

JOHN CURRIN

Parkett 65 - 2002

*Which is what the Demon was counting on...
the Graces and nymphs, the smooth Madonnas, the tenderly strokable Venuses,
all supposedly finished forever; seem already to
be hovering on the future horizon of the possibilities of painting.*

– Paul Valéry¹⁾

MARK VAN DE WALLE

Against Nature

John Currin is best known as a trafficker in perversity. Much of this reputation is attributable to the fact that he has long specialized in representations, equal parts luscious and louche, of variously unattainable objects of male desire. Some of his women are physically impossible, all Russ Meyer breasts and blond curls and legs that seem to stop just where the cleavage begins. Others are merely inappropriate, post-menopausal Park Avenue doyennes and Connecticut *hausfraus*, either dumpy or rail-thin and stretched to the point of snapping right there in front of you. And still others are just plain untouchable, a combination of art history and fashion model, poses like Botticelli angels and faces like catalog girls (or vice versa). Men show up, too, sometimes, but they are always notoriously lame: old or effeminate or wrong somehow, dressed in ridiculous cravats and polka-dotted shirts

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and with badly rendered skin. As though they were there specifically to not get the girl.

Early in his career, the simple fact that he was painting people was as weird (if not more weird) as anything else he might have been up to. For some time, figure painting had been a highly suspect activity. It belonged to the commercial realm, turning up in places like the covers of romance novels, where paintings of windswept Fabios and women with heaving bosoms inevitably appeared. Or it belonged to amateurs, people too far out of the stream of fashions in contemporary art to know any better, to know that history had left them behind. That he insisted on making them at all rendered Currin's paintings uncomfortable. There was always the creeping possibility—even the probability, given statements he kept on making to that effect—that he wasn't being ironic, that he really believed in what he was painting, clichés, impossibilities and all, and that all these women really were, one way or another, the objects of some kind of real desire. Later, after he had

JOHN CURRIN, *THE LOBSTER*, 2001, oil on canvas, 40 x 32" /
DER HUMMER, Öl auf Leinwand, 101,6 x 81,3 cm.
(PHOTO: OREN SLOR)



helped to spearhead a revival of figure painting, this was the thing that gave the paintings their edge, that made them so hard to look away from. Being beautifully perverse, they were perversely beautiful.

Now though, Currin has abandoned his pin-up girls for something that looks suspiciously straight. The women are still there, and some of them still have impossible anatomies, but they're impossible like figures in a Cranach painting, with bulbous bellies and balloon breasts, golden hair floating against black backgrounds. Or they come with scare quotes hanging in the air around them: charcoal and pastel "sketches" and "life drawings" like pages from a spectacularly gifted art student's book, or an Old Master's study. There are "earthy" Courbet nudes and gardeners, where passages of lush and elegant brushwork alternate with palette-knifed insouciance. The woman in *THE LOBSTER* (2001) has what looks like a Chardin still life on her back. The light shimmers in a jug of water, caresses the lemon's skin, and the slime on the fish glistens just so. But it wears some-

thing like a cartoon smile; it's somehow not quite natural, like the woman herself.

To give you an idea of what his mindset is like, when I went to Currin's studio, he told me about a recent experience he'd had with a collector. The collector, it seemed, found the spirit of his work infectious, had decided to fly in the face of current fashion and get the painting framed; he wanted John to go with him to help pick out the frame. "So we went uptown," John said, "and into this shop. It was completely old-school, with a tiny, stooped European guy wearing a green eyeshade, running the place. He came out of the back and showed us a bunch of frames. Then, finally, he brought out one from the 1600s. It was totally lush—it was just huge and ornate and the carving was so elaborate. You could slide your finger in behind the leaves and it still had all the original gold on it. He brought out this velvet pillow and set up the painting inside the frame. And it was perfect. It was like it just locked the composition into place." Then he grinned and said "The frame

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*JOHN CURRIN, HOMEMADE PASTA, 1999, oil on canvas, 50 x 42" /
HAUSGEMACHTE NUDELN, Öl auf Leinwand, 127 x 106,7 cm. (PHOTO: FRED SCRUTON)*

costs ...," he named an astronomically high, five-figure sum. "If I had enough money, I'd put all my paintings in a frame like that," Currin said.

Don't be taken in. This isn't a retreat into irony. He's not after anything as safe as a simple rehearsal of art history. When you hear a story like that, you know what you're witnessing is an artist in the grip of a passion far stranger than any kind of kitsch love you could care to name: Currin has fallen for academic painting. He's found a fetish for technique, for style. And in a way, it's hard to imagine a less fashionable enthusiasm. High and low culture have been shackled up together for so long now that it's hard to think of what kind of junk you'd have to like for it to be shocking. But mannerism has been sneered at for ages; deciding to give yourself over to the pleasures of brushing round, peachy pink flesh and creating archly artificial poses is one of the few truly perverse gestures left. Diderot, as far back as the aftermath of the Salon of 1765, found that kind of impulse morally questionable when he saw it in Boucher's work (one of Currin's early heroes): *I don't know what to say about this man. Degradation of taste, color, composition, character ... and drawing have kept pace with moral depravity... What can we expect this artist to throw onto the canvas? What he has in his imagination. And what can be in the imagination of a man who spends his life with prostitutes of the basest kind? There's too much...mannerism and affectation for an austere art.*²⁾

Currin has always been one to turn to the basest materials for his lushest pleasures: he mines old magazines, ancient ephemera and other stuff that should, by all rights, already be trash for bits and pieces of inspiration. People have always talked about the debt Currin owes to Vargas, understandably taken in by all those billowy blondes. But Vargas was never actually much of an influence; he's both too good and not quite good enough, operating in an in-between state that doesn't go out far enough. He's mannered but not Mannerist. Instead, in a recent interview with Robert Rosenblum, Currin said that he got his real kicks from Frank Frazetta, the artist who did the covers for hundreds of fantasy and science fiction novels. Specializing in balloon-muscled barbarians (he did all the "good" covers for Robert E. Howard's Conan novels) and women with

even more pneumatic physiques and chain-mail bikinis, Frazetta bent flesh and warped nature to suit his needs. All about lushly applied paint and hyped up sex, he was more of a mannerist than Vargas ever was. Catalogues of advertising stock photos are another favorite source. They are, more or less, the most debased form of photography in media. The catalogues come arranged according to subject matter and demographic, so you can shop for "men and women," "moving," "health," or, of course, "gay couples" according to what your pamphlet or too-low-budget-for-a-shoot-ad needs. The gay couple in *HOMEMADE PASTA* (1999) got their pose from a catalogue of stock photos, which may help account for why their presence is such a weird mix of the generic and the specific. In the studio, I saw an unfinished portrait of an effeminate man in a sheepskin coat—you could practically feel the powder-puff soft texture of the wool—and his fingers curled as though he had plastic instead of bones, as though he shared the anatomy of an Ingres odalisque, bred specifically for unnatural elegance and pleasures. He gets his pose and his clothes from a seventies Sears catalog, although no model there would ever be so swish.

Even though he gets his inspiration from various kinds of low life, none of his paintings come from real life, or from photographs: it's imagined, dreamed up. They inhabit a nature of their own—or rather Currin's own—making. Which is exactly the point. Currin, like the artists whose amorality Diderot decries, isn't interested in an "austere art." Quite the opposite, in fact, since austerity is anathema to pleasure. What you see in his work are "no longer actions unfolding in nature, they're carefully prepared and considered ... acted out on the canvas."³⁾ The kind of painting that he's hooked on is painting against nature. It's not work that's supposed to be good for you, but work that's supposed to feel good. For him, if not for anyone else.

1) Paul Valéry, *Degas, Manet, Morisot*, transl. by David Paul (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series, 1989), p. 80.

2) Denis Diderot, *The Salon of 1765 and Notes on Painting in Diderot on Art*, vol. I, transl. by John Goodman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 22.

3) *Ibid.*, p. 222.

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*JOHN CURRIN, THE PRODUCER, 2002, oil on canvas, 48 x 32" /
DER PRODUZENT, Öl auf Leinwand, 122 x 81,3 cm. (PHOTO: OREN SLOR)*

*JOHN CURRIN, THE NEVER-ENDING STORY, 1994, oil on canvas, 38 x 30" /
DIE ENDLOSE GESCHICHTE, Öl auf Leinwand, 96,5 x 76,2 cm. (PHOTO: FRED SCRUTON)*

