

John Currin: In what way does Currin aspire to the title of Modern Master

Introduction

“In what way does Currin’s opus aspire to Old Master status?”

These two statements are quite different. The first refers to the artist’s aspiration and the second to the work’s aspiration. The work can’t have an aspiration. You might also want to change ‘in what way’ to either ‘how’ or ‘in what ways’ as ‘in what way’ implies that you’re only looking for a single ‘way’.

I re-encountered (is the ‘re’ important?) John Currin’s highly polished figurative work while looking for inspiration for approaches to painting the human form; a recurring area of interest to me in my OCA studies. My parallel project explores indirect painting techniques of the Old Masters and Currin’s work was congruent to that intention.

“The Pink Tree” stood out as anachronistic (anachronistic compared to what?) as its Renaissance heritage was obvious in its facture (?), but the ambivalent relationship between the female subjects added a surreal edginess and contemporary twist. I found the fusion bewildering and the puzzling nature of the work and title resonated with me and I resolved to make Currin’s work the focus of my critical review and inspiration for professional development. The fine polish of his painting technique is something I aspire to. This explains why you’re doing this, but has nothing to do with the title of the essay.



Figure 1 Currin, The Pink Tree, 1999

In order to ascertain whether Currin aspires to Old Master status I will begin in chapter 1 by surveying a selection drawings and paintings and expound the gamut of his representations from caricature through cartoons to straight portraiture. Next, in chapter 2 I will search for evidence for Old Master status by directly comparing Currin with giants in the canon of art history. In chapter 3 I

will be making a direct application of Currin to my own practice; specifically my parallel project. Finally in my conclusion, I will speculate on how much my own work has changed by my encounter with Currin.

If you're interesting in establishing a link between Currin and the Old Masters, you don't need to go into detail about how it has affected you and your work. It's important to keep on track. I recommend making the essay less personal (remove 'I') and more objective. Place your interest in the work in the introduction and leave it there.

Chapter 1: A brief survey John Currin and his work

I aim to begin with early works that depict the lampooning of male heterosexual desire, or, that comment critically upon a particular social type or class through caricature. I propose that his work becomes increasingly sophisticated and more serious as he juxtaposes high art with low life using photographic reference culled from popular cultural sources.

You're not 'aiming to begin'. You' are beginning with this point. As such you can just say something like:

Currin's early works lampoon male heterosexual desire or comment critically on a particular social type or class through caricature. I propose that his work becomes increasingly sophisticated and more serious as he juxtaposes high art with low life using photographic reference culled from popular cultural sources.

Currin is an American figurative artist who paints his predominantly female subjects in a highly polished and finely rendered style that belies his comedic content and narrative. Born in Boulder, Colorado in 1962; Currin entered into prominence in the 1990's and has subsequently enjoyed continued commercial success commanding high six-figured sums for his works at auction. In that time his work has evolved and it is my intention to explore how his approach to his subject has changed and to answer the question; In what way does Currin's work aspire to Old Master Status. (Hoptman,2002, p.)

Straight portraits



This “straight” portrait is one of a series of “vacant looking high school girls” derived from class year book photographs. (cite Vit P) The dead pan expressionless face is humorous. We speculate on the subject’s displeasure and the lack of effort to smile for the camera. The paint handling is refined, even at the early stage and the skin tones convincing. Currin builds up his images using thin glazes built up in successive layers. The blouse subtly merges into a blended background and we admire the controlled transition from dark to light as our eye travels from the top down the canvass. The author recognises a homage to Gerhard’s “Eight student nurses” and Currin is on record as admiring Gerhard as a role model and perhaps the unnaturally solemn expression is an acknowledgement of Richter’s eight student nurses..

Cartoons



Currin, Jaunty and Mame, 1997

http://www.saatchigallery.com/aipe/john_currin.htm

The image above shows two women with abnormally large breasts negotiating a transaction involving the sale of an inadequately sized bra. Currin often distorts proportions for comedic effect. For instance in "Big Hands" a voluptuous female is portrayed with large hands. This is a visual pun on the epithet that describes a large breasts and we are reminded of Currin's enjoyment of word play.

Since we recognise Currin's ability to handle paint; it is curious to note the lack of effort in the faces. The brush marks there are thick impasto and otherwise hastily rendered compared with the fabric and skin. **Do you know this for a fact? You ought to back up such an assertion with evidence that isn't your opinion, I'm afraid.** It is as if the faces are of no importance in the context of the exaggerated and "hyper-sexualised" forms and we can ruminate upon Currin's ambiguous motives and message in doing so. Again, there is little background to distract the viewer. An exception exists however, in *The Golf Course Girl*, 1997, where the face receives equal attention [foot note?]

The humour appears to be at the expense of women and many consider Currin sexist or misogynistic and he has drawn volatile critical attention from feminist commentators. (Cite) But is it that simple? **Don't use rhetorical questions. Re-write.**

~~Conversely~~, Currin may be poking fun at the male "gaze". According to Dominic Molon; "Such exaggerated imagery serves as a lampoon of male heterosexual desire at its most fetishistic while also pushing figurative representation into a strange new direction." (Dexter, 2005, p.070)



Currin, Mrs Omni 1993

Here Currin is lampooning vanity so harshly that his critics denounced him as ageist and sexist. Particularly so with his nude portrait of Bea Arthur.

The stance is that of a model, "someone trying to strike a nonchalant pose, to appear much younger and far more elegant than she is." (Godfrey, 2009, p.180) The skin tones are dulled, and she is presented, (knowingly) on a grey background, the grey hair and a grey stripe on her jumper drawing attention to her hollowed breasts. The figure is emaciated and this allows Currin to distort the figure with elongation particularly in the neck. A mannerist conceit. **Explain this rather than just state it. Do you mean 'Mannerism'? If so, give specific evidence (perhaps in a footnote).** Backgrounds and

context clues are noticeably absent as if not to distract from the subject. The brush strokes in the fabric are fluent and confident.

His wife is the subject of the portrait Blue Rachel where I think Currin is at his most frank and honest.

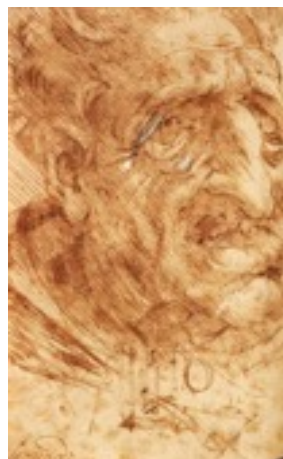


Currin is certainly difficult to quantify. However, it is clear that, despite the ascerbic humour, Currin is serious about his work and his opus is self-consciously littered with art history allusions

Chapter 2: Aspects of Currin's art historical references

Currin experiments with a wide variety of wet and dry media in his drawing practices.

Leonardo- sepia and wash



Viewed in https://www.bridgemaneducation.com/en/asset/857407/summary?context=%7B%22route%22%3A%22assets_search%22%2C%22routeParameters%22%3A%7B%22_format%22%3A%22html%22%2C%22_locale%22%3A%22en%22%2C%22filter_text%22%3A%22Leonardo+sepia%22%2C%22filter_group%22%3A%22all%22%7D%7D accessed 12/10/15

I like that Currin uses a huge variety of drawing media including ink and wash. For the purposes of this essay your opinion isn't that important. If he does use a wide variety of media, then simply state it with some evidence. In this sepia and wash by Leonardo we see a grotesque image of an old man with distorted and exaggerated features. Leonardo records facial variation to scrutinise variation and difference and medical abnormality forensically. The same activity Currin engages in but for exploring stereotypes or making social commentary.



Viewed in http://media.aphelis.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/CURRIN_2006_Thanksgiving_related_material_B.jpg accessed 15/10/15

Watteau and Fragonard- coloured chalks



Viewed in https://www.bridgemaneducation.com/en/search?filter_text=watteau+nude&filter_group=all accessed 15/10/15

Fragonard (1732-1806)

The Chemise Removed



Viewed in <https://www.bridgemaneducation.com/en/asset/89788/> accessed 15/10/15

Watteau is more modest than Fragonard. His is the elegante society of Fetes villageoise, Fetes gallantes. For Watteau the passive female is only viewed even when the narrative intention is a prelude to intercourse. It is clear that voyeurism of a woman at her toilet is a fitting subject for art as long as it is dressed in classical literature or the romanticism of arcadia.

Fragonard brings us into the boudoir and furnishes the intimacy with swathes of fabric folds, sheets, curtains and chemises. The figure is being interacted with. For Fragonard there is no requirement to legitimise the nudity as in Young Girl with puppies. The questionably young female is inexplicably bare-breasted. Themes of abduction, manslaughter and rape are acceptable subject for art so long as it is mediated by soft focus, pastel colours and vapid and luxurious brush strokes.

The use of multiple figures makes for compositional interest and the floating form of gods and goddesses of classical mythology allows forms to intertwine without straining belief within the parameters of their super natural powers.

The Maenads, 2015



Viewed in <https://www.gagosian.com/artists/john-currin/selected-works> accessed 15/10/15

In my opinion these Maenads, wild follows of the cult of Bacchus, appear fairly sober. **Again, your opinion isn't that important here. Try and give evidence of how it is 'more sober' than other versions of the subject.** Currin does not do what you expect. **Sorry to be picky, but this is presumptuous. You can't know what an audience expects.** The apples hint at ripeness and fecundity, the roundness of the breasts and belly of the main subject; but I am pushed to infer alcohol. It is easier to make a connection with the uppermost figure, apparently floating on a sea of silken sheets with the image of a classical cupid. The sheets and flowery curtains segue between Fragonard's boudoirs and Watteau's arcadia. The diaphanous chemise and fabric fold protect modesty, but appear self-conscious allusions and appropriations from late 18th early 19th Century models. What makes this more contemporary is the acknowledgement of the voyeur in the returned gaze. **This is**

good stuff. It shows that you're looking at the elements and pulling out differences as well as similarities. You may want to reference John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* here.

Boucher- icy coloured pastels

Leda and the swan



Viewed in <http://pagineazzurre.forumcommunity.net/?t=50775944> accessed

Boucher is being explicit in this recumbent nude. The figure is presented with a clear view of the genitals. Additionally, the swan's neck is used as a compositional device to direct the viewer's gaze. To our post-modern minds, the phallic symbolism is apparent. Even today this has the power to shock. The image has all the finesse and refinement we expect but we learn that implied intercourse with animals is an acceptable subject for art. ~~In fact it is staggering to think this taboo, and the legend of Leda and the swan have entered into mainstream art and literature.~~

Limoges, 2008



Viewed in <http://www.sadiecoles.com/artists/currin#jc-john-currin-2008> accessed 15/10/15

So it is equally surprising that Currin is castigated for presenting images culled from Danish porn reworked as fine art with all the technical aplomb of the Renaissance. Why is this so shocking when rape, voyeurism, manslaughter, and bestiality sit so comfortably within the canon of art history. **But is it surprising? We can distinguish between the different sources of fiction.** Perhaps it is Currin's conscious appropriation from the high Renaissance that makes us reassess how we review that heritage and challenge assumptions from our post-modern vantage point.

Certainly, Currin's art has developed from single portraits on a blank or modulated background, to complex arrangements of figures in believable space furnished with all manner of surfaces rendered realistically. By appropriating themes, Currin has made it evident that he deserves his place alongside the Old Masters.

You haven't actually proved anything, I don't think. Better to think about how Currin appropriates themes and techniques from the old masters for his work. This is in a different context (more permissive perhaps, but also more judgemental), from the one the Old Masters worked in. He uses technique to back up the appearance of the work to reinforce the associations (perhaps).

Cover girls with Botticelli



Viewed in https://www.bridgemaneducation.com/en/asset/1109605/summary?context=%7B%22route%22%3A%22assets_search%22%2C%22routeParameters%22%3A%7B%22_format%22%3A%22html%22%2C%22_locale%22%3A%22en%22%2C%22filter_text%22%3A%22Botticelli+nude%22%2C%22filter_group%22%3A%22all%22%7D%7D accessed 12/10/15

Chapter 3: Areas of Currin's impact and relevance to my work

Your title (see my nearer note) is unconcerned with your work and yet this is the longest section. If you want to prove Currin's place among the Old Masters, that's one thing, but if you want to explain his influence on you, that's another thing altogether. You've got some good ideas and knowledge but you need clean all this up as it's too sprawling. By choosing to explain and explore one artist and their large oeuvre you end up describing and giving opinions. The best section is where you compare the Fragonard / Watteau etc., with his work. Comparisons release meaning. Be careful of making too many generalisations as — for example — lots of artists have used similar techniques for all sorts of different reasons. Currin uses a 'pre-modern' approach, which is significant. You ought to have some quotes from him (or respected critics about him) to explore his intentions for the work. It can't simply rest on your opinion, I'm afraid.

The main impact has been technical rather than conceptual. Beauty and seriousness are perhaps the most shocking tactics left to artists these days.” (Sulcas, 2015)

Appropriation is a post-modern conceit and mechanism for subversion that appeals to my own creative impulse and I began speculating on my own narrative using the title as catalyst for my stream of consciousness.

Having researched John Currin, the above quote by Grayson Perry seemed to summarise what I think I understand of the elements John Currin’s figurative work. It appears that critics struggle to articulate just what the body of work represents. It is an enigma. What is certain is that Currin’s opus communicates a running commentary on beauty; paints with technical mastery over protracted period of time. He is unquestionably serious about his craft but applies his high cultural pursuit to low brow subject matter and sources such as cartoon fetishes and Danish porn; and enjoys stirring up debate and, in my opinion, the publicity his shock tactic brings.

I have enjoyed the figurative and portrait elements in my OCA studies. I also enjoy being subversive and controversial if it acts as a catalyst to discourse and debate in those that view it. One Post-modern strategy is to subvert by appropriation. Consequently, the work of John Currin seems particularly salient to my development.

Conclusion- What I have learned and how my work has changed

I am aware that “our attitudes to the human body have changed in recent years so how we paint it and how we see those paintings has changed” (Godfrey, 20 . p180)

I am reassured by the fact that Currin’s hard work has paid dividend and his paintings have greater compositional complexity. The realism he is now able to achieve in the variety of surfaces; marble, glass, polished floor, fabrics in silk is due to hard work. This teaches me that if I work hard enough, my skills and technique will improve. He teaches me also that it is not wrong to be controversial .John Currin has fallen into the trap of becoming very good at less and less. C.f Jim Shaw Part 2

Highly polished technique in and of itself says nothing other than the artist ability to produce it. While I see his technique as formidable, others are not so generous.

On its own it lacks communicative power of the Expressionists. Confer Currin’s impasto faces with the portraiture of Frank Auerbach. Currin lacks commitment to the physicality of paint in my opinion. To communicate, it is therefore necessary to retell a well known narrative, perhaps from the bible or the classics of literature. That is what the Old Masters did and where Currin departs. They merely share the indirect painting technique.

Currin’s power for me resides in his use of the shock tactics of juxtaposition between low cultural themes treated with the..... of High Renaissance. To the viewer the refined style is “dissonant” with the base subject and there is a frissant in the starkness of the contrast.

Alternatively, the ambiguity of meaning between his subjects encounters allow the viewer to project their own narrative with all the insight the post-modern mind rings to interpretations.

I agree with (Painting Today) and I do not see Currin as a social commentator. He merely presents stereotypes and tries to believe in them to present them faithfully. He says he uses Danish porn because that supplies a meaningful context for contorting the human forms and

entwining them for compositional purposes. The fact is, as an intelligent and articulate artist he is getting his viewers to talk and think. For instance, in the classical a popular theme is the rape of the Sabine woman. It has entered the canon of art history and is a standard theme in Renaissance repertoire. Rape sanitised and made visually appealing is still rape. So, Currin's use of porn merely reminds us that we have taken the sex subject for granted and no longer see it. He makes us confront and reappraise. Is he also making a statement about freedom of expression. A conundrum perhaps.

In conclusion I do believe that Currin's work does aspire to Old Master status and despite his flippant attitude, his love of humour, visual pun and mockery, he should be recognised as a serious contender.

List of Images

1. Currin, J. (1999) 'The Pink Tree'. [oil on canvass] Painting Today. s.l.: Phaidon Press.p.179
2. Currin, J. (1999) "The Pink Tree"

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