John Currin and the American Grotesque
Robert Rosenblum

or those fascinated by chronology, it's a happy coincidence that John Currin was born in 1962. In that year, Roy Lichtenstein had his first one-man show at the Leo Castelli Gallery and, to the horror of all sensitive, art-loving people, set forth a new vision of what might be called "the American grotesque." He found his sources in the oceans of unlooked-at visual trash that hurt the eyes of refined spectators, and disclosed, among other shocks in our image world, how strange, to the point of being hideous, the American ideal of female beauty could be. Culled from low-budget ads and comic strips, these ripe young girls, when enlarged and presented as oil paintings for close-up scrutiny, turned out to be monsters, belying their original purpose of seducing the vast unwashed American public into spending money on holiday resorts, soap operas, and kitchen appliances. The faces of this artificial race were discovered to have a paralyzed, masklike perfection (see p. 12); the lips and torsos of their warped, steam-rolled bodies were entirely deprived of bone, joint, and muscle, so that their fluid contours could expand and contract at the artist's will. But of course the mock eventually wore off, and now these paintings look not like their commercial sources but like vintage, museum-worthy Lichtensteins, as much his private fantasy of the female body as were the nudes of Boucher or Canova, Ingres or Renoir. And on a less exalted, American wavelength, moving closer in time to Currin's grass-roots heritage, one might mention the pinups of George Petty and his successor Alberto Vargas, whose silk-smooth, pneumatic fantasies of rounded and elongated female flesh established their own new race of sex goddesses. From the 1930s through the 1960s, these shared erotic dreams kept arousing heterosexual subscribers to Esquire and Playboy and surely helped to inspire the pinup nudes that, in the early 1960s, also became the satirical focus of many works by Lichtenstein's pop contemporaries Tom Wessellmann and Mali Ramos. Today, of course, these mid-century objects of desire seem as remotely artificial and unsexy as Japanese erotica, having long ago become nostalgic documents of another era far less likely to prompt contemporaries lust than to provide a field day for students of gender roles in American culture.

All of this may offer some preparation for looking at Currin's ever-expanding population of American humanoids, a completely original update of works by 1960s pioneers who were excited by the aesthetic potential lurking in the eeriness of contemporary America. One might begin, as Currin did, with the commonplace of portrait photographs, like those preserved in the high-school yearbooks we remember from our ever more distant youths. From 1989 on, this egotistical format haunted him; and with a bias as predictable as Renoir's, he focused exclusively on the girls in the class (see pp. 25–27). Whether black or white, anonymous or named, these graduates set up a weird disparity between the bell-line formula—a frontal bust-length portrait silhouetted against a totally plain ground—and the quirikness of individual mutations within this gallery of teenagers trying to look both proper and sexy,
mating angel hair and plucked eyebrows. The revival of a traditional hyperrealist style that fuses the old masters with hack commercial portraitists also adds macabre undertones, as if these mindless platitudes from every graduating class had been emblazoned forever as motionless icons whom we can stare at as curious artifacts but who cannot return our gaze, not being quite human or alive. Moreover, their deadpan photographic likenesses begin to stir in strange ways, as we become slowly aware that their frozen demeanor conceals unexpected distortions of mind and body — an uncannily vacant or mock-serious expression that peers through the pastel, greeting-card colors; a curious irregularity of scale, with figures too large, too small, or too awkwardly placed within their empty spaces; or, perhaps most disconcerting, subliminal anatomical oddities that may turn up anywhere, whether in the shifting proportions between heads and bodies or the unexpected widening or narrowing of shoulders and breasts. A new race is being born before our eyes, one that can embrace both the infinite variety and the sameness of American teenagers, as well as, on a rare occasion, even such a celebrity as the South African novelist and Nobel Prize-winner Nadine Gordimer (p. 33) now with the outsized head of an intellectual, as in a David Levine portrait caricature for the New York Review of Books. But even this world-famous writer, when reflected in Currie’s distorting mirror, looks as though she might have been excerpted from the high-school yearbook’s section of faculty photos, much as his equally exceptional double portrait of John F. Kennedy (1996), holding hands with his alter ego in drag, might also look like a giddy moment from the school principal’s office party.

Less famous and usually anonymous adult women quickly became part of this growing portrait gallery, which often reflects, like antiquated etiquette books, those body types and social postures deemed fashionable for our time. The hand-on-hip pose comes in many variations from the would-be intensity of a Shakespearean actress (1991, p. 28) to the caricatural extremes of the American ideal of unaesthetic slender bodied, as in Skinny Woman (1992, p. 34) or the grotesquely aging Ms. Omol (1993, p. 36), half-skeleton, half-warworks, paralyzed forever in her Gothic stance of arms fashionably akimbo and, as Roberta Smith put it, “as ready as she’ll ever be for her close-up.” As with the teenage portraits, the placement of these middle-aged socialites against a plain background is usually eerily (off-center, too high, too low), adding new dimensions to the disparity between their efforts at stylish grace and the actual facts of flesh and clothing, a contrast that can twist the way Goya subtly undermined so many of his fashionable sitters. Moreover, these contemporary witches radiate an uncomfortable aura of stopped time, even of death, an effect far more overt in the 1993 sequence of variations on the theme of a girl lying in bed (pp. 39 and 41). Her head has totally still on a white pillow, her body is covered with a white sheet up to her neck, and her pale face is discreetly
enhanced with makeup. Is she rapping? Is she ill or, closer to the bone, does she offer a gloss on the cosmetic skills of the modern American mortician? This uncanny slipping from life to death, from the natural to the synthetic, from ordinary people to new kinds of body snatchers was, in fact, a growing phenomenon in late twentieth-century art. In 1992–93, this new world of virtual humans was isolated and christened by Jeffrey Deitch in an exhibition titled Pulp Human.1 Considering first the proliferating onslaught of ways in which contemporary humans can transform themselves or enjoy surrogate experiences—range that would include nose jobs, face lifts, breast implants, computer alteration, electronic communication, video games, and virtual sex—he then presented a large number of artists who mirrored our ever-stranger versions of virtual reality—among others, Matthew Barney, Charles Ray, Robert Gober, Paul McCarthy, Cindy Sherman, and Jeff Koons. Curin was too new on the scene to have been included. (After his 1989 debut at White Columns, his first newsworthy show was not until March–April 1992 at the Andrea Rosen Gallery.)

But now, with hindsight, we know how well he would have fit into this group, a young Frankenstein who makes his monsters not only from the old masters but from the humanoid fantasies of contemporary America. In inventing these creatures, sex, for Curin, soon became the driving engine. Even Bea Arthur, star of Golden Girls, the TV series about aging singles who still want to be sexy and meet Mr. Right, gets stripped in a flabbergasting "portrait" of 1991 (p. 29) in which Ms. Arthur appears to be posing as a nude senior citizen who by some bizarre accident is stark naked, her slightly sagging breasts fully exposed. Or, conversely, in Big Lady of 1993 (p. 37), a dour, white-haired suburban matron wears a neck-high wooden sweater that amplifies rather than conceals her gargantuan chest. Pinup fantasies lurk strangely in these images of what appear to be very real people undressed in the artist’s imagination. In fact, several paintings of 1994 are direct spoofs of conventional pinup anatomies, an update of the aging Picabia’s delight in transforming French girls magazine of the 1940s into oil on canvas (see p. 14). But Curin’s predictably blonde nudes display their assets in uncomfortably cramped postures and spaces that transform the erotic abandon of, say, Goya’s Naked Maja into unexpectedly stressful situations of mind and body. Above all, it is breasts that...
fascinate Currin, as indeed they had fascinated ol of moviing America in the mid-century, the heyday of Jane Russell (who measured in at 38 inches) and, a bit later, Jayne Mansfield (who measured in at 41 inches), not to mention Diana Dors, the British con-
tribution to this bawdy sorority. On this wave-length, Currin himself claimed, in a recent interview, that he was not only a collector of 1960s girly photos from such mags as Modern Man, but was also a big fan of Frank Frazetta’s comics, particularly Conan the Barbarian, with its big-breasted superwomen. And it might be mentioned that these traditions are still alive and well in contemporary America, witness the ever-expanding restaurant chain Hooters (founded in Texas in 1983) or the monthly anthol-
gy of mega-breasts offered by Juggs magazine, which, in fact, singled Currin out for “paying atten-
tion to the worthy theme of big tits.”

Currin drives this obsession to unnerving ex-
tremes, so that even breast-feeding, as in ‘The Nurs-
ery’ (1994), makes one wallow and squirm in its un-
tiggery fusion of an oversized-boxed pinup girl and the presumably seaward pleasures of maternity. Elsewhere, such a disquieting marriage of bombshell breasts with fetal motherhood is, if possible, pushed even further. In ‘The Invalid’ (1997, p. 50), a Jayne Mansfield underlyingly plays the soap-operaic role of a mother who, in the most awkwardly angular linkng of arms, exchegtes a comforting embrace with her blonde, handicapped daughter, a junior pinup tragically confined to a wheelchair. When freed from domestic obligations, these ballooning Venuses can concentrate on their body’s most im-
portant attribute. In provocative pairings that con-
jure up overtures to lesbian pornography, they competitively admire each other’s breasts and, with tape measures and bras in hand, go about the femi-
nine business of finding the proper underclothing to cankler their freakish assets (see pp. 64–67). And at times, they invade Currin’s earlier rural idyls of languishing blonde country girls bathed in the kitchsunlight of picture-postcard hills and valleys. In ‘The Farm’ (1997, p. 74), a plainly-clothed farm girl, a tight sweater form-fitting her huge breasts, looks dream-
ily down at a picked flower and a folded paper, sug-
gestng a barnyard romance to come. In ‘Dogwood’ (p. 70), another painting from the same year, two girls from this corn-fed species seem to be gather-
ing flowers in a burgeoning landscape. But one girl, who burrows earnestly in the soil between her parted thighs, has crossed her bare leg over those of her country playmate, with results that evoke the robust vulgarity and erotic earthiness of Courbet’s lesbian scenes. Currin’s unashamed delight in breasts and in “women as sex objects,” as the phrase goes,
reaches even hands-on extremes, as in The Wizard (1994, p. 60), almost the equivalent of the Fugs’ cruelly honest hit song of 1966, with its simple-minded, droning refrain: “Do you like boobs a lot? (Yes, I like boobs a lot.) Boobs a lot, boobs a lot. (You gotta like boobs a lot.)”

In these days of gender awareness, it is of course as easy to accuse Currin, as it is Menor, of gross sexism; and his work has elicited its own share of feminist outrage. In 1993, writing in the Village Voice about his first one-man show at the Andrea Rosen Gallery, Kim Levin first quoted the relatively objective description offered in the press release (“Paintings of old women at the end of the cycle of sexual potential . . . between the object of desire and the object of loathing”), and then added, “Apart from that, they’re awful paintings. Boycott this show.” But if Currin usually depicts women as grotesquely ripe for plucking or grotesquely over the hill, his fascination with these sexual stereotypes is too easily explained as the attitude of all “male pigs.” It should be remembered that the same infatuation with surreally deformed and eroticized female anatomies can be no less a driving force in the work of female artists, such as Lisa Yuskavage, who has also spawned a breed of humanoids concerned only with their efforts to look like swollen Barbie dolls. Yuskavage and Currin, in fact, were classmates at the Yale School of Fine Arts, both getting their M.F.A.s there in 1986. “That they arrived at comparably grotesque female fantasies should certainly indicate that these synthetically distorted visions of American womanhood are highly topical cultural issues, transcending the artists’ own sexual appetites.” Nevertheless, Currin could not be clearer about the way in which his own libido has piloted his art. In a long statement published in 1993, he asserted that “painting has always been essentially about women, about looking at things in the same way that a straight man looks at a woman.” And further on, he becomes even more explicit: “When I hold a brush, it’s a weird object . . . as if part of the female sex has been taken and put on the end of this thing that is my male sex to connect with a yielding surface.” (If Picasso could speak from the grave, he might say the same thing.) Currin’s candor in revealing that his work is primarily rooted in heterosexual desire is refreshing. Tossing political correctness aside to make room for truer, baser instincts, he says: “I paint women and that’s what my work’s about.”

If many of these women seem the progeny of locker-room daydreams and porn magazines, others seem to have been born from the old-master DNA Currin is always collecting in the museums. In fact, separating these two major sources of his invention may be beside the point, since his fusion of venerable past and vulgar present, I would say as a perfect hybrid that lives in both worlds. To be sure, the collision of naked, real-life women and old-master

Frank Frazetta
(American, b. 1928)
San Geddis, 1970
Oil on academy board
20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)
©1970 Frank Frazetta
abrupt contrasts of old and new, creating instead fluid metamorphoses that circulate through many unlikely image banks. Peter Schjeldahl succinctly pinpointed this disquieting phenomenon in Currin’s work: “It’s that ‘old’ and ‘new’ are exhausted categories. The past is present now.”

So it is that the proliferation of “ideal” nudes (although some may still keep on their brass and panties) from 1998–99 takes us on a seamless round-trip from pinups and fashion models to the lofty heights of, among others, Cranach and Botticelli. As for the latter masters, not to mention the pages of Vogue, they seem to have prompted Currin to create another, complementary race, whose salient features are no longer gigantic, spherical breasts and inert, clumsy postures, but slender, elegant bodies frozen in balletic poses. Currin knows his old masters inside out, and I was once able to enjoy with him a personal tour of his favorites at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Of course, I was looking for specific sources that could have prompted his figurative fantasies. His awe before the precious varieties of blue in the robes of Gerard David’s Madonnas or the kravura rendering of shimmering lace in the tunic of El Greco’s Cardinal Guevara (which, in fact, might have inspired the looser, brushier rendering of contemporary clothing in many of Currin’s recent genre scenes) seemed beside my point. I was hoping rather that he would relate me to the odder Renaissance anatomies I had imagined would be perfect grist for his mill. Happily, he did. The Northern Renaissance schools were particularly fertile, not only in his predictable love for Cranach’s Judith with the Head of Holopherne, with its sharply defined contours that left no doubt about the strangely twisted deformations of the heroine’s body, but in his fascination with a work by a far less famous artist, Cornelis Engebrechtsz, in whose Crucifixion (p. 26) the agonized nude bodies of Christ and the two thieves offered a vocabulary of knotted limbs and torsos that can be recognized immediately in Currin’s stockpile of weird anatomy. And crossing the Alps to Italy, I

Otto Dix
(German, 1891–1969)
Three Wives, 1924
Oil on canvas
7 1/4 x 4 1/5 in. (18.4 x 10.5 cm)
Courtesy of Galerie der Stadt Stuttgart
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nudes is hardly new to Western painting; witness Goya’s recasing of a Titian Venus as a sexually liberated maja stripped of clothing, or Manet’s reincarnation of the same prototype as a Parisian courtesan, or, closer to the present, Otto Dix’s Germanic fusion of Cranach’s Venuses and Eves with Weimar Republic whores. Nevertheless, Currin’s absorption of the old masters is far more slippery than these
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registered his particular attraction to Piero di Cosimo’s Hunting Scene, a vision of a primitive state of civilization populated by satyrs and savage men and women whose active, foreshortened bodies, with their guitar-like silhouettes, look for closer to Northern than to Italian ideals of beauty. Currin was also freshly excited about the crumpled and twisted body of Christ in the Met’s newly acquired Deposition by Ludovico Carracci. And in the nineteenth-century galleries, Currin focused enthusiastically on the nudes of Corot and Courbet, seeing them as supine hills and valleys of flesh, bearing out his assertion that, for Courbet, landscape and woman were equated. 16 It’s a point that he continued to make in his art, as in Nude on a Table (2001, p. 107), in which we can survey, starting with the feet at the bottom of the bed, the mounds and hollows of a reclining nude whose genealogical table would include porn photos, the view between parted thighs in Courbet’s notorious Origin of the World, Ingres’s odalisques, and Manet’s famous foreshortened Christ. The breast-shaped lemons and a candelabra of three exhausted candles, dripping with wax, also mix modern and old-master erotic symbols.

From such image banks, especially those culled from Renaissance art, Currin found the anatomical inventions he could translate into modern American womanhood. In a 1996-97 sequence of what look like fashion shoots, each model seems both contemporary and ancient, with paper sexuality startlingly relocated in the present tense. Pelletier (p. 65), a memory of one of the artist’s high-school classmates, and Ann-Charlotte (p. 10), a memory of a famous fashion model of the 1970s, are both found in the act of dressing or undressing, making one think that Botticelli’s Venus had been caught doing a striptease. In Heartless (p. 72), the golden dress has a heart-shape cut-out that unexpectedly offers a peeksaboo of the model’s breasts. In The Cripple (p. 73), the sick joke of The Invalids is seen in a macabre variation: a smiling, full-breasted American beauty, with a cascade of perfect hair, must support herself with a cane. In fact, the bizarre undercurrent of medical handicaps casts a grotesque pall on these anatomies, as if the corporeal fictions of Renaissance nudes, with their attenuated limbs and sinuous torsos, were to be explained factually by a diagnosis of rickets or scoliosis.

By 1998–99 these contemporary women could shed their bras and skin-tight dresses entirely, time-traveling more clearly to the “ideal” nudes of the museums. With opaquely abstract monochrome backgrounds, many of them solid black, they echo a familiar Renaissance format used by, among others, Botticelli and Cranach, a format which, like the fashion photographer’s, forces us to concentrate on the fluent, wiry perfection of the figures’ silhouettes.

Lucas Cranach the Elder (German, 1472–1553) Judith with the Head of Holofernes, c. 1520
Tempera and oil on wood
35 ¾ x 24 ¾ in. (91.5 x 62.9 cm)
Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1911
11.25

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In Three Friends (p. 88), one feels that the three goddesses in a Cranach Judgement of Paris have been abandoned by their heterosexual puror and left to their own devices. But this sexy trio is also a riff on a drawing by Hans Baldung Grien of three lewd, naked witches, one of whom exposes her forshortened bottom. In Currin’s retake of such beauties and monsters, a curious foreplay is introduced, including gentle touches, unraveled golden hair, intertwined limbs, and an in-your-face protrusion of buttocks and thighs that promises secrets about the next act in this perverse Renaissance ballet. More often, however, these nudes come in Au Naturel, not trio, continuing their delicate sexual provocations and slipping uncannily back and forth between memories of highly paid American fashion models with pinup girl pasts to the supernatural beauty of Renaissance Venuses or the sinister sexuality of Renaissance Eves. As awesome, their frozen postures reach strange heights, intermingling the gawkiest, most twisted anatomies from Cranach’s nudes with a wrathlike fragility that extends to the mannered gestures of their elongated fingers. But at the same time, their identities as museum-worthy erotic ideals keep shifting to images in pinup calendars. These constant transformations pertain even to inanimate objects, so that, for example, branches of coral—in Renaissance art, usually a symbol of Christ’s blood that will ward off evil—are transformed into a pink tree that looks like a prop for a modern stage set. This back-and-forth between past and present is equally disarming in a different sequence of nudes and near-nudes, now presented against pale rather than bare backgrounds. Here, the postures and attributes of the cross-bearing, backpacking pinup girls in Hobe and Sno-Bee (pp. 94 and 95) re-create, in a wardrobe of only bra and panties, the traditional religious figure of Saint Catherine, who fords a stream with the infant Christ on her shoulders. Similarly, in a series of female heads of 2001, classical and Christian images seem resurrected as contemporary mutations. Round Head, which borrows the Renaissance tondo form, is a mixture of Venus, Medusa, and the winner of a Miss America pageant, Ino, with a cURN-TAINED background that might be host to a holy image, revives images of suffering Christian martyrs, except that this contemporary saint seems wracked by the mortification of orthodontia. The Clairvoyant (p. 109), with its furrowed brow and upturned eyes, combines the phoniness of a modern spiritualist with the otherworldly anguish of a German Renaissance Magdalene or Madona. It is a tribute to Currin’s thorough re-creation of his sources—whether the skin tones in 1960s grift magazines, the female demons of German Renaissance art, or even modern reviles of old-master realist techniques he had learned from William Bailey, one of his most influential teachers at Yale—that they always remain elusive, leaving subliminal memories rather than offering flat-out quotations.

This gift for total absorption of a wild diversity of images that respects neither art-historical chronology nor pecking orders of high and low art has also made it possible for Currin to reinvent the third category of genre painting. For the better part of the twentieth century, this once great tradition, which could embrace Vermeer and Eakins, had seemed
a lost and trivial cause, firmly rooted as it was in
insignificant vignettes culled from contemporary life
rather than in loftier ambitions that would seek out,
as the pioneers of modernism would have it, the
eternal, universal truths of form and color. But by
the end of the twentieth century, especially in the
United States, the depiction of the ordinary facts of
real people and their daily activities became a man-
date for many younger artists, such as Eric Fischl,
who exposes, among other things, the sexual un-
dercurrents of suburbia. Of course, earlier in the
century, artists had often registered unevenful mo-
ments in contemporary lives—think of Edward
Hopper or George Segal—but Currin’s new read-
ings of American society at the turn of the millen-
num end up looking like the commonplace world as
seen through a funhouse mirror.

Here, the usual definition of genre painting as
“scenes from everyday life” goes wildly askew. Al-
ready in Boys with a Drill, a modest little painting of
1991, inspired by yearbook photos of what the stu-
dents are up to, something is very wrong, but it’s
hard to say what. Two black kids are busy at a ju-
ior experiment in carpentry, but this “scene from
everyday life” projects such an intensity of narrative
focus that the act of drilling turns into something
ominous and secretive. In Guitar Lesson (1993, p. 38),
one of the persistent themes of Western art from
Caravaggio to Picasso, becomes bafflingly strange, as
we watch a middle-aged suburbanite awkwardly ac-
quiring a new hobby. With a fixed expression of va-
cant concentration and with eerily skeletal limbs and
fingers, she holds and strums her stringless guitar,
as surprisingly flat and unreal as a cobalt paper cut-out.

When Currin’s bizarre race of American men
enters these prosaic scenes, everyday life gets odder
still, especially since some of them found their inspiration in the geeks invented for Mad magazine
by the cartoonist David Berg. Sometimes they are
seen as singles, alone and imprisoned in their
domesticity. In The Berliner and The Old Guy (both
1994, pp. 56 and 59), these strange specimens of
murkiness, with their outsized heads, make a close-
up appearance, looking as if they came not from
Currin’s earlier high-school graduation photos, but
rather from a later phase of American education,
perhaps from some out-of-town college yearbook.
 Holding dishrags or seated at a silent dinner be-
fore a bowl of pasta, they seem to have taken over
the roles of suburban homemakers, right down to
their immaculate clothing. Their shirts and collars
are fresh and white; their sweaters feature geomet-
ric patterns as tidy as their wall-hangings. At times,
these rural intellectual types find the women of their

Hans Belding Grant
(German, 1484 – 1543)
The Witches, 1510
Monochrome print, two plates
grey and black
14 7/8 x 10 1/4 in. (37.8 x 26.1 cm)
Louvre, Paris, Collection
Edmond de Rothschild, bequest
1935
© Réunion des Musées
nationaux / Art Resource,
New York
dreams and end up rhapsodically as the nerdier half of an ideal pair, introducing a theme of lovers' bliss explored by Currin in a series of variations of 1993–95. His matchmaking is predictably askew. As in earlier Renaissance traditions that caricature mismatched couples (old and young, beautiful and ugly), he dreams up unlikely combinations — a brooding thinker with a slutish blonde; a teenager in a bathing suit with a dandified country gentleman; or a would-be bride and groom who look more like father and daughter. Moreover, despite their ostensible embraces, these lovers occupy separate worlds, each immersed in private thoughts and each avert the other’s gaze. And often our vantage point is warped, as if we were looking up at a movie from the first row. In fact, these couples seem to replay the tearjerking finales of classic movie formulas, when the lead actor and actress, towering above us as the music swells, are finally united, silhouetted against a glorious harmony of blue sky and white clouds.

With his usual ability to sound other chords of visual memory, some of these canvases look like willfully awful reincarnations of the virtuoso painting traditions that run the gamut from Tiepolo, another one of Currin’s old-master enthusiasms, to such American illustrators as Howard Chandler Christy. Twenty-three years ago (1995, p. 61) sums up these many strange liaisons. Here we become Peeping Toms, stealthily observing from behind a rear view of another odd pair of embracing lovers — a nude young blonde and a freakishly dressed country spiff, sporting a striped jacket and a shirt with huge polka dots, clothing more suited to a clown than to an impassioned lover. And, true to the artist’s word, the glorious sky seems to quote satirically Tiepolo’s celestial skies.

Currin’s exploration of the oddities of contemporary American life kept expanding in the late 1990s. At times, he would continue his erotic fictions, as in The Dream of the Doctor (1997, p. 71), which at first glance looks like a cheerful visit to a rural doctor’s office appropriate to a Norman Rockwell Saturday Evening Post cover. It quickly moves, however, into a potential X-rating, with a mannish female doctor, her closely cropped head half-concealed, applying her stethoscope to the chest of what must be, judging from the elaborate pink lace bra that temporarily dangles over the screen, a patient whose luscious, bare-breasted body we can only imagine.

But in general, in a sequence of canvases from 1999—2001, Currin moved toward more familiar slices of contemporary society, focusing especially on the activities of well-heeled suburbanites, mostly women, enjoying their version of a good time. The results often seem to combine a Norman Rockwell scene of American felicity with what Goya might have produced, had he been resurrected in a posh Connecticut town and asked to update his Caprichos.
those being commentaries on the follies of Spanish society. Oh, rather than middle-aged, women dominate The Addicts (2000, p. 101), in which we see almost a parody of small-town law and order, with a convention of aging locals, led by a very senior citizen, arguing for some neighborhood cause. More often, though, the scenes are of leisure, pleasure, and consumerism, as in The Consignment Shop (2000), where an immaculately groomed housewife has gone antiquing and scrutinizes an old glass vase that may soon be in her shopping bag. Mainly, women dominate these scenes, evoking a cast of happy newlyweds who have just settled into all the comforts money can buy. Occasionally they join the significant men in their lives for, say, a close-up at a buffet table or a meal at Park City Grill (2000, p. 97), whose title refers to a generic upscale restaurant in a Utah ski resort where the most joyful of young and sophisticated blondes can click white-wine glasses with their perfect JFK look-alikes. And in one painting, Homemade Pasta (1999, p. 72), we even find a same-sex couple—al fresco rolled, aprons in place—who are working together in the kitchen to prepare the inevitable gourmet meal and who reflect recent sitcom tolerance for the more prosaic facts of gay American life. Rockwell’s Home for Thanksgiving has been brought up to date.

As with the nodes, these genre scenes seem to be branches off many traditional trees. One thinks not only of Rockwell’s chauvinist, hyperrealist narratives, but of countless scenes of comparably uneventful episodes that may take place in the privacy of a kitchen or living room or in the public spaces of a cafe, the kind that artists recorded everywhere from seventeenth-century Amsterdam to nineteenth-century Paris. But of course, Currin again views these vignettes of modern life through a distorting lens that emphasizes, to the point of caricature, how weirdly unnatural our world has become. A perfect example is Stamford After-Brunch (1999, pp. 2–3), which captures the giddy camaraderie of what appear to be three wealthy suburban housewives who, without their husbands, are filling out their post-brunch afternoon by telling hilarious tales, drinking more white wine, and, most peculiar, letting all their hair down by smoking cigars and — who knows? — confiding sexual secrets. Through the picture window, a snowy winter landscape is disclosed, a bone-chilling view that makes the interior comforts of heat and lightweight clothing look all the more unnatural. We are close here to the kind of bizarre, almost surrealist contemporary America that has captured the imagination of many film directors. Stamford After-Brunch, in fact, might almost be a still from Ang Lee’s Ice Storm, a reconstruction of 1970s America that exposed the undergound sex lives of adults and teenagers in a prim and wealthy Connecticut suburb during a severe winter storm that forced its residents indoors. A similar fascination with the strange rituals and fashions of American life from earlier decades can be seen in Todd Haynes’s Far from Heaven (2002), a movie that, like Currin’s art, is charged with a sinister nostalgia, in this case for the stylized dramas and decor of the 1950s, as defined in the films of Douglas Sirk. Or, there is Alan Ball’s HBO series Six Feet Under, in which the old-fashioned soap-opera format is now used to scrutinize the grotesque public and private lives of what purports to be just another American family. Like these directors, Currin looks at the crumbling myths and icons of twentieth-century America, revealing, as in a warped looking-glass, their bizarre surface and their dark underbelly.

Olivia Birkeland, Barbara Garrick, Patricia Clarkson, and Julianne Moore in Todd Haynes’s Far from Heaven.

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NOTES
3 Jeffrey Deitch, Paz Humen, Pully/Lausanne, Switzerland: FAE-Musee d'ulti, Contemporain, 1993.
7 The relationship of Currie's and Yukjavie's work, to-gether with that of another woman artist, Catherine Howe, is discussed in Barry Schwabsky, "Picturesque & Powerful," Art in America 85, no. 12 (December 1997), pp. 80-85.
9 Ibid., p. 167.