

John Currin: A Currin-t Surrealist

Connor Lucas

Art and the Surreal

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Since Guillaume Apollinaire coined the term in 1917 and André Breton, the movement's 'founder', drafted the inaugural "Manifesto of Surrealism" in 1924, surrealism has continued to influence creatives in a variety of fields¹. It is only natural that today, as the strict social conventions of the past have become increasingly relaxed, society is progressively open to the often-shocking and always-provocative ideas of surrealism. Those inspired by the twentieth-century movement include everyone from architects and fashion designers to writers and artists; a modern example of which is New York-based painter John Currin.

Currin's figurative work, for which he is best known, has the obvious markings of classical training; however the depiction of their subject matter is provocative and satirical in a way that is incredibly unique- and starkly different from the oil paintings of the past. *The New Yorker* art critic Calvin Tomkins describes these skills, "which include elements of Old Master paint application and high-Mannerist composition, have been put to use on some of the most seductive and rivetingly weird figure paintings of our era."² 'Rivetingly weird' is, objectively, an accurate description, and one that aligns with that of many products of the surrealist movement. **While Currin's work throughout his career touches on many cornerstones of the twentieth century artistic movement, there are a few pieces that most exhibit elements of the surreal, including *Red Shoes*, *The Bra Shop*, and *The Kennedys*.**

A key tenet of surrealism is the ability to look into oneself as a means of producing art and to use self psychoanalysis to channel the unconscious mind; as stated in Breton's "The Manifesto of Surrealism": "Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to

¹ "Movement: Surrealism," *The Art Story: Modern Art Insight*, <http://www.theartstory.org/movement-surrealism.htm>

² Calvin Tomkins, *The Lives of Artists: Portraits of Ten Artists Whose Work and Lifestyles Embody the Future of Contemporary Art* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2010).

express- verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner- the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral preoccupations.”³ While Currin’s paintings, with their carefully curated colors and classic compositions, are definitely not exempt from any aesthetic concern, their morals are as questionable as those depicted in surrealist works; and the idea of turning to one’s own psyche is not foreign to the painter. Despite the fact that the majority of his work details the female body, he stresses that his painted personalities are reflections of himself.⁴ For example, during a particularly trying time as he was transitioning into his career as an artist, he is quoted in *The New Yorker* describing his subjects as “ ‘old women at the end of the cycle of sexual potential, between the object of desire and the object of loathing,’ but to him they also mirrored his own situation as a figurative painter whose work lacked validity in the market of ideas.”⁵

Currin’s portrayal of said female body is another noteworthy surreal element of his work. Surrealists drew inspiration from reality while often distorting it to a point of little recognition, and similarly, he is inspired by the world around him: “Reminiscent of 1950s illustrations, inspired by 1970s *Cosmo*[politan] models, drawn from clichéd images featured in stock photography books, Currin’s paintings succeed in pointing out the ordinary while giving it a distorted twist,”⁶ as described in an exhibition review. But his sources of inspiration often stray from the PG-13. A *New Yorker* profile on the artist describes his piece, *The Women of Franklin*

³ André Breton, *Manifestoes Of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972).

⁴ Stephanie Buhmann, “John Currin, Whitney Museum of Art,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, January 2004, <http://www.stephaniebuhmann.com/currin.html>

⁵ Calvin Tomkins, “Lifting the Veil,” *The New Yorker*, 28 January 2008, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/01/28/lifting-the-veil>

⁶ Buhmann.

Street (the title of which is an homage to Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*) as "[having] the scale and pyramidal structure of a Renaissance altarpiece, but, according to John Currin, who began work on it four days ago, the immediate source was an Internet porn site."⁷ This sort of raw, explicit source of inspiration for oil paintings-- historically a medium with a level of seriousness and provenance-- feels very surreal in its nature. Currin thematically strives to turn a taboo topic into a thing of beauty, stating, "one motive of mine is to see if I could make this clearly debased and unbeautiful thing become beautiful in a painting."⁸ While the surrealists weren't necessarily concerned with beauty, their desire to portray the taboo isn't unlike that of this contemporary artist.

Taboo visions seem to make up a significant portion of the surrealists' streams of unconsciousness, and these ideas often revolve around uninhibited sexuality and erotica. Referring to it as his "sex thing,"⁹ Currin's paintings are often incredibly sexual in nature as well; which is hardly surprising considering one of his major sources of inspiration is pornography. In the same way that surrealists were testing the boundaries of explicitness with works like *The Great Masturbator* by Salvador Dalí or even through written word like Georges Bataille's *The Story of the Eye*, Currin is doing the same, although perhaps less abstractly. Many of his works depict outright intercourse, such as *Copenhagen* and *Rotterdam*, both of which place focus on the female subjects while completely hiding the faces of the males. But like that of the surrealists, Currin's portrayal of sex isn't necessarily intended to be sensual or sexy, with the artist describing his erotic works, "I liked the idea of a beautiful painting that has this big problem, like

⁷ Tomkins.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

a lead ball chained to its ankle. A heavy weight that keeps it from ever being good”—something beautiful and ugly at the same time.”¹⁰

The first piece under study, *Red Shoes*, with a title that surreally and comedically focuses on a rather unimportant element of the work as a whole, depicts a tall woman painted in Currin’s signature style with skillful technique and historical composition. The subject has her leg lifted and resting on a tree trunk, allowing the viewers a better perspective of her body, which is dressed in a sheer white top (doing nothing to hide her engorged breasts) and a pair of brown slacks against which her red shoes, for which the painting is named, pop. But what is most noteworthy about this painting, besides her cane- the necessity of which for a young woman seems surreally unusual- is the long baguette and pitcher that top her head, as described; “The curves of the pitcher, twisting down the side of his figure’s face, seems so naturally placed that its surreal addition almost dissolves into the artist’s graceful sense of color and movement.”¹¹

The historical sense of color and composition of this piece is something found throughout Currin’s work, however the undeniably surrealistic element of the bread immediately draws comparison to one of the most well known surrealist objects, *Retrospective Bust of a Woman* by Salvador Dalí. In his piece, Dalí dresses a painted porcelain bust of a woman with a table’s worth of random objects, the most conspicuous of which is a long baguette placed, identically to that of Currin’s painting, across the top of the female’s head.

Currin’s kitschy introduction of food to otherwise serious still lifes is a recurring theme of his career, with other exemplary works including *Pistachio*, depicting a loving elderly couple

¹⁰ Tomkins.

¹¹ D. Creahan, “London- John Currin at Sadie Coles HQ Through January 21st, 2017,” *Art Observed*, 16 January 2017, <http://artobserved.com/2017/01/london-john-currin-at-sadie-coles-hq-through-january-21st-2017/>

donning ice cream cones, fish, and fruit as casually as a hat, or *The Christian*, where a woman carries a tray of fruit with an oversized cantaloupe cleverly taking the placement of her left breast.¹² This juxtaposition of antique ideas of still lifes and portraits blended into one art piece allows Currin to simultaneously parody them both; with parody being a tactic used extensively by surrealists as creative commentary on society. As a final touch, a shadowed bird perches on the subject's knee, drawing to mind images of Joseph Cornell's series of mixed media boxed birds, many of which were also represented in shadow.

As mentioned previously, Currin is known for his distortions of the female body, and these truly surreal modifications often consist of “noses protruding out from the face, torsos reaching out to exaggerated lengths, or hips swelling out to create almost circular body parts.”¹³ These alterations are one of the few things (save for, perhaps, the pornspiration) that separate Currin's contemporary work from the Old Masters and classical paintings from which he has derived his techniques. Some of the most obvious examples of this are in pieces like *Nude in a Convex Mirror*, in which the female subject's bottom is distorted to extremely oversized proportions in the mirror, or in *Patch and Pearl*, which depicts a fairly average sized woman with an incredibly large stomach that is barely able to be contained by her pants. But it is the breasts that are most often Currin's distorted body part of choice, which relates not only to the erotic elements of surrealism but also its common thread of altering the anatomy with which society is comfortable. His work includes “innumerable images of young women weighed down

¹² Adrian Searle, “John Currin review- meta-painter dances on the knife edge of taste,” *The Guardian*, 25 November 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/nov/25/john-currin-review-sadie-coles-gallery-london>

¹³ Creahan.

by basketball-size breasts,”¹⁴ which is a surrealist element most clearly seen in the second specific piece of study, *The Bra Shop*.

This painting, standing out from the rest of his works with its bold orange background, features a pair of women measuring their extremely exaggerated breasts with a tape measure, with one of the subjects holding a bra; reinforcing the mammary theme. Like the woman in *Red Shoes*, these women are fully clothed, however, in a sense, they reveal just as much as Currin’s nude portraits due to their impossibly tight clothing. While many of the artist’s paintings feature a variety of still life elements that direct one’s attention all over the canvas, the focus of this painting is clear: “[the women] are completely engaged in their activity, concentrating on what the viewer’s eyes are drawn to as well: their enormous breasts.”¹⁵

The shocked and repulsed reactions that this piece garners, as well as its obsession and focus on a single body part, isn’t all that different than many surrealist pieces. Hans Bellmer is a surrealist artist who distorts the human form, typically through his life-sized ‘dolls’, many of which featured oversized stomachs, bottoms, and, of course, breasts. But one of the most pronounced comparisons is with René Magritte’s *Le Viol (Rape)*, in which the artist has replaced the face of a woman with her bare torso. Her eyes have become her breasts, which are now the focus of the painting. While more abstract than Currin’s portrayal, it is equally intended to parody society and to “suggest firstly of the way males see the woman. The idea is to create a sexual image out of the woman’s face, the first thing one would usually see,” according to Magritte.¹⁶ Currin’s painting also draws comparison to surrealist works that play with anatomical

¹⁴ Tomkins.

¹⁵ Buhmann.

¹⁶ “Rape, 1945 by Rene Magritte,” *Rene Magritte*, <https://www.renemagritte.org/rape.jsp>

ratios, like *Composition with Portrait* by Victor Brauner, which turns the focus of a normal portrait, the face, ‘on its head’ by directing the viewer to look instead at the hand of the subject, which now has facial features. While Currin isn’t superimposing eyes or a mouth onto his subject’s breasts, he is, like the surrealists, drastically redirecting the focus from that of a classic portrait.

Portraits are the focus of Currin’s work, but many of his portraits feature anything but antique subject matter- despite their classic painting style. This is exemplified by an early piece titled *The Kennedys*. The stateliness and gravity with which it is titled does not translate to the piece itself, with Currin painting the face of the 35th President of the United States, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, twice over on the bodies of what appear to be a young boy and girl. In the same way that surrealists modified anatomical elements, they also altered everyday, known objects by changing their scale, location, or use, and Currin did exactly that with one of the most iconic figures of all time. One would not expect to see the face of a grown man enlarged and placed upon the body of a child, let alone the face of someone as respected as a presidential figure. This surreal juxtaposition creates just the sort of jarring reaction prompted by pieces like Salvador Dalí’s *Lobster Telephone*, an iconic object consisting of a lobster sitting atop a telephone that, like Currin’s painting, is “made from the conjunction of items not normally associated with each other, resulting in something both playful and menacing.”¹⁷ Likewise, *Les valeurs personnelles* by René Magritte peculiarly places everyday items, such as a comb, matchstick, and drinking glass, in a bedroom.. These seemingly-random objects have been blown up to human proportions that threaten the comfort of the viewers, just as Currin did with the face

¹⁷ “Lobster Telephone,” *Tate*, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/dali-lobster-telephone-t03257>

of Kennedy. While not depicting a celebrity or even a figure, these pieces, like Currin's painting, align with the surrealist idea of creating something close to reality, but simultaneously far from being realistic.

Just as John Currin borrows technique and skill from the Old Masters of yesteryear, he has dipped his brush into the concepts and ideas of the surrealists; as exemplified by pieces like *Red Shoes*, *The Bra Shop*, and *The Kennedys*, among others. Despite the decades that separate modern society from surrealism, Currin and other creatives have reimagined the movement's themes for today. This newfound relevance does not seem to be waning, based on the September 2017 *Vogue* cover for which Currin was commissioned, the prominent use of his *Nude in a Convex Mirror* painting in Tom Ford's critically-acclaimed *Nocturnal Animals* film, or the artist's home in the collections of institutions like the Whitney Museum, The Broad, and Tate. The impact of surrealism is lasting as it continues to excite across many disciplines while impressively managing to maintain the shock value with which it was originally instilled.

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