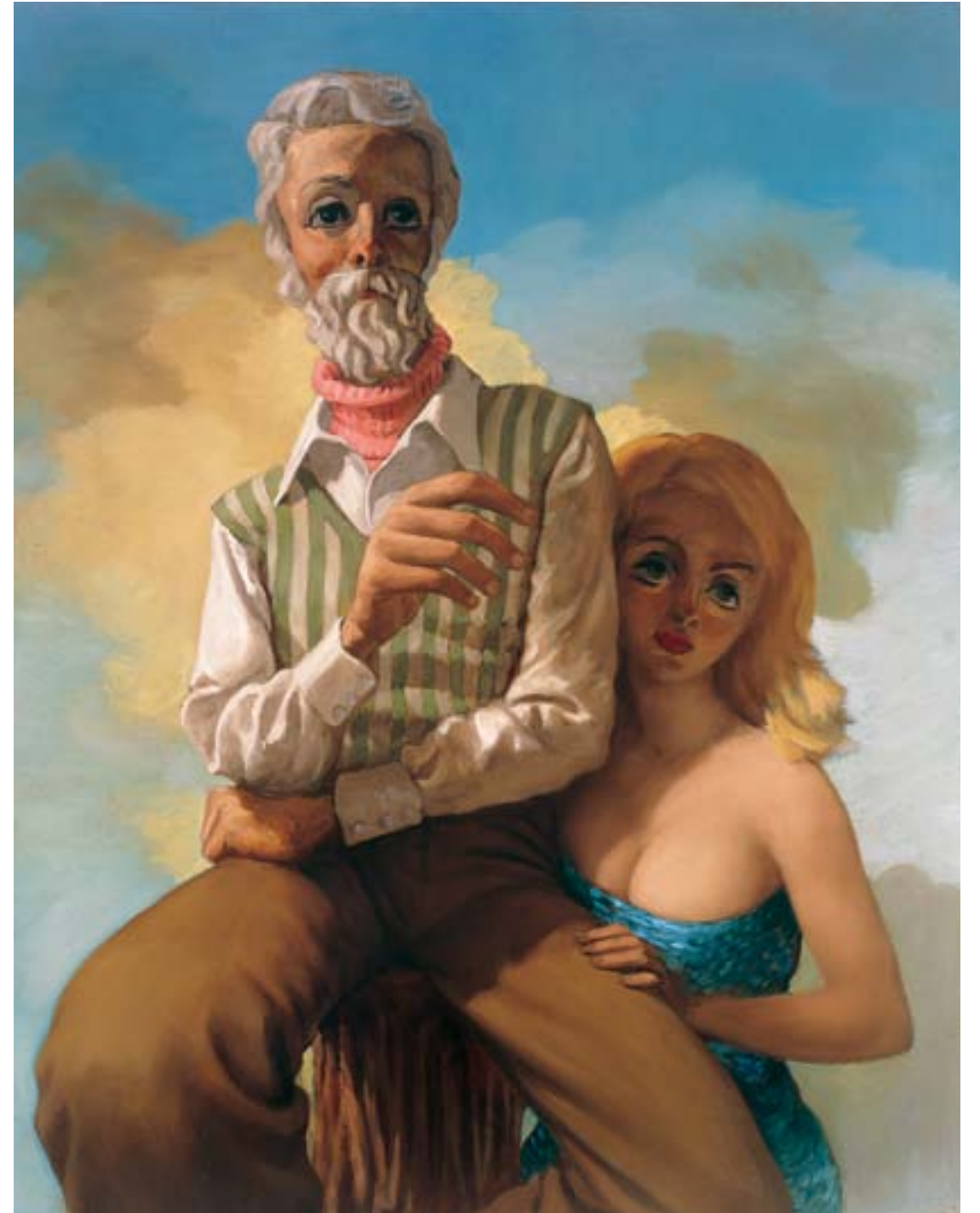
George Condo



The Banker's Wife, 2011
Oil on linen
74" x 72" (88 x 182.9 cm)
Private Collection

© George Condo. Image courtesy Skarstedt Gallery

John Currin



Entertaining Mr. Acker Bilk, 1995

Oil on canvas

48" x 38" (121.9 x 96.5 cm)

Private Collection

© John Currin. Image courtesy Gagosian Gallery
and Andrea Rosen Gallery.

Photography by Fred Scruton

Jeff Koons



Gazing Ball (Ariadne), 2012–13
Plaster and glass
44 5/16" x 93 7/8" x 36 5/8" (112.6 x 238.4 x 93 cm)
Private Collection
© Jeff Koons

Yayoi Kusama



Self-Portrait, 2008

Acrylic on canvas

89½" x 71½" (227.3 x 181.6 cm)

Private Collection

©Yayoi Kusama. Image courtesy David Zwirner,
Victoria Miro Gallery, Ota Fine Arts, Yayoi Kusama Studio Inc

Chris Ofili

30

Orgena, 1998
Acrylic, oil, polyester resin, glitter, map pins and elephant dung on linen
71 3/4" x 47 3/4" (182.2 x 121.3 cm)
Private Collection

© Chris Ofili. Image courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London



Jenny Saville



Hybrid, 1997
Oil on canvas
108" x 84" (274.3 x 213.4 cm)
Private Collection

© Jenny Saville. Image courtesy Gagosian Gallery

Cindy Sherman

34

Untitled #193, 1989
Chromogenic color print
48 7/8" x 41 15/16" (124.1 x 106.5 cm)
Edition of 6
Private Collection

Photo courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

Cindy Sherman has changed the way she prints this image.
This reproduction is based on her current color choices.
Untitled #193 in this exhibition is an early version, and does
not match the color shown here — it is significantly darker,
predominantly blue, and more garish.



Rebecca Warren



L, 2009
Reinforced clay on MDF sheet on wheels
59½" x 54" x 25" (151.1 x 137.2 x 64 cm)
Private Collection

Lisa Yuskavage



Night, 1999–2000
Oil on canvas
77" x 62" (195.6 x 157.5 cm)
Private Collection

Endnotes

- 1 *La Jetée*, directed by Chris Marker (1962; Neuilly-sur-Seine: Argos Films, 2011), DVD.
- 2 Janet Harbord, *Chris Marker: La Jetée* (London: Afterall Books, 2009), 3.
- 3 Ralph Rugoff, "The Enigma of Jean Louis (Interview with George Condo, New York City, March 14, 2006)," in *George Condo: Existential Portraits—Sculpture, Drawings, Paintings 2005–2006*, ed. George Condo and Ralph Rugoff (New York: Holzwarth Publications, 2005), 7–8.
- 4 Stuart Jeffries, "George Condo: I was delirious. Nearly died," *The Guardian*, February 9, 2014. Condo has appropriated styles from many artists such as Cézanne, Goya, Fragonard, Delacroix, Velázquez, Picasso, Matisse, Goya, Ingres, Manet and David—often exploring their general approach to the female figure, as opposed to a direct interrogation of any one specific image.
- 5 See Thomas Kellein, *George Condo: One Hundred Women* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005).
- 6 Jeffries, "George Condo: I was delirious. Nearly died."
- 7 See Christa Döttinger, *Cindy Sherman—History Portraits: The Rebirth of the Painting after the End of Painting* (Verona: Shcirmmer / Mosel, 2012). Other Old Masters appropriated by Sherman include François Boucher, Jacques-Louis David, Albrecht Dürer, Dominique Ingres, Raphael, Jean Fouquet, Frans Hals, and Sandro Botticelli.
- 8 Ibid., 18.
- 9 Cheryl Brutvan, "A Woman Who Paints," in *Jenny Saville*, eds. Cheryl Brutvan and Nicholas Cullinan (West Palm Beach: Norton Museum of Art, 2011), 16.
- 10 Brown has worked from paintings by Auerbach, Van Gogh, Delacroix, Velázquez, Courbet, Baselitz, Debuffet, Renoir, and Dalí, amongst others.
- 11 Roberta Smith, "Gladiatorial Combat: The Battle of the Big," *New York Times*, May 17, 2013, C21.
- 12 Francesco Bonami, "A Kind of Blue," in *Jeff Koons: Gazing Ball* (New York: David Zwirner, 2013).
- 13 Koons's *Ariadne* is likely inspired by a version that was originally owned by Pope Julius II and purchased for the Belvedere Fountain in Rome in 1512, which is now at the Vatican Museum.
- 14 Smith, "Gladiatorial Combat: The Battle of the Big."
- 15 Carl Swanson, "Jeff Koons Is the Most Successful American Artist Since Warhol. So What's the Art World Got Against Him?" *New York Times Magazine*, May 13, 2013.
- 16 Catherine Hickley, "Jeff Koons Fashions Venus's Buttocks in Shiny Steel," *Bloomberg*, June 24, 2012.
- 17 Frances Morris, "Yayoi Kusama: 'My Life, a Dot,'" in *Yayoi Kusama: Obsesión infinita*, eds. Philip Larratt-Smith and Frances Morris, (Fundación Eduardo F. Costantini, 2013), 198.
- 18 This is exemplified by the experimental film *Kusama's Self-Obliteration* (1967), directed by Jud Yalkut. The film features Kusama in a fantasy landscape, ritualistically covering animals, herself, and canvases with polka dots culminating in an orgiastic, body-painting sequence with countless other people.
- 19 Yayoi Kusama, "Interview with Jud Yalkut," *The New York Free Press and West Side News*, February 15, 1968. Quoted in Morris, "Yayoi Kusama: 'My Life, a Dot,'" 199.
- 20 Brutvan, "A Woman Who Paints," 16.
- 21 This is best represented in a review by William Packer from 1994, which can be found in Brutvan, 13.
- 22 Brutvan, 14.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Simon Schama, "Interview with Jenny Saville," in *Jenny Saville* (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), 124.
- 25 These observations occurred during a 1994 residency hosted by Susan Kasen Summer and Robert Summer, American collectors of contemporary British and Scottish art.
- 26 Interview with Cheryl Brutvan, June 2011. Quoted in Brutvan, 17–18. While the scene of the artist attending a surgical procedure might evoke images of Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson* (1631), Saville's uses of art historical sources are less obvious than Condo, Brown, Sherman, or Koons. For the most part, they are personal references that viewers may or may not recognize: the connection between Stare (2004–2005) and the mouth of Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1665), for instance.
- 27 Barry Martin Weintraub, "Surgical Practice," in *Territories*, ed. Mollie Denti-Brocklehurst (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 1997), 27.
- 28 The elephant dung Ofili has used in his works was originally brought from Zimbabwe and more recently has been sourced from the London Zoo.
- 29 Thelma Golden and Chris Ofili, "Conversation," in *Chris Ofili* (New York: Rizzoli, 2009), 249.
- 30 Thelma Golden, "She & He," in *Chris Ofili: Afromuses 1995–2005* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2005), 13.
- 31 Michael Juul Holm, "Tragedy Framed: Mother + Father," in *Sip My Ocean: Video from the Louisiana Collection*, eds. Michael Juul Holm and Anders Kold (Humblebaek: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 20.
- 32 Louise Neri, "Candice Breitz and Louise Neri: Eternal Returns," in Neri, Louise (ed.), *Candice Breitz* (London: White Cube, 2005). Also see, T.J. Demos, "(In)voluntary Acting: The Art of Candice Breitz," in *Candice Breitz Mother + Father* (Monaco: Prince Pierre of Monaco Foundation, 2007), 10–23.
- 33 Other examples include *Trilogy* (2000), *King* (2005), *Queen* (2005), and *Monuments* (2007).
- 34 Louise Neri, "Candice Breitz and Louise Neri: Eternal Returns," in *Candice Breitz*, ed. Louise Neri (London: White Cube, 2005).
- 35 Robert Rosenblum, "John Currin and the American Grotesque," in *John Currin* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003), 15.
- 36 There is, however, merit in Currin's honesty. In his use of art historical sources, most notably Cranach, but also Courbet, David, or El Greco, Currin enfolds the masters within his own fraught and wanton sexualization of the female figure—making it more difficult to divorce the history of the male gaze from modern and contemporary exploitation and pornography in media and advertising.
- 37 Norman Bryson, "Maudit: John Currin and Morphology," in *John Currin* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2006), 23.
- 38 Claudia Gould, "Interview," in *Lisa Yuskavage* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 2000), 10.
- 39 Rochelle Steiner, "Interview with John Currin," in *John Currin* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003), 78–80.
- 40 As a figure of the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, R. Crumb often included himself in his illustrations as a meek man struggling to keep himself together and from being terrified when confronted by a monstrous image of the female sex.
- 41 See Bice Curiger, "In all things a song lies sleeping," in *Rebecca Warren: Every Aspect of Bitch Magic* (London: FUEL, 2012), 11.
- 42 Ibid., 12.
- 43 Julia Peyton-Jones and Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Interview with Rebecca Warren," in *Rebecca Warren* (London: Serpentine Gallery, Koenig Books, 2009), 64–65.
- 44 Ibid., 65.

DAVID WINTON BELL GALLERY, BROWN UNIVERSITY