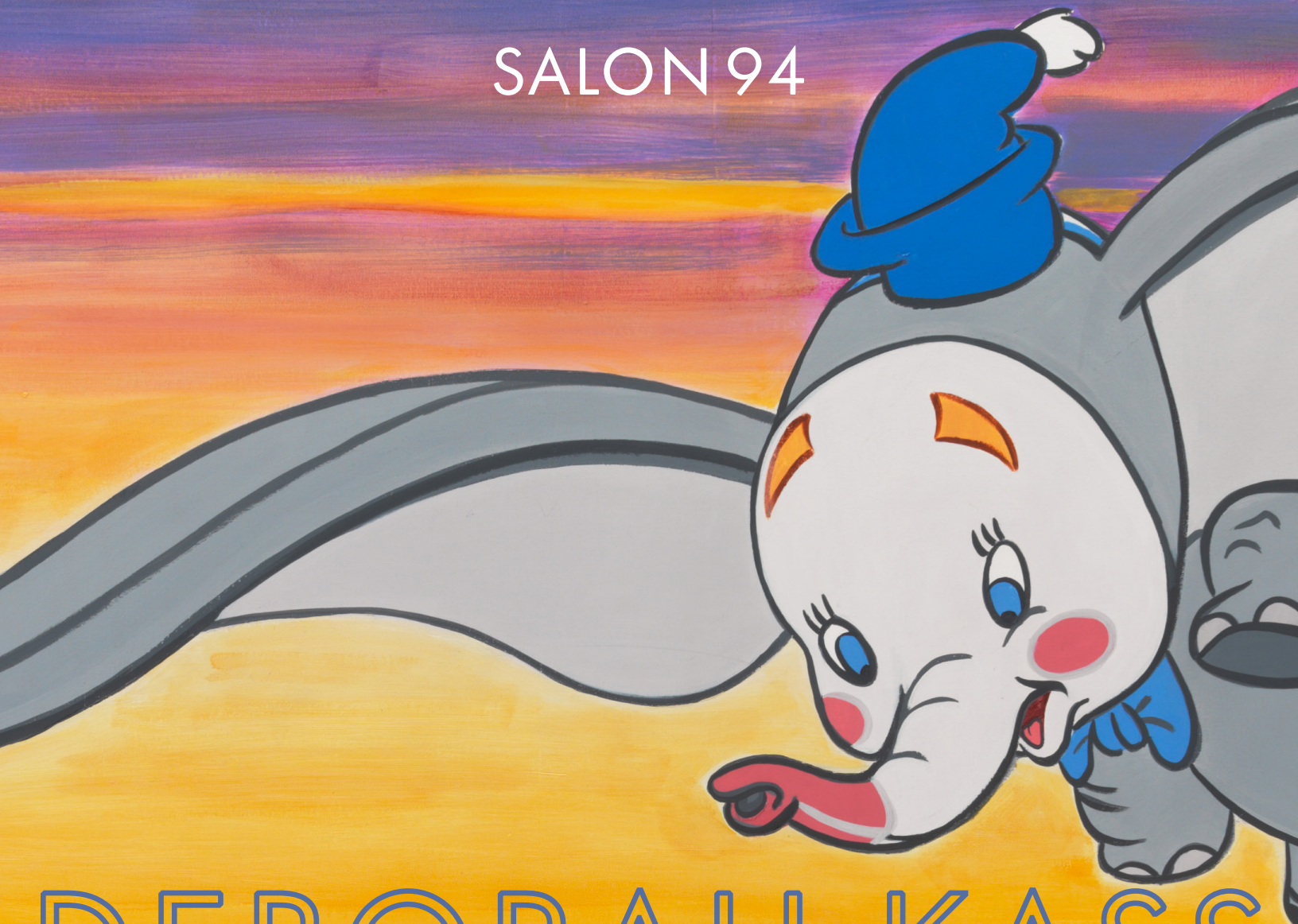


SALON 94



DEBORAH KASS

THE ART HISTORY PAINTINGS

1989-1992

FEBRUARY 19 - MARCH 29, 2025

The Art History Paintings 1989-1992

February 20 - March 29, 2025

Opening February 19, 2025 | 6-8pm

“As a young woman I walked around MoMA and didn’t see myself, but I fell in love. These icons of Modernism were my teachers. These are artists that were invested in cultural meaning that I strove to understand. First, I learned their language—then I changed it.”

Salon 94 is proud to restage Deborah Kass’ *The Art History Paintings*, her full-frontal response to the patriarchal, exclusionary art history culminating in the late 1980s. Painted between 1989 and 1992—the advent years of New York’s reckoning with intersectionality—the works challenge the reigning narratives of art history that ignored the roles of gender, race, ethnicity, and privilege in sustaining the status quo. A dozen paintings reunited in our second-floor galleries—including important loans from The Guggenheim and The Jewish Museum—are a collective and enduring call to arms, confronting the ongoing erasure and minimization of voices throughout art history.

Kass’ tactic was to undermine the narrow trope of the male “genius,” audaciously pulling apart the foundational narratives of 20th century art history to expose its limitations. Excerpting the “greats”—Picasso, Pollock, Johns, Warhol, Cezanne et al.—Kass deconstructs the ways the reception of their work reinscribes the exclusionary channels between market, museum, and history.

Injecting elements of popular culture—Walt Disney, Charles Schulz, wrestling manuals, and pornography—Kass introduces a new lexicon for interpretation. Kass conjoins Robert Motherwell’s *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* with Ferdinand—a “sissy” bull who preferred to smell flowers over fighting—and, in another painting, an image pulled from an instructional manual for young male wrestlers. In other paintings, Pollock and Picasso are reread together through male pornography;

Warhol's *Before and After* abuts Cinderella; Dumbo, the African savannah, and Cubism link together high art and pop culture versions of the continent... These juxtapositions make explicit underlying logics that structure the ways meaning in art, maintenance of power, and construction of value continue within a guarded and reactionary establishment.

Kass did not ask, she demanded a space for her voice—a gay, Jewish woman—by hijacking these works and returning them back to anew. “This work asks the essential question what it means for someone—me—to be excluded from a language and then speak through it. Art follows power—that’s why I took it on and took ownership of it.”

What *The Art History Paintings* confront—and change—is not isolated to the moment of their making—in this way they are not prescient “... it’s still ongoing. It’s time to wake up, recognize the stakes, and continue questioning whose history we’ve been told to revere.” The work extends beyond art—they are unapologetically activist: if you are not angry about this—if you’re not outraged—then you’re not paying attention.

“Painting has all this incredible baggage; it embodies all the signs of the last millennium of male hegemony. I sought recontextualize it, to reclaim it for myself and make room for others.” On the first floor of Salon 94 will be a display of works by contemporaries and precursors of Kass’—David Salle, Julian Schnabel, Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, Jackson Pollock, Robert Moskowitz, and John Baldessari—some works with direct references to the paintings upstairs, and others serving a representative role. The combination of the two floors is an attestation to the multiple histories and trajectories our current moment carries forth simultaneously.

Deborah Kass



Deborah Kass has developed a distinctive artistic practice spanning a broad range of styles and media. Her work explores the intersection of pop culture and identity, with a particular focus on challenging and recontextualizing dominant narratives in art history. By engaging with the visual language of art history, Kass creates space for new dialogues that interrogate constructs of power, gender, and cultural representation.

Kass first gained notoriety in the 1990s when she exhibited “The Art History Paintings” at Simon Watson Gallery, New York. These works offer a critical perspective on both the art historical canon and contemporary cultural identity of the late-1980s and early-1990s. Laura Cottingham, an American art critic, wrote in 1990 that “Kass challenges painting to reconsider some of its most conservative postures. Her visual appropriations of modern masters, for instance, reveal some of the sub-texts beneath America[n]’s painting’s supposed triumph.” Most recently, Kass has sought to engage a wider audience through public art installations and print campaigns, moving beyond traditional gallery spaces to situate her work within the urban landscape, including her monumental OY/YO sculptures permanently installed in front of three

major museums: The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY; Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University, Stanford, CA; and The Weitzman Museum of American Jewish Culture, Philadelphia, PA. These recent works speak to our contemporary, twenty-first century, socio-political climate through her characteristic integration of pop culture, aesthetics, and political commentary.

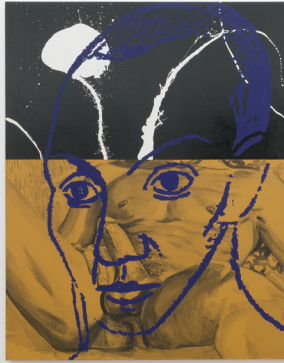
Kass's work has been widely exhibited nationally and internationally. Her major mid-career retrospective *Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After* was held at the Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, in 2012. Her work has recently been featured in several significant group exhibitions, including The New American Wing, Brooklyn Wing, Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY; *Gertrude Stein / Pablo Picasso: The Invention of Language*, Musée du Luxembourg, Paris, France, 2023; *Tender Loving Care: Contemporary Art from the Collection*, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston, MA, 2023-2025; and *He Said/She Said: Contemporary Female Artists Interject*, Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX, 2023.

Her works are represented in the permanent collections of The Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; The Jewish Museum, New York; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; the Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge, MA; the New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, LA; the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Washington DC; the Pérez Art Museum, Miami, FL; and the Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX, among others.

Born in San Antonio, Texas, in 1952, Kass earned her BFA in Painting from Carnegie Mellon University and studied at both the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program and the Art Students League in New York. She currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.



Installation view, *The Art History Paintings 1989-1992*, Salon 94



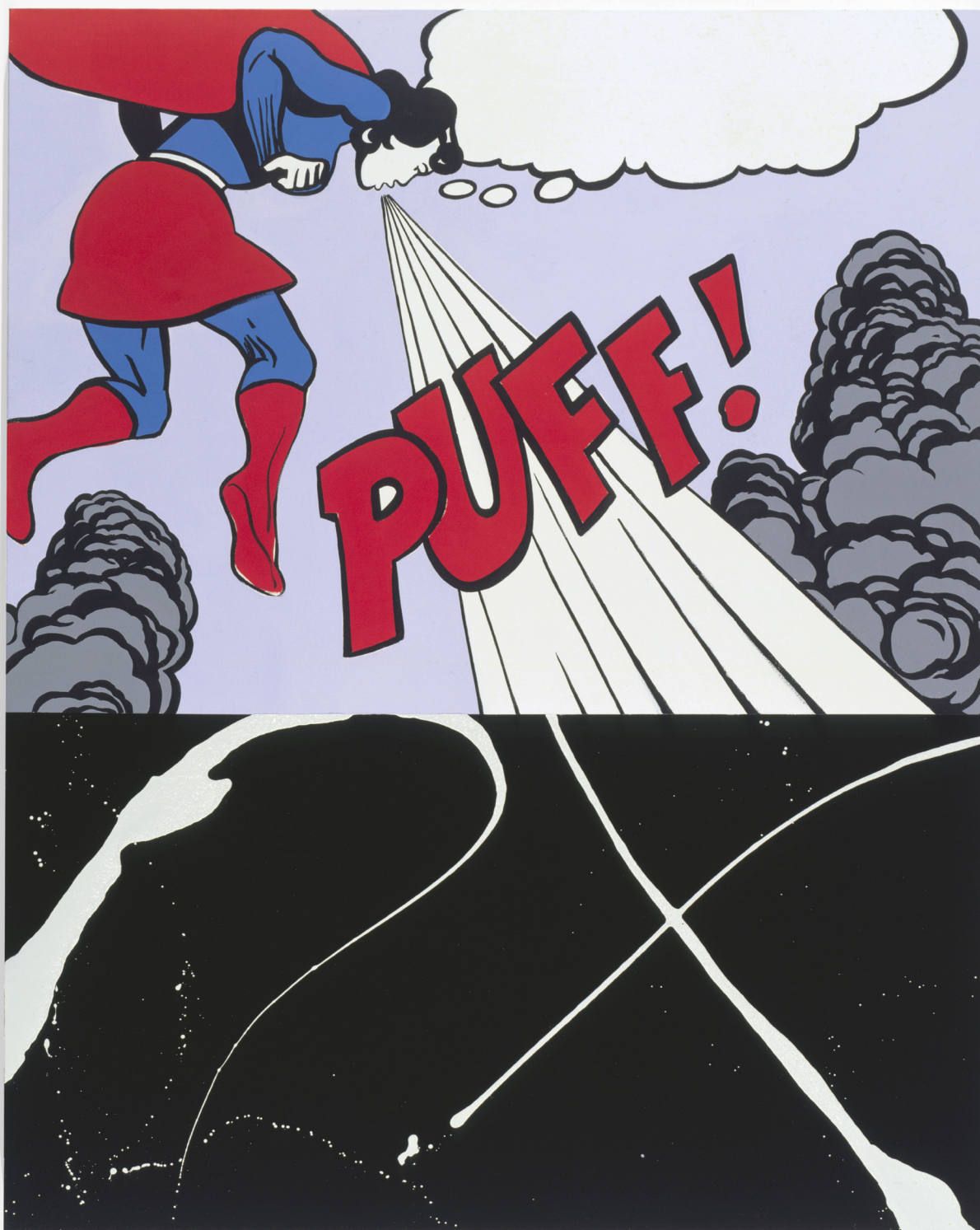
Installation view, *The Art History Paintings 1989-1992*, Salon 94



Installation view, *The Art History Paintings 1989-1992*, Salon 94



Installation view, *The Art History Paintings 1989-1992*, Salon 94

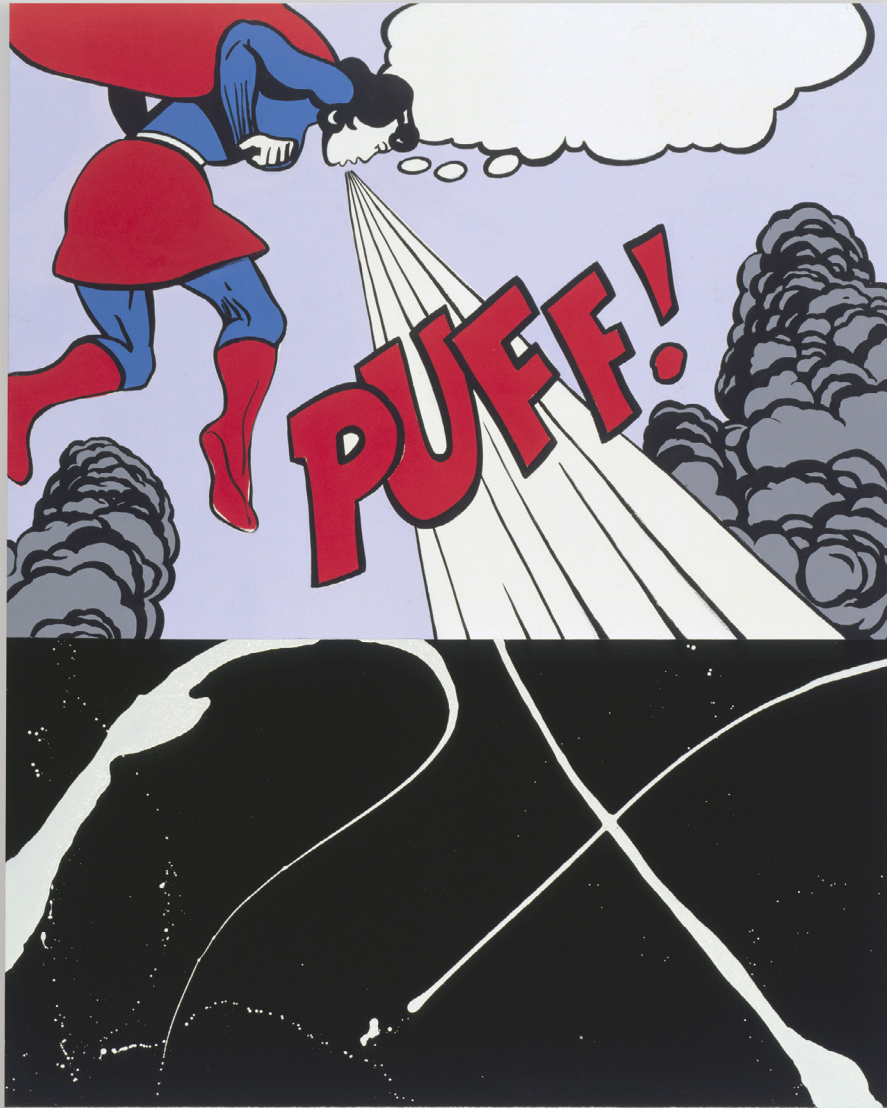


Puff Piece, 1992

Acrylic, flashe, and enamel on canvas
 72 x 60 inches (182.9 x 152.4 cm)
 (DeKa 15)

Detail view, *Puff Piece*, 1992

S94



Scale view, *Puff Piece*, 1991

S94



My Spanish Spring,
1991-92

Oil, acrylic, and flashe on canvas
72 x 60 inches (182.9 x 152.4 cm)
(DeKa 11)

S94



Detail view, *My Spanish Spring*, 1991-92

S94



Scale view, *My Spanish Spring*, 1991-92

“I think to deal with the construction imposed by the history of painting or, more accurately, how that history has been written...we need to use the same material to address the meaning of the material”

—Deborah Kass

S94



*Untitled (First
World, Third World),*
1990

Oil and flashe on canvas
45 x 105 inches (114.3 x 266.7 cm)
(DeKa 4)



Detail view, *Untitled (First World, Third World, 1991)*

S94



Scale view, *Untitled (First World, Third World)*, 1990

S94



Emissions Control,
1989-90

Oil, acrylic, flashe, and enamel on canvas
60 x 133 1/2 inches (152.4 x 339.09 cm)
(DeKa 1)



Detail view, *Emissions Control*, 1989-90

S94



Scale view, *Emissions Control*, 1989-90

“Kass’s assembled montages of appropriated abstract styles, mass-media imagery, and recycled segments of her own earlier paintings can be read as reconfigurations of fragments from a broken language in which fresh meaning collects itself out of a despair of meaninglessness.”

—Stephen Westfall

S94



Read My Lips, 1990

Oil and acrylic on canvas
72 x 60 inches (182.9 x 152.4 cm)
(DeKa 6)



Detail view, *Read My Lips*, 1991

S94



Scale view, *Ready My Lips*, 1991

“Painting has all this incredible baggage...painting embodies all of the signs... of the last millennium of male hegemony. I want to recontextualize it, to reclaim it for myself.”

—Deborah Kass

S94



*Before and Happily
Ever After, 1991*

Oil, enamel, and acrylic on canvas
72 x 60 inches (182.9 x 152.4 cm)
(DeKa 8)



Detail view, *Before and Happily Ever After*, 1991

S94



Scale view, *Before and Happily Ever After*, 1991

S94



Making Men 2, 1992

Oil and acrylic on canvas
70 x 84 inches (177.8 x 213.4 cm)
(DeKa 12)



Detail view, *Making Men 2*, 1992

S94



Scale view, *Making Men 2*, 1992

“Kass challenges painting to reconsider some of its most conservative postures. Her visual appropriations of modern masters, for instance, reveal some of the subtexts beneath America[n] painting’s supposed triumph.”

—Laura Cottingham



*Portrait of the Artist
as a Young Man,*
1991

Oil, enamel, and acrylic on canvas
84 x 66 inches (213.4 x 167.6 cm)
(DeKa 7)



Detail view, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 1991

S94



Scale view, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 1991



How Do I Look, 1991

Mixed media on canvas
50 x 100 inches (127 x 254 cm)
(DeKa 9)

The Collection of James E. Cottrell and Joseph F. Lovett, New York



Detail view, *How Do I Look*, 1991

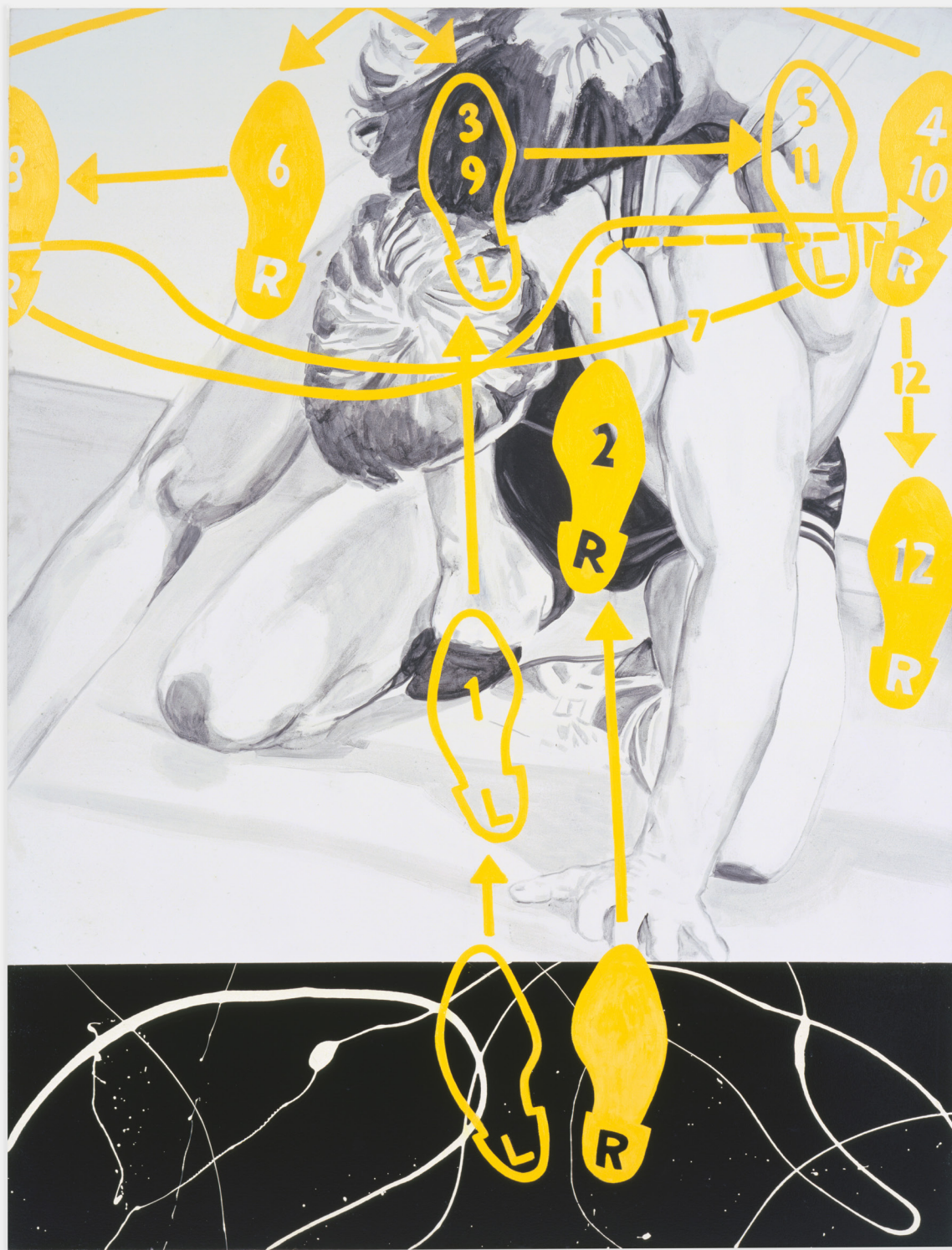
S94



Scale view, How Do I Look, 1991

“The narrow hermeticism of formalism, for instance, did not bury painting, but it buried itself--it was the last grasp of a powerful aesthetic community that had already been rendered absurd by events in the social sphere. Kass organizes social meaning out of this discontinuity.”

—Stephen Westfall



Making Men 4, 1992

Oil, enamel, and acrylic on canvas

78 x 63 inches (198.1 x 160 cm)

(DeKa 14)

The Collection of James E. Cottrell and Joseph F. Lovett, New York



Detail view, *Making Men* 4, 1992

S94



Scale view, *Making Men 4*, 1992



Nature Morte, 1990

Oil, acrylic, and enamel on canvas

76 x 63 inches (193 x 160 cm)

(DeKa 5)

Collection of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York



Detail view, *Nature Morte*, 1990

S94



Scale view, *Nature Morte*, 1990

“Painting has to be addressed from different point of view. That means it’s going to look different.”

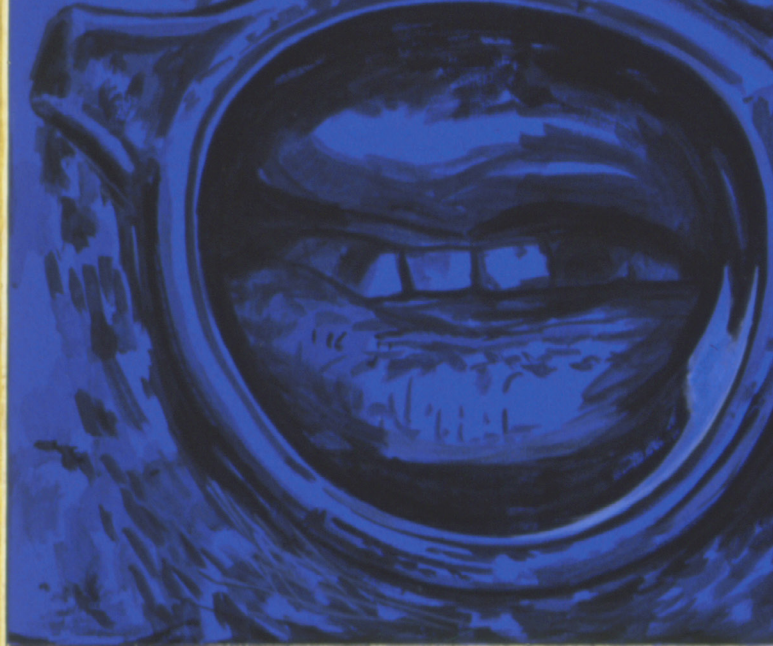
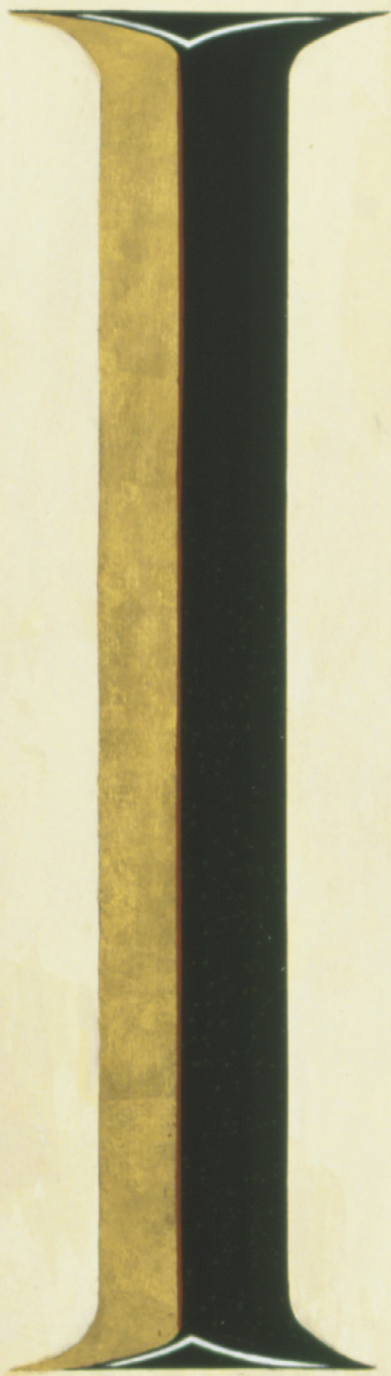
—Deborah Kass

S94



Subject Matters,
1989-90

Enamel, gold leaf, and acrylic on canvas
63 x 135 inches (160 x 342.9 cm)
(DeKa 3)
Collection of the Jewish Museum, New York



Detail view, *Subject Matters*, 1989-90

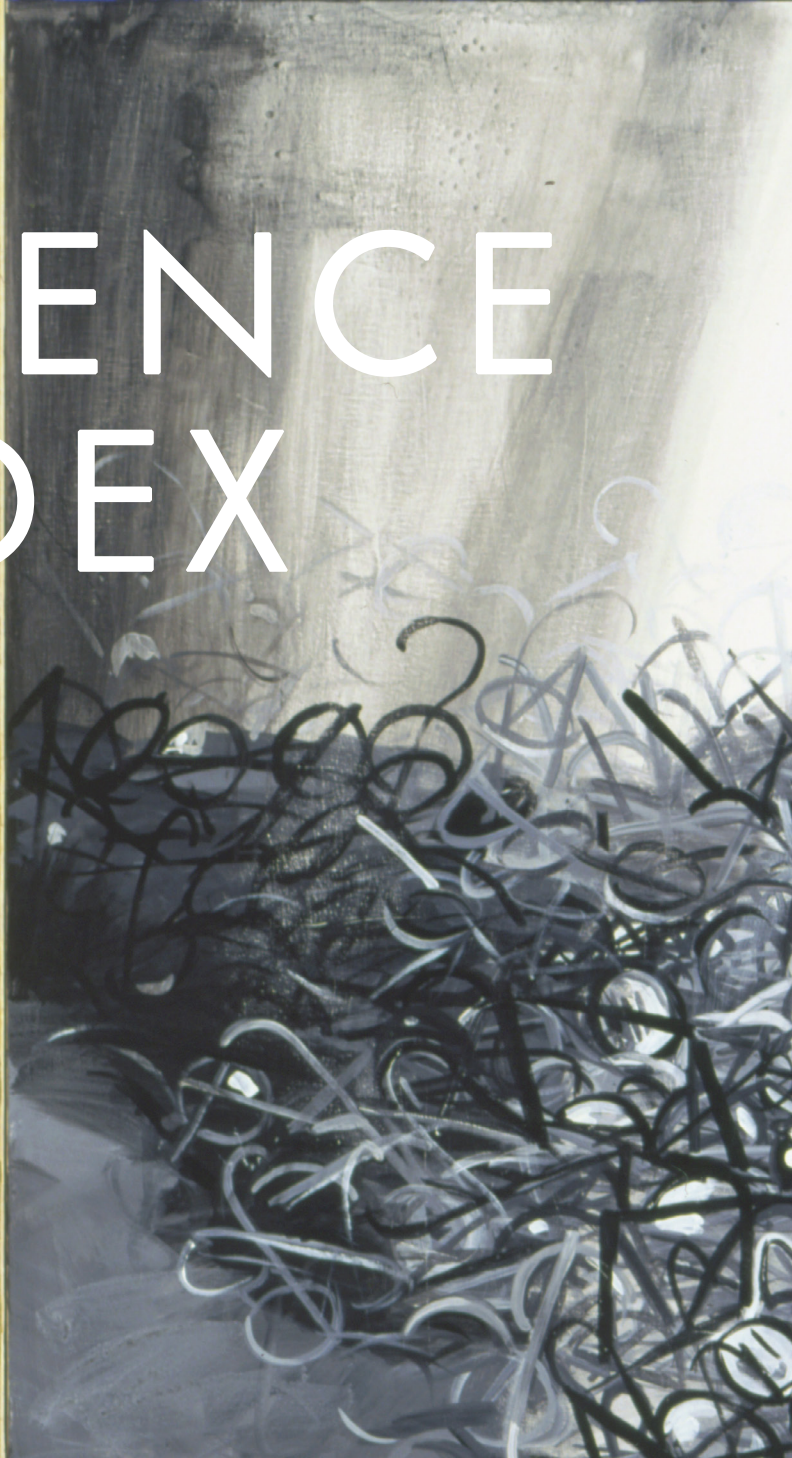
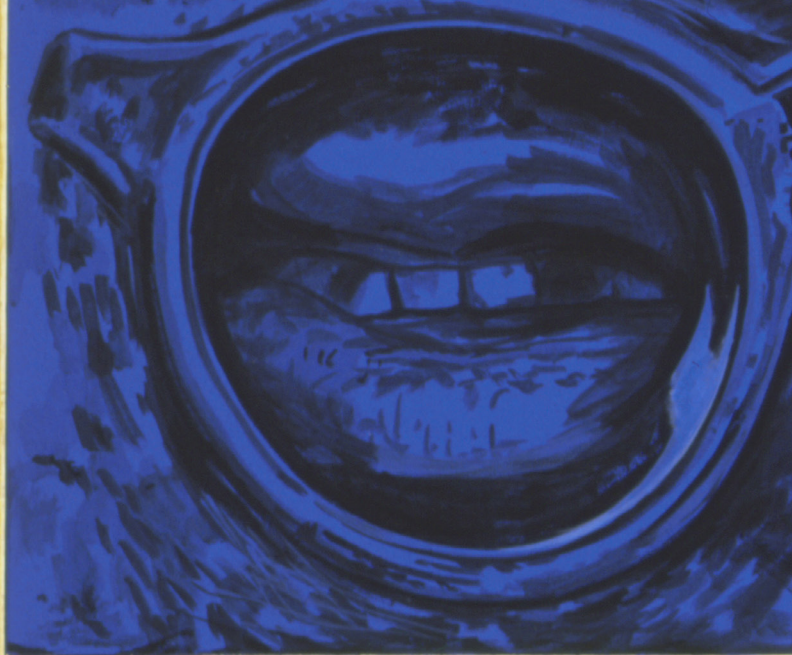
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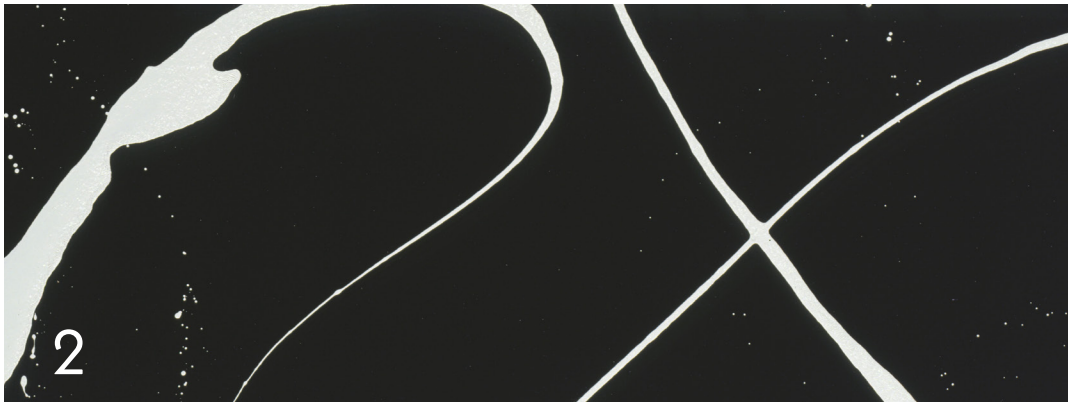
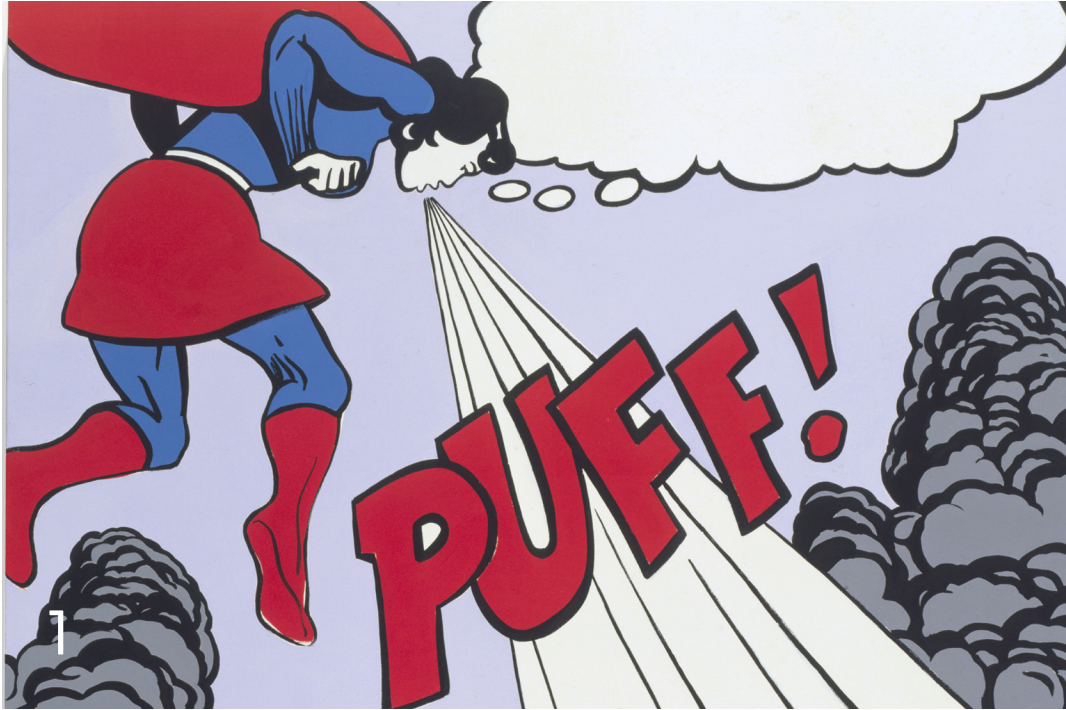


Scale view, *Subject Matters*, 1989-90



REFERENCE INDEX





- 1 Andy Warhol, *Superman*, 1961 (with compositions interventions by Kass)
- 2 Jackson Pollock action painting circa late-1940s

Exhibition History:

Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After, Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, 2012

Literature:

Plante, Michael. *Deborah Kass: The Warhol Project*, Newcomb Art Gallery, Woldenberg Art Center, Tulane University, Louisiana, 1999, pg. 61.

Shiner, Eric. *Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Every After*, Skira Rizzoli, New York, 2012, pg. 89.



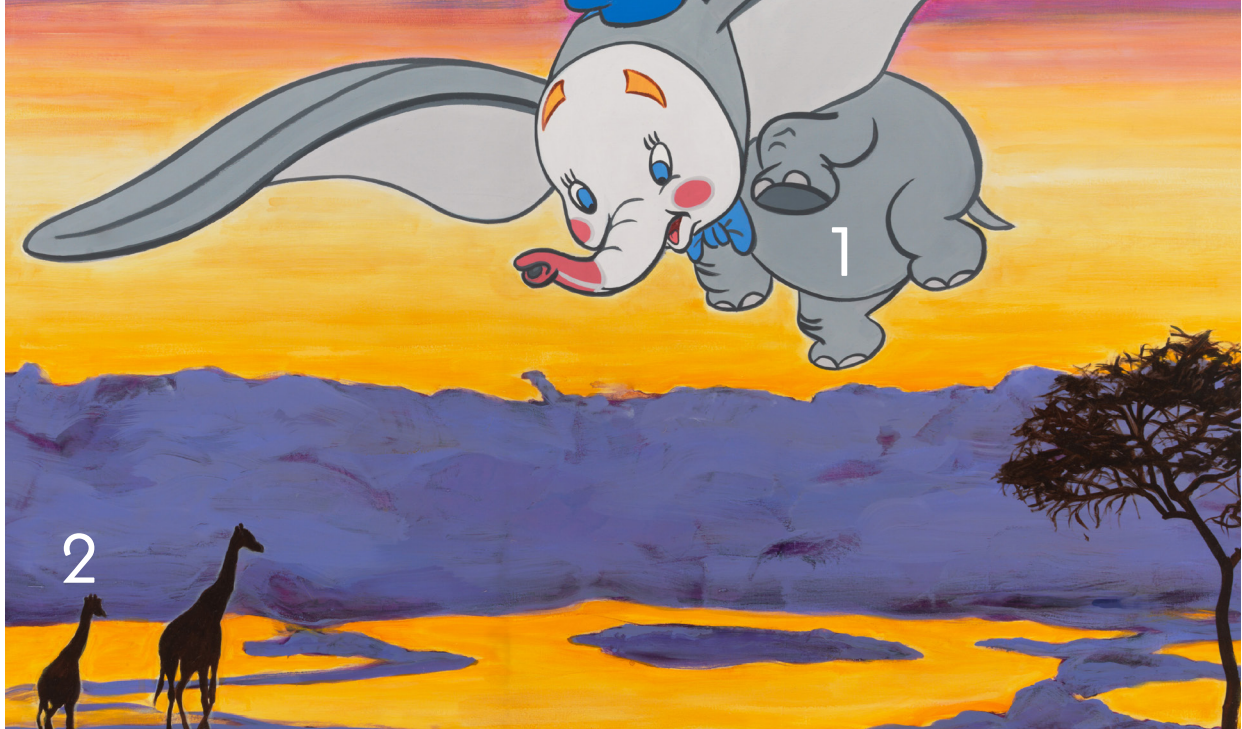
- 1 Robert Motherwell, *Elegy to the Spanish Republic XXXIV*, 1953-54. Collection of the Buffalo AKG Art Museum, Buffalo, New York.
- 2 Still from Disney's *Ferdinand the Bull*, 1938

Exhibition History:

Alcolea Gallery, Barcelona, 1992

Literature:

Shiner, Eric. *Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Every After*, Skira Rizzoli, New York, 2012, pg. 71.



- 1 Still from Disney's *Dumbo*, 1941
- 2 Painting referencing undated National Geographic image of wildlife on the African savannah
- 3 Cubist portrait of Dumbo painted contemporaneously *Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1990.



Exhibition History:

Simon Watson, New York, 1990

Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After, Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, 2012

Literature:

Shiner, Eric. *Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After*, Skira Rizzoli, New York, 2012, pg. 74-75.



- 1 Generic cartoon bubble over Crazy Kat cartoon background
- 2 Found graffiti
- 3 Jackson Pollock action painting circa late-1940s
- 4 Deborah Kass, untitled painting circa 1983
- 5 Painting referencing the explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger in 1986
- 6 Excerpt from Crazy Kat cartoon

Exhibition History:

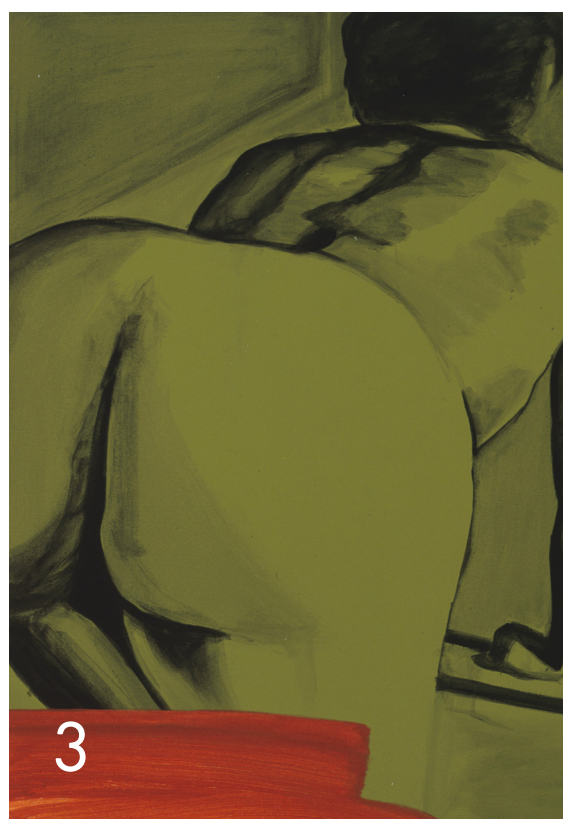
Simon Watson, New York, 1990

Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After, Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, 2012

Literature:

Plante, Michael. *Deborah Kass: The Warhol Project*, Newcomb Art Gallery, Woldenberg Art Center, Tulane University, Louisiana, 1999, pg. 27.

Shiner, Eric. *Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Every After*, Skira Rizzoli, New York, 2012, pg. 66-67.



- 1 Jasper Johns, *The Critic Sees*, 1961
- 2 Painting referencing photograph of Helen Keller and her instructor, Anne Sullivan Macy
- 3 David Salle, *His Brain*, 1984

Exhibition History:

Simon Watson, New York, 1990

Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After, Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, 2012

Literature:

Shiner, Eric. *Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After*, Skira Rizzoli, New York, 2012, pg. 82.



- 1 Andy Warhol, *Before and After*, 1961. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York
- 2 Still from Disney, *Cinderella*, 1952

Exhibition History:

Simon Watson, New York, 1990

Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After, Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, 2012

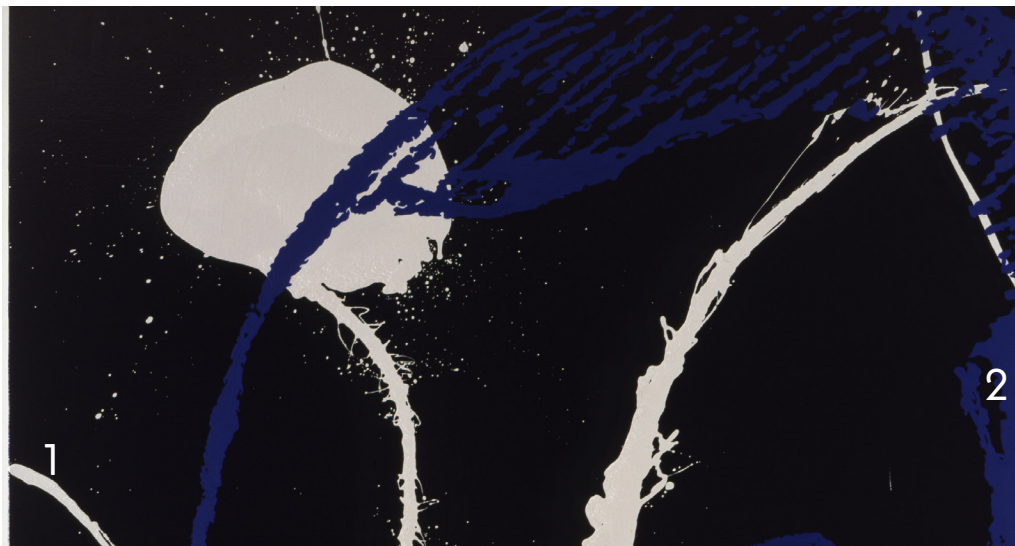
Literature:

Plante, Michael. *Deborah Kass: The Warhol Project*, Newcomb Art Gallery, Woldenberg Art Center, Tulane University, Louisiana, 1999, pg. 63.

Shiner, Eric. *Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After*, Skira Rizzoli, New York, 2012, pg. 87.



From the artist's studio, 2025



- 1 Jackson Pollock action painting circa late-1940s
- 2 Pablo Picasso, *Self-Portrait*, circa 1899 as featured on the cover of John Richardson's *Picasso*, Vol. 1, 1991
- 3 Photograph acquired by the artist from gay pornographic shop in Greenwich Village

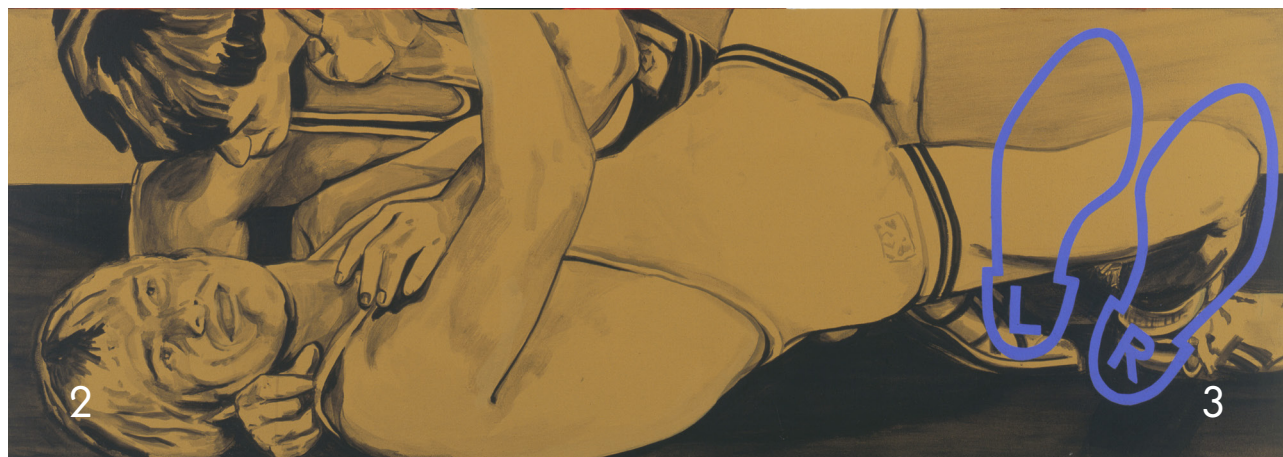
Exhibition History:

Simon Watson, New York, 1990

Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After, Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, 2012

Literature:

Shiner, Eric. *Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After*, Skira Rizzoli, New York, 2012, pg. 79.



- 1 Robert Motherwell, from the *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* series, 1948-91
- 2 Photograph from Russ Hellickson's and Andrew Baggot's *An Instructional Guide to Amateur Wrestling: The Basics and Beyond*, 1987
- 3 Andy Warhol, *Dance Diagram [2] [Fox Trot: "The Double Twinkle—Man"]*, 1962. Collection of the Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA

Exhibition History:

Deborah Kass: *Before and Happily Ever After*, Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, 2012

Literature:

Shiner, Eric. *Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After*, Skira Rizzoli, New York, 2012, pg. 85

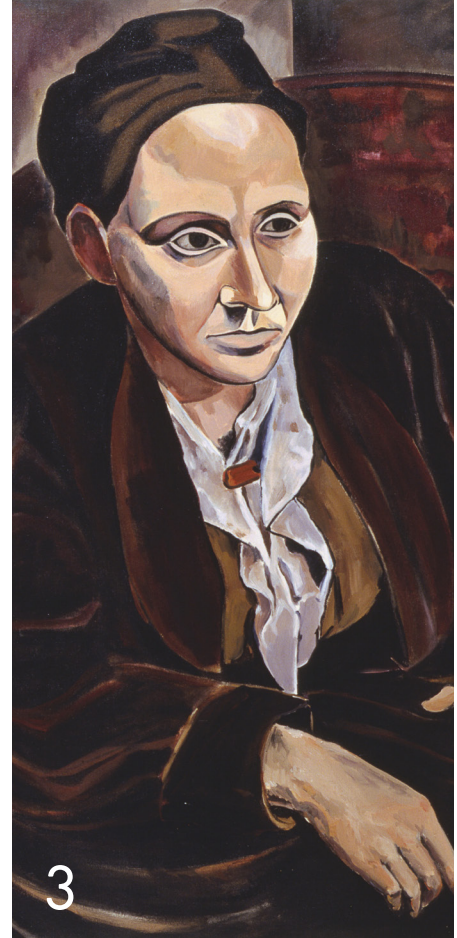
Figure 1



Figure 2

If you get put on your back, you need to use your skills to get off. In the photo above (fig. 1), D uses a head bridge to keep from getting pinned. D drives off his feet and uses a hip arch. In the next photo (fig. 2), L brings his elbow in under D to regain some power to help clear D off him. As L starts to turn off his back, he must use the hip-hest twisting of his hips to get his stomach turned back to the mat and avoid the pin.

Make going for the fall an integral part of your wrestling technique development. The pin is exciting. Go for it!



- 1 Gustave Courbet, *The Sleepers*, 1886. Collection of the Petit Palais, Paris, France
- 2 Jasper Johns, *The Critic Sees*, 1961
- 3 Pablo Picasso, *Gertrude Stein*, 1905-6. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Exhibition History:

Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After,
Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, 2012

Literature:

Plante, Michael. *Deborah Kass: The Warhol Project*, Newcomb Art Gallery, Woldenberg Art Center, Tulane University, Louisiana, 1999, pg. 54.

Shiner, Eric. *Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Every After*, Skira Rizzoli, New York, 2012, pg. 80-81

Triandos, Theo. "Inside and Outside of 'Queer': Deborah Kass's Feel Good Painting for Feel Bad Times." *Woman's Art Journal* 45, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2024), pg 40.



- 1 Photograph from Russ Hellickson's and Andrew Baggot's *An Instructional Guide to Amateur Wrestling: The Basics and Beyond*, 1987
- 2 Jackson Pollock action painting circa late-1940s
- 3 Andy Warhol, *Dance Diagram [2] [Fox Trot: "The Double Twinkle Man"]*, 1962 Collection of the Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA

Exhibition History:

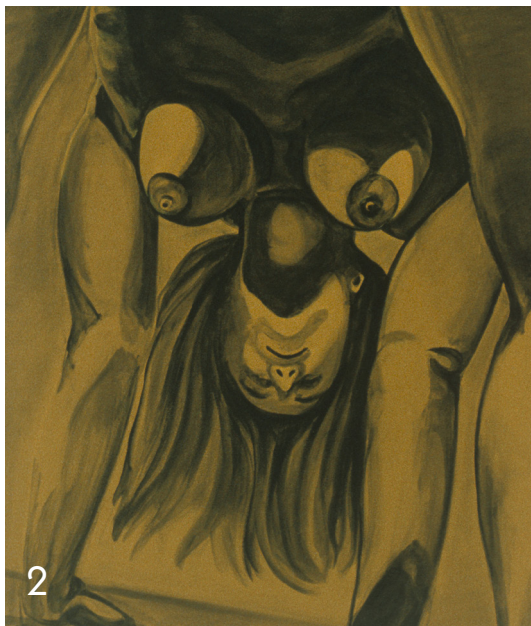
Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After, Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, 2012

Literature:

Plante, Michael. *Deborah Kass: The Warhol Project*, Newcomb Art Gallery, Woldenberg Art Center, Tulane University, Louisiana, 1999, pg. 62.

Shiner, Eric. *Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After*, Skira Rizzoli, New York, 2012, pg. 83.

Triandos, Theo. "Inside and Outside of 'Queer': Deborah Kass's Feel Good Painting for Feel Bad Times." *Woman's Art Journal* 45, no. 1 (Summer 2024), pg 41.



- 1 Step-and-repeat motif referencing Lucy character from Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*, circa 1950
- 2 David Salle, *What is the Reason for Your Visit to Germany*, 1984. Collection of the Ludwig Forum for International Art, Aachen, Germany
- 3 Paul Cézanne, *Apples and Oranges*, c. 1899. Collection of Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Exhibition History:

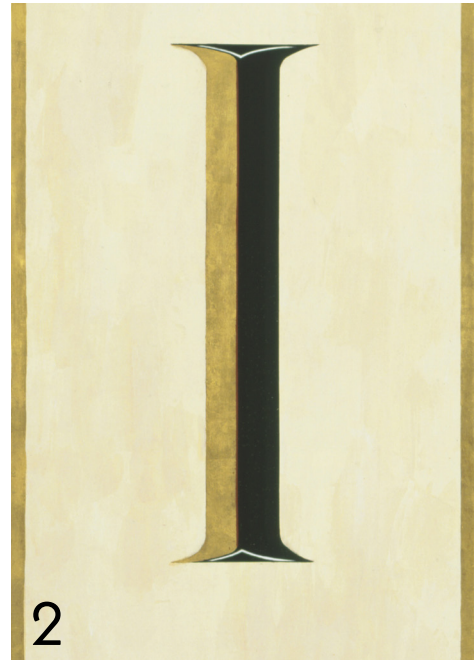
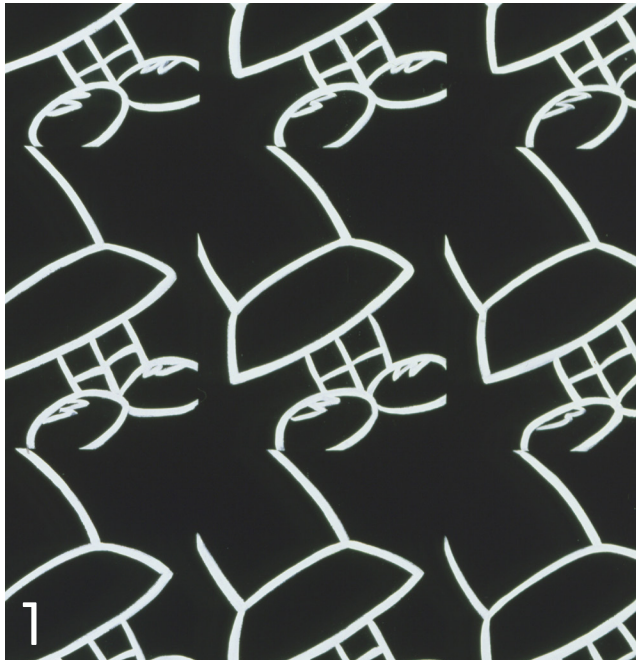
Simon Watson, New York, 1990

Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After, Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, 2012

Literature:

Plante, Michael. *Deborah Kass: The Warhol Project*, Newcomb Art Gallery, Woldenberg Art Center, Tulane University, Louisiana, 1999, pg. 55.

Shiner, Eric. *Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Every After*, Skira Rizzoli, New York, 2012, pg. 78.



- 1 Step-and-repeat motif referencing Lucy character from Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*, circa 1950
- 2 Letter "I" from European illuminated manuscript
- 3 Jasper Johns, *The Critic Sees*, 1961
- 4 Pile of eyeglasses from Auschwitz with raking light inspired by Rembrandt



Exhibition History:

Simon Watson, New York, 1990

The Perpetual Well: Contemporary Art from the Collection of the Jewish Museum, Harn Museum of Art, Gainesville, FL, 1999

Culture and Continuity: The Jewish Journey, Jewish Museum, New York, 1999

Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After, Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, 2012

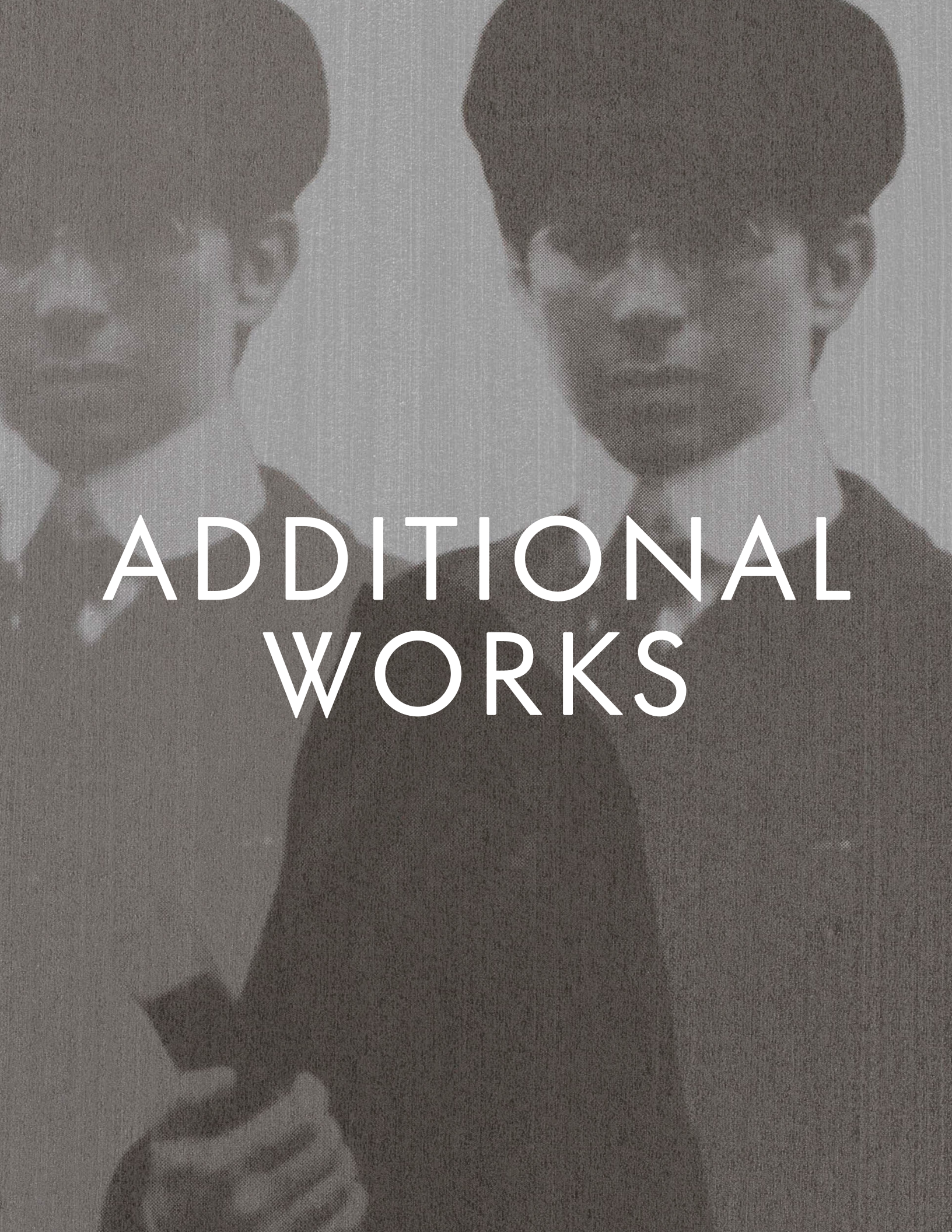
Personas: Self-Portraits, Jewish Museum, New York, 2018

Personas: Artists on Artists, Jewish Museum, New York, 2023



Literature:

Shiner, Eric. *Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After*, Skira Rizzoli, New York, 2012, pg. 76-77.

A black and white photograph of two young men in suits and ties, looking down. The image has a halftone or dithered texture. The text 'ADDITIONAL WORKS' is overlaid in the center in a white, sans-serif font.

ADDITIONAL WORKS

Double Ghost Yentl (My Elvis) & Streb

In 1992, after finishing her *Art History* series, Deborah Kass began a new body of work based on Andy Warhol's iconic screenprints of celebrities and mass-produced consumer products from the 1960s. Kass's series employs the same visual lexicon and silkscreen medium as Warhol's but replaces Warhol's celebrities and products with her own icons, including Sandy Koufax and Gertrude Stein, as well as her friends in the art world. For example, in Kass's adaptation of Warhol's *Merce* series, she replaces the figure of Merce Cunningham with her friend, the choreographer Elizabeth Streb, whose own choreography was inspired by Cunningham's work. The first of Kass's icons was Barbra Streisand, whose image is repeated throughout the *Jewish Jackie* and *My Elvis* series. In replacing Warhol's Marilyn Monroe, Jackie Kennedy, and Elvis Presley with Streisand—a woman whose refusal to conceal or hide her Jewish identity has been celebrated as a feminist position—these works call attention to issues of representation, reinscription, and self-determination within the art world and visual culture more broadly.

S94



*Double Ghost Yentl
(My Elvis), 1997*

Silkscreen ink and acrylic on canvas
72 x 52 inches (182.9 x 132.1 cm)
(DeKa 20)

Deborah Kass

Double Ghost Yentl (My Elvis), 1997

Silkscreen and acrylic on canvas

72 x 52 inches

(182.9 x 132.1 cm)

Provenance

The Artist

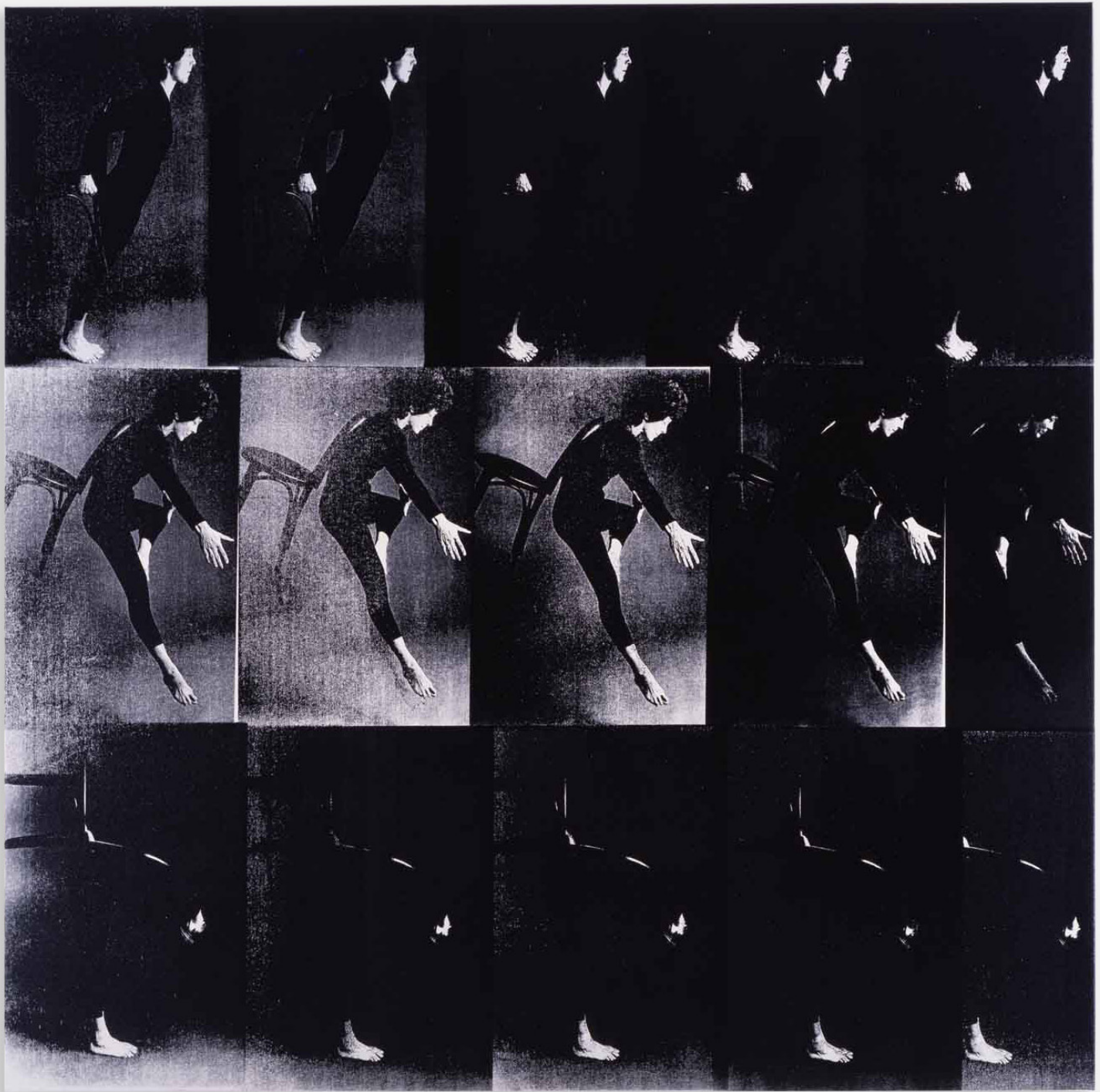
Exhibitions

Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After, The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, October 27, 2012-January 6, 2013

Literature

Liebmann, Lisa, Eric Shiner, Griselda Pollock, Robert Storr, Irving Sander, and John Waters. *Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After*. New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2012. Reproduced in color, pg. 114.

S94



Streb, 1998

Silkscreen and acrylic on canvas
81 x 81 inches (205.7 x 205.7 cm)
(DeKa 19)

Deborah Kass

Streb, 1998

Silkscreen and acrylic on canvas

81 x 81 inches

(205.7 x 205.7 cm)

Provenance

The Artist

Exhibitions

Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After, The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, October 27, 2012-January 6, 2013

Literature

Berger, Maurice, Linda Nochlin, Robert Rosenblum, and Mary Anne Staniszewski. *Deborah Kass: The Warhol Project*. Edited by Michael Plante. New Orleans, Louisiana: Newcomb Art Gallery, Woldenberg Art Center, Tulane University, 1999. Reproduced in color, pg. 89.

Liebmann, Lisa, Eric Shiner, Griselda Pollock, Robert Storr, Irving Sander, and John Waters. *Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After*. New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2012. Reproduced in color, pg. 155.

S94



S94



After Louise
Bourgeois, 2010

Neon
66 x 68 x 5 inches (167.6 x 172.7 x 12.7 cm)
Edition 2 of 6 + 2 APs / (DeKa 18.2)
\$250,000



Installation view, *The Art History Paintings 1989-1992*, Salon 94



RECENT PRESS

Interview

“I’m So Old Testament, Honey”: Deborah Kass, in Conversation With Titus Kaphar
Titus Kaphar
February 21, 2025



Deborah Kass, 2025

For more than three decades, Deborah Kass has been using the language of the art market in order to deconstruct and subvert it. Her new exhibition, *The Art History Paintings*, now on view at Salon 94, comprises 12 works that were born out of the Reagan years, during which America’s middle class was squeezed and a new order of wealthy young white men who understood art as a bona fide asset emerged. Working as a queer Jewish woman, Kass rarely found a place in an industry careening rapidly toward commodification, so she spent her

illustrious career challenging the conventions of an exclusionary market and reinterpreting its popular tropes and motifs. “I’d often go to the MoMA and the Met after school,” she told her friend and fellow artist Titus Kaphar last month. “I’d roam the galleries and I fell in love.” But these institutions, she continued, “are love letters to the white men who made it.” In conversation, Kass and Kaphar explored her career-long mission of disrupting the regime, the intense misogyny of the 1990s, and how they were first brought together by the poetry of Adrienne Rich.—EMILY SANDSTROM



Titus Kaphar and Deborah Kass, 2025

DEBORAH KASS: Hi, darling.

TITUS KAPHAR: How are you doing?

KASS: I’m good. I just watched Shut Up and Paint an hour ago. I’d never seen it.

KAPHAR: You never saw it?

KASS: I don’t know why, but I never saw it. And I’m so glad I did before this conversation because so much of what you talk about is among the many, many things we have in common.

KAPHAR: All right, we should just jump in.

KASS: Jump in, baby.

KAPHAR: I wanted to know, for this body of work, what was the political moment that it emerged from?

KASS: The work came out of a decade of Ronald Reagan and Reaganomics, and how his tax policy shifted the burden from rich to the middle class, creating an enormous amount of new money and power in America. Income inequality—that was the beginning of it soaring. That was the most comprehensive attack on the middle class, ever. It was sort of the beginning of the art world and market as we know it now, because with all of this wealth creation, young white men with a lot of money were really interested in this new asset: art. And they had an entire generation of white male painters who were happy to supply that. And I arrived in New York in the middle of the 70s, when feminism and women had an enormous amount of power and the most interesting art was absolutely being made by women.



My Spanish Spring, 1991-1992. Oil, acrylic, and flashe on canvas. 76 x 63 in.

KAPHAR: Yeah. If I could find a through line for most of the work that you make, in these subtle ways and sometimes not-so-subtle ways, it really is about the disruption of power. And your work came into the world when there was a power and economic shift, but now we see that again in a much more extreme way, right? So, how do you feel about bringing this work back into the world at this point?



Subject Matters, 1989-90. Enamel, gold leaf and acrylic on canvas. 63 x 135 in.

KASS: As I was planning for this show, we didn't know who was going to win the election. So the environment it was going to come out again in was 50-50, up for grabs. And now we know.

KAPHAR: I have images of your work in front of me, and I went back to those images thinking of a different president. It speaks to what it means to be an engaged artist and recognize that the thing that you make inside of your private space exists as one thing, but once it gets out into the world, there's a transformation that happens that you have zero control over. Right now I'm staring at *My Spanish Spring*. What's the cow's name?

KASS: That's Ferdinand the Bull.

KAPHAR: I'm looking at that piece—that juxtaposition, that relationship. Obviously, the first visual relationship is just the palette, Motherwell's palette and the palette of the bull. But it also seems like more of a juxtaposition of high art and a cartoon. Are you thinking about that at all in this piece?

KASS: It's hard to remember, but in general, all this work is about disrupting visual regimes that reinforce sexism and racism, and white male supremacy. And the high-low thing, I guess this is generational—

KAPHAR: What do you mean by that?

KASS: It's all information. In the digital age, we're all getting scraped for information. What is this information telling us that we refuse to see, or that we could see if we weren't so conditioned to not see? I would like to say it was a strategy, but it's really not. It's just how we live.

KAPHAR: I love this expression, "Disrupting the visual regime." Can you talk about that a little bit? I want to get that tattooed on my shoulder.



Untitled (First World Third World), 1990. Oil and flashe on canvas. 45 x 105 in

KASS: Yeah, this work was about deconstructing white male power, white male value, white male history, white male language. So, how has the history of modernism or painting or art re-inscribed misogyny? What aren't we seeing that's right in front of our eyes?

KAPHAR: I remember we had a studio visit when I was at Yale really early on, and you quoted something to me. Do you remember what it was?

KASS: I will always remember what it was because it's a quote that has been at the bottom of my practice since I read it in the 70s. It's a poem by Adrienne Rich called "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children." The quote I said to you when I walked in the door and raised my hand was, "This is the oppressor's language, yet I needed to talk to you."

KAPHAR: I'll never forget that. It comes back to me a lot, actually. It's been the thing that I have kept with me most out of school, and it's part of the reason why we have the relationship we have. Can you speak about how that quote impacts this particular body of work?

KASS: Well, it's almost a directive. It really is what the work is. I grew up in the New York suburbs, and I'd often go to the MoMA and the Met after school. I'd roam the galleries and I fell in love. But these are love letters to the white men who made it. This was when young artists were selling for enormous amounts of money for the first time at auction and retail. That was not the case until my generation of white guys. And to go back to the 70s and what happened with Reagan and the beginning of income inequality, these young guys with money on Wall Street wanted to see themselves represented. So suddenly all of those great women artists who really were doing historic work were completely out of the picture. There were galleries that had no women. Mary Boone Gallery, which represented so many of these guys, had none for a long time. Women's paintings didn't matter. And these paintings are a reaction to that, because some of us wanted to paint. We didn't want to be photographers, but we took the lessons from the picture generation and wanted to talk about the culture and wanted to make art about the culture with that same deconstructive urge.

KAPHAR: I want to ask you about the rise of the Guerrilla Girls. Is that about the same time?

KASS: Well, I'm not sure because, Titus, I was not a Guerrilla Girl.

KAPHAR: I don't believe you.

KASS: That's fine. You're not alone. But honestly, I really felt like my job was public. I was a very outspoken person and I couldn't hide. And you're probably going, "Oh yeah, she probably wasn't."

KAPHAR: You—quiet? What do you mean?

KASS: [Laughs] So anyway, I think they started in 1986, and these paintings started in '89, and we were all part of a reaction. And it



Emissions Control, 1989-1990. Oil, acrylic, flashe, and enamel on canvas. 60 x 133 1/2 in

certainly was present in feminist art history, literary criticism, critical race theory, gender stuff. We're talking everybody from bell hooks to Griselda Pollock to Judith Butler. It was an incredibly exciting time of political, intellectual ferment. I'm doing a book about this work, and I've got all my reading lists out from when I taught at RISD. And it's riveting, because it's before things got dogmatic, when things were new. I've always said that critical race theory's relationship to law is how I figured out my relationship to art history.

KAPHAR: Oh, say more.

KASS: It was looking at the structural racism within the law and taking it apart. And we're talking 1989. I'm sure I was late, but as a white girl, as I was on it. And to me it was like, "Let's look at art history and see how these things are structured and written in."

KAPHAR: Because in some ways, art history is our law, right? It defines our norms.



Before And Happily Ever After, 1991. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 72 x 60 in

KASS: It's certainly our bible.

KAPHAR: But what is the bible if not a collection of laws?

KASS: You know what I always say? "Mine is a vengeful god."

KAPHAR: Shit.

KASS: I'm so Old Testament, honey.

KAPHAR: Grace and mercy and forgiveness, remember? Oh, can we jump back to the poem for a second?

KASS: Please.

KAPHAR: “Power rarely remembers the source of its power.” When we talk about that poem, we ascribe ownership of that language to a group of people for the purpose of understanding this idea, right? But what is fascinating to me about that particular poem is that there is so much blood and labor that is the source of those people’s power that I don’t know that I can say that it actually belongs to them because I feel like a lot of us died for that power. So there is some necessity to reclaim it and say, “Fuck you, that’s mine. I own that shit. And I get to say and talk however the fuck I want to talk.” And that’s what this work is doing.

KASS: I don’t know where I got this, but I copied this down: “If we learn anything from [Gilles] Deleuze and [Felix] Guattari’s exceptional *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, it should be that the dominant powers appropriated from us first.”

KAPHAR: That’s what I’m talking about. If we’re talking about Picasso, then we have to talk about some of the influences of Picasso.

KASS: It’s like the Romans took over cities and cultures and just incorporated it and that’s how they became an empire. That is capitalism.

KAPHAR: Yeah. What did Picasso say?

KASS: “Great artists borrow, great artists steal.”

KAPHAR: There you go. Y’all stole all that shit.

KASS: They stole everything and they steal everything. And now we’re in hyper capitalism, and it’s our language. And that’s what we’ve been saying: “It’s our language too. Let it speak for me.”

KAPHAR: Exactly. Well, let’s talk about that for a second. I’ve never been able to make something because somebody put money in front of me. I’ve stopped doing commissions except under very, very strict

circumstances. I just don't like questioning my own motivations in the process of making.

KASS: Well, you have a kind of situation that could lead to temptation. I've never had that situation.

KAPHAR: What does that mean?

KASS: It's like I used to say—I've never had the opportunity to sell out.

KAPHAR: Tell me what you mean.

KASS: I made these paintings, and I got shit for them. I didn't have a community backing me up. I didn't have institutional support. I was



Read My Lips, 1990. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 72 x 60 in

very naive, a word you used in *Shut Up and Paint*, because I thought I was having a conversation with my peers and with history. But it was not appreciated by people who are invested in power because—

KAPHAR: Can we talk about some of the critiques?

KASS: Sure. I got pretty trashed because people in power were not

interested in being confronted or deconstructed or told there's another way to be. 1990 was the first time I showed any of these. And then I showed two more a year later in a group show. I got very, very bad reviews in 1990. 1992 was kinder, I think, because there were two years more of the early 90s that became a sort of feminist moment. Me and some others were involved with the Women's Action Coalition, WAC. It was H.W. Bush. So we had eight years of Reagan and four years of Bush. AIDS was not being addressed. Abortion was under attack, women were under attack, gay people were under attack. People of color were always under attack. And there was a huge groundswell of feminism that happened between '90 and '92 in a certain kind of way.

KAPHAR: So you feel like that community of people got the work in a way that they didn't before?

KASS: Maybe, or maybe critics who were writing at the time got more sensitized to feminism and misogyny themselves, because it was pretty extreme then.

KAPHAR: I want to go back to this idea that you didn't get the opportunity to sell out. You had every fucking opportunity to sell out. You don't even see it as an opportunity because you made the decision every single day to go to the studio and make what the fuck you wanted to make. You very easily could have been like, "Okay, this is what they want from white ladies, so this is what I'm going to do." Right? No, that's not what you did. You have always been a disruptor.

KASS: Well, I appreciate what you can see as my integrity, but the fact is that nobody wanted what white ladies were making. So I spent decades without galleries and it wasn't my choice. And there's no question, I've always been a disruptor because it's just my unfortunate personality. But understand, nobody wanted us.

KAPHAR: Well, that's interesting because there's definitely the thing that people want from Black artists right now.

KASS: I understand that, believe me.

KAPHAR: Yeah, and I think there were versions of it.

KASS: There were, but it was for men, hon. Let me put it this way: there was a reason the most critical art of the 80s was photography done by women, because there was no photo market then. But I wanted to paint. I wanted to talk to painters about the history of painting, but literally there were no women showing who painted in the 80s, almost none. There was one here and there, but we got really pushed aside. There were women who started in the early 70s. They're the generation that inspired me. Elizabeth Burry and Howardena Pindell and—

KAPHAR: And Marilyn Minter.

KASS: And Pat Steir and Joan Snyder.

KAPHAR: Well, there are a lot of Black feminists, artists and writers that have been influential to you and your philosophy and thinking. Who are some of the people at the forefront? During our studio visits, you made references to very different kinds of writing than what was happening in my other studio visits. And there was a diversity of writers and gender in your references that I found inspiring. And it just happens that on your desk right there you have some of those books. Why don't you read some of those titles?

KASS: I have no memory, Titus. I'm blank.

KAPHAR: We're talking 20 years ago.

KASS: Now I'm going back now to all my sources.

KAPHAR: Uh-oh, we're on the go now.

KASS: What do we have here? Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman and Invisibility Blues by Michele Wallace, who I adore.

KAPHAR: Yes.

KASS: Vision & Difference by Griselda Pollock. Angela Davis, Women, Race and Class.

KAPHAR: That's a good one.

KASS: Absolutely essential. Believing Is Seeing, by Mary Anne Staniszewski. Then Sarah Lewis, her new book, The Unseen Truth. It's

about how you see what you want to, even though what's in front of your eyes is telling you something different.

KAPHAR: Shout out to Sarah Lewis.

KASS: Patricia J. Williams, the most elegant, in my humble opinion. I'm not an expert on critical race theory, but this was my—



Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, 1991. Oil, enamel and acrylic on canvas. 84 x 66 in.

KAPHAR: The Alchemy of Race and Rights, yeah.

KASS: I love that. Anything by Michele Wallace, but particularly pertinent to me was an essay that I think was in in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, published by the New Museum. That and *Rethinking Representation* were like, the textbooks. For my work, talking about disruptors, Robert Colescott and Faith Ringgold were absolutely essential for me because—

KAPHAR: I was waiting for you to say Faith's name. I know she was pretty important to you.

KASS: Totally. I'll send you pictures of everything later.

KAPHAR: Send me a bibliography.

