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WAKING DREAMS

In conversation with *Hikari Yokoyama*, *Rachel Feinstein* discusses her reverie-filled girlhood,
the power of nostalgia and transforming the abstract into reality



Rachel Feinstein's
'Panorama of Rome' (2012)

Below: 'St Michael'
(2012). Bottom: Feinstein
photographed in her studio



Clockwise from bottom left:
a work in progress in
Feinstein's studio. The artist
and her husband John
Currin at a dinner for
Gucci's Alessandro Michele.
Feinstein's 'The Snow
Queen' (2011). Currin's
'Rachel in Fur' (2002)



As one half of the New York art scene's biggest power couple, Rachel Feinstein has succeeded in her childhood quest to make her dreams come alive through her creativity.

Her ambitious, intensely physical installations use a range of media to delve into collective fantasies of mortality, religion, decay and female archetypes. Feinstein's work is bold and unerringly personal, connecting directly to her life as an artist and as a wife, a mother and a woman – aspects that are not necessarily fashionable in the cerebral, conceptual, testosterone-imbued art world. Here, she tells Hikari Yokoyama that there is still a fundamental difference between how male and female artists work.

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Hikari Yokoyama: Some artists rehash the same thing over and over; they find the style that suits and go deep into it. You seem to take the opposite approach – you are happy to delve into almost any medium: wood, drawings, collage, paint, mirrors, plaster, resin... Is the exploration of materiality as important as the curiosity around the ideas? Is one driving the other?

Rachel Feinstein: I've always believed that most art is being driven by the memories of the artist's



childhood. It can be just a whiff, or a full-blown bodily immersion; something as abstract as the weave of the carpet in your 10-year-old's bedroom or a vivid first-time experience of visiting Disneyland.

Nostalgia is a hardcore aphrodisiac for artists. Being a sculptor, I use materials to transfer that feeling of nostalgia, whether it is through mirrors, paper, paint, wood or resin. Painters have that magical space inside the canvas to do this but we sculptors have the great 3-D world to immerse the viewer into ours. My husband [the painter John Currin] and I always argue about who has it better.

HY: How do you see the phases of your various bodies of work over time?

RF: Making art that has always been based on my childhood, you can see the progression of my stages like you watch a child grow up. My early works from the 1990s, when I was just out of school, are very surreal: dreamlike and psychedelic fantasies about Miami where I grew up. Then I met John and everything changed – his art-historical background influenced me heavily. In 2000, we shared a studio and I took a big turn from my earlier Miami work to

reference European rococo and baroque art.

I have since used subjects such as African sculpture, Roman architecture, German Gothic wood sculpture, Nymphenburg and Meissen porcelain, Italian, German and French period rooms, antique panorama wallpaper, and certain early films, including *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, as my sources.

When I started making my first paper cut-up maquette, it was totally by accident, without actually thinking of any artist before doing it, or using any of my usual inspirational sources. In 2006, I had made a very simple pencil drawing of a German stone bas-relief of Adam and Eve from the mid 1500s and I started cutting up the drawing and then hot-glueing it back together in certain spots. I loved how I could then mimic the same flatness and 3-D planes of the paper glued together in

Below: part of Feinstein's 2012/2013 exhibition in Rome



plywood on a larger scale. It started a whole new way of making things that continues to this day.

Recently, the big change in my life and my art has come from hitting middle age and realising that life is limited. I have always been a fantasist, but as certain hard knocks hit during one's life, it is harder and harder to remain in a happy, dreamy place.

I seek out oppositional forces in my art and life – I'm interested in extremes. I've always loved fairy tales and use them as inspiration because they are so violent. Growing up in drug-fuelled, lawless Miami during the 1980s definitely shaped my experience for loving drama! I was a religion major at Columbia University because of my interest in life and death, good and bad, young and old, heaven and hell... I am drawn to stories and art where there are both sides always present. I think man and woman are also those two constant oppositional forces, always side by side, and I live that every day with my husband. We represent for me the ideal Jungian couple – according to Jung, as you grow older you should not try to look back at your earlier self but instead, rebirth yourself as the different sex, so at the end of your life you will be both halves joined in one body. In my home life, I very much live as the 'female and wife' to John's 'male and father' with our children, but in my studio I am more the male in my art practices and John is more female. So I feel quite fulfilled in that respect.



Above, from left: 'Rhoda' (2005). Feinstein's studio

'I want to see things I dream of inside my head out in the world as real objects that others can see too'

HY: I think one of the great things about being a woman today is the ability to have a strong identity but also to be a chameleon...

RF: I totally agree that part of being a woman is about taking on many roles all at once. Men rule the world because the celebrated ones are able to laser-focus and become the best at just one thing from an early age, and stick with it till the end. Women are required to multitask and they take on too many roles, which divide their strengths. Every day, I have to be a great mother,

artist, chef, estate planner, decorator and housekeeper, and juggling all of those roles means I will never be the master of the universe or the billionaire mogul. I can go out as John's wife one night, playing the supporting role to his Oscar-nominated lead, but then I'll need to switch gears the next morning to be the star in my own studio.

Sometimes that is very hard, and I'm not sure if the great male artists ever have to think about switching gears like that. But that is the way of the world, at least for now, and I just have to accept that. I have given up on believing that I can change the universe. When I was 22, fresh out of college, I would have railed against myself for saying this.

HY: What keeps you working?

RF: I want to see things I dream of inside my head out in the world as real objects that others can see as well. Again, it all goes back to my childhood, where I had a secret fantasy world going on in my head. If I can conjure up those weird childish fantasies from my now grown-up brain, and create them into flesh through my middle-aged hands, then I will be happy. □