

JUNK ART

Though male artists have been painting the female nude for millennia, when female artists have dared to make explicit pictures of men, they've been criticized or ignored. Now artists like painter **Nicole Wittenberg** are challenging the status quo—to stirring and gorgeous effect. **By John H. Richardson**

● A dude walks into a feminist art show—*bada-bum*. Yes, that is a fully contained joke. The punch line is taking in a show called *The Female Gaze, Part Two: Women Look at Men* (at the Cheim & Read gallery in New York City) and finding yourself confronted by mirror images of the reductive crap men have been throwing at women for centuries. Behind the desk, there's an image of a beach hunk in a smiley-face T-shirt, followed by a Diane Arbus photograph of a "male primitive" with tattoos all over his face. The worst is a yellow carcass by Louise Bourgeois that looks like a cross between a melting penis and, as one critic put it, a "smooshed-up kebab" on a carving post. Cindy Sherman offers, instead of her romantic self-portraits celebrating the infinite play of female mutability, a muscle-bound plastic man-doll covered with hair. None of this makes me feel very good as a man. Which, of

course, may be the point—*bada-bum!*

There are a few positive images. Betty Tompkins is represented by one of her blurry sex close-ups, at once romantic and clinical. Grace Graupe-Pillard supplies a lovely realist portrait of a young artist staring into his cell phone. The great Alice Neel has a painting of a blue-jeaned hippie, probably because the gallery couldn't get her brilliant portrait of the fantasist Joe Gould with three penises—even I find that one funny.

And then I see it: a giant erection lovingly encased in a fist and painted in luscious expressionist sweeps of red and white paint. It's heroic, monumental, gorgeous. There are no other colors, just black and white turned red and white by minimalism and lust, which suddenly seem like a perfect match. *Red Handed, Again* was the title.

So begins my introduction to Nicole Wittenberg. I track her down on the Internet and

learn that she first came to public attention when she was just 24—and still a student at the San Francisco Art Institute—for paintings about suffering from scoliosis as a teenager. "I needed to know what was wrong with me," she explained at the time. Here's how a critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle* described the result: "The young girl in the painting, naked, slim and pale, has ripped her body open to examine her organs. The image is immediately shocking but also strangely beautiful."

Her subsequent rise came fast—in 2012, the American Academy of Arts and Letters gave her its best young figurative painter award, praising her "unusual imagery and freshness." The Guggenheim bought one of her architectural-interior paintings, which evoke small, spare stages, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, acquired her stylized black-and-white portrait of a young woman called *Ann*. She's been featured in group shows curated by artists such as the prominent figurative painter Alex Katz and 1980s art superstar David Salle, known for his own use of sexual imagery in jumbled canvases that loot art history and contemporary life to celebrate information overload. "She's a rare bird," Salle says when I call to ask about Wittenberg. He praises her commitment to reinventing realism—or, as he puts it, "How



Wittenberg in her studio with *Black and White Kiss* (2016)

do you describe a form? Traditionally, you do it by accentuating the lights and darks, which Nicole does in a kind of brutal way.” And he’s impressed with her decision to portray sexually aroused men, a subject that is “actually underrepresented in Western painting in any century,” he says. “People think everything’s been done, but that’s not true.” Wittenberg, Salle goes on, “dares herself to do precisely that which scares her.”

I find Wittenberg’s e-mail address and write her. From the beginning, she’s surprisingly personal and chatty: “What’s wrong with oversharing?!! Isn’t that a big part of being alive? I’m so annoyed by how much New York emulates Europe with all these stiff classist social conventions.” Occasionally, she mentions inviting me to her studio—but every time I try to set a date, she disappears.

Truth is, I have the fantasy of buying *Red Handed, Again* and have been trying to get her to state a price. But she keeps dodging the question. Finally, she hints at the reason: “I must mention, a dick painting may be the most impossible thing to sell, ever.”

That surprises me. Isn’t modern art supposed to be scandalous? What about the shocks of surrealism and cubism? The outraged crowds at the famous Salon des Refusés show of 1863?

Not when it comes to men, she replies. You can paint all the odalisques-reclining-on-a-couch you want, but the movie rule applies: no “pickle.”

Despite the frankness of our exchange, the promised studio visit keeps not happening. I wonder if all the sex talk makes it more unlikely. Isn’t that why we cordon off sex, to contain its disruptive power?

Finally, almost as an afterthought, I mention that my wife, Kathy, also paints male nudes, including one with an erection.

Wittenberg writes back in seconds: “Your wife paints dick pics!?!?!?”

I send her the proof.

“I love it!” she responds.

Two days later, Kathy and I step off an elevator into Wittenberg’s loft. It’s a set decorator’s dream of an artist’s studio: the walls

painted Platonic White, a hammock hanging between two I beams, the neon tumble of Chinatown six stories below. A miniature parrot flies around, occasionally coming to rest, like inspiration, on the artist’s shoulder.

We’re barely inside when Wittenberg starts peppering Kathy with questions about her own work, curious what inspired the portrait I’d e-mailed, a frontal shot of a naked and obviously lustful young man.

As they talk, I get a chance to observe. At 38, Wittenberg is gorgeous in a low-key way you could pass on the street and only register a few steps later: wide-spaced eyes, full lips, hair chopped short as if she’d cut it herself in a mirror. No surprise that she’s modeled for other artists. In manner, she’s both intense and California casual, a mixture of her childhood in Marin County (where her father was a lawyer, her mother an interior designer and teacher) and her spiritual home in downtown New York.

These days, Wittenberg says, she finds sources for many of her paintings on Internet sex sites. Although she didn’t start painting sexual imagery until 2014, she says she started looking at porn around the same time that she decided she wanted to make art: “I was a virgin when I started watching that stuff. I was like, ‘Oh! That’s attractive.’ Even then, at 13, 14, I already was really interested in the Renaissance artists, particularly Venetian painters like Veronese, Tintoretto, and Titian. They were making a lot of paintings of beautiful women, like a prostitute with gold coins falling on her. Women were shown in this very beautiful, very sexualized way that I thought was mysterious and fabulous.”

At the time, Wittenberg was wearing a back brace for her scoliosis. She’d had two major spinal surgeries over a six-year period,



The Countess Zapak (2016)

with long recoveries where she got to gaze out the window and dream. After art school, she spent a year in Italy making sculptures in glass and copying classical paintings, then moved to New York and landed a job staging shows for installation artist Anthony McCall. Working with projectors and moving lights stoked her interest in the function of space and light, ideas she explores in her interior paintings. But her desire to capture a modern sense of urgency prompted her to paint portraits based on images from long-distance Skype conversations with a friend in England.

Then, while diverting herself with the gay site ManHub during a bout of pneumonia, she found herself contemplating sex as a subject. Setting the video to slo-mo, she began drawing the moving images as they crawled across the frame. As it happened, many of the moving images on ManHub were ManSpokes.

This is where I should say something about the film critic Laura Mulvey and her theory about the “male gaze”—that the movie camera itself plays the role of voyeuristic male, implicating all viewers in the act of objectifying women and the world. That’s what most of the critics who saw *The Female Gaze* did. The Daily Beast called it “the best kind of payback,” and the *New Yorker* invoked Freud’s idea of *schaulust*: “the pleasure, always libidinal and sometimes pathological, of looking at someone else.” Some huffy webzine scholar even went double jujitsu: Despite the “potential to open up areas of theorizing about how we look at each other as gendered beings,” the show failed because it reduced men to “the sign of a phallus,” he sniffed. “There are other ways of looking at a woman or a man that do not

“It doesn’t go in the kids’ room. It doesn’t go in the living room. When you have an aggressive subject matter, it doesn’t know its place.”

vantages to staying small. No support staff to pay and no food wasted. One of the *bêtes noires* of chefs everywhere is gauging what ingredients to buy and in what quantities—not knowing how many customers they'll serve on a given night or who will order what from the menu. Chefs who can't master this balance inevitably find themselves without a kitchen to run.

In the restaurant business, “the hours are long, you don't have holidays off, and there's not a lot of money in it,” says Emde, who owns Fish & Game with her husband, Zakary Pelaccio. “If you find a mate outside the industry, they have to know what the industry requires. My husband and I are not side by side in the kitchen every day, and at this point I don't think that would work for us. Anna and Elise seem to have it figured out.”

Yes...but their world is very circumscribed. They live just around the corner from Take Root, arriving at the restaurant six out of seven days a week at 10 A.M. and leaving around midnight. (On days when they don't have dinner service, they're planning menus and paying bills.) “Sometimes it feels like we're existing all on this one block,” Hieronimus admits. They once shut down the restaurant for a few months because they had to make some repairs, and because they were exhausted.

Though the couple insist they've decided to stay small not “out of fear,” I wonder if this is entirely true. I ask Kornack if she's ever been called a control freak. Yes, she says, and adds, “I always believe that instead of pushing away things about yourself that may have a negative connotation, you should say okay, and just own them.”

There's a big gulf between selling out to reality TV and selling out to hire a dishwasher. When I ask Kornack, “Why *not* just hire a dishwasher?” she replies, “This is a studio, the way I see it. Some people have apprentices who clean their paintbrushes; some don't. When I worked at art galleries on Nantucket, there were some who sold their \$22,000 painting and were like, ‘Okay, now I need a staff of three or four.’ And there were others who still don't have any staff. That's just how I do it.” Later, she says more directly, “I just wouldn't want to have someone in my space.” Unless you are Anna Hieronimus, or one of the 12 people who get to partake of this performance art-cum-lovefest-cum dinner-out-in-Brooklyn, three nights a week. ■



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diminish them as merely objects for visual pleasure or ridicule.” He thought Wittenberg's painting was “magnificently angry.”

But Mulvey's theory, like so many academic theories, is a little dopey. Who says that taking visual pleasure in a woman diminishes her? And Wittenberg tells me she doesn't think her painting is angry. It's more “aggressive,” she says, like the work of the male

artists she admires. “That writer is some angry PhD scholar,” she says. “He read too many books and forgot to fall in love.”

Probably the most famous piece of early feminist art—art with a distinct uplift-the-gender message—was Judy Chicago's 1974-79 *The Dinner Party*, the installation of Great Historical Vaginas now on permanent exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum. But Wittenberg introduces me to a group of female artists of the 1960s and '70s who pioneered the painting of sexually explicit images of men as well, and soon I discover that the art world is in the midst of a veritable ManSpoke renaissance. Early last year, the Dallas Contemporary mounted a retrospective called *Black Sheep Feminism: The Art of Sexual Politics*, while the Mary Boone Gallery in New York City featured 1960s-era antiwar artist Judith Bernstein under the title *Dicks of Death*—inspired by the scrawls on the walls of men's bathrooms, she drew cartoon penises shooting bullets or turning into giant menacing screws. Eventually I find my way to the Fight Censorship Group, a girl gang of '60s artists who put this *cri de chatte* in their manifesto: “If the erect penis is not wholesome enough to go into museums, it should not be considered wholesome enough to go into women.”

But Wittenberg's love of sexual material goes deeper than politics or even lust. She's looking for fresh ways to engage art's long history of sexual imagery, from the first cave paintings 12,000 years ago to the lingams of ancient India and the phallic statues of ancient Greece to more modern provocations like Courbet's *The Origin of the World*, a close-up view of a woman's genitals that is still so upsetting it's been banned on Facebook. She's very interested in technical questions like the contrast between “image and surface,” applying high style to subjects that many people consider vulgar. She's also responding to other current artists who are exploring the theme, from Salle and Jeff Koons to Marlene Dumas, a prominent Dutch painter whose earthy subjects range from childbirth to peep shows to, yes, impassioned men. In 2008 and 2009, a Dumas show called *Measuring Your Own Grave* made an influential splash at both the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. And of course, with frank sexual imagery now available on every laptop and with the porn industry outselling Hollywood, Wittenberg is engaging like a journalist with the hot topics and pressing issues (so to speak) of the modern world. As she puts it, “When you're thinking about sex all the time, it has a funny way of wandering into the picture.”

It certainly doesn't hurt that her predecessors are finally starting to sell their paintings; this year, the Carnegie Museum paid \$350,000 for a series of Bernstein's “screw drawings” from the Mary Boone show. Boone's director, Ron Warren, said that while male artists still find it easier to sell explicit work (it's considered “much more aggressive for females to use sexual imagery”), the message of Bernstein's work—its critique of the link between militarism and machismo—made it downright family-friendly. “I saw people bringing in their kids and explaining the work to them.”

When I e-mail Bernstein for perspective, I inadvertently stumble into a minefield of feminist politics by starting with a general question about women who paint sex. “Women who work with sexual imagery are often lumped together, when in essence their aesthetic and message are very different,” she snaps. Maybe

this is because I enthused a little too much about Wittenberg, who rejects “identity art” and the notion that a woman should paint from a female perspective—the closest she's gotten to that is painting the Fox News building like a vaguely phallic still from a Leni Riefenstahl movie.

Wittenberg put me in touch with Betty Tompkins, who was more fun. Still sounding 25 at 68, she laughed her way through most of a two-hour visit to her SoHo studio. She found rejection by all the male-dominated galleries of the '70s “liberating” because she could focus on what she really wanted, which was explosive imagery. “That was in the back of my mind all the time—a charged image. It was too late to do it like de Kooning and Hofmann—they were my heroes—and I didn't want to be anybody's second place.” One day she was flipping through her husband's porn collection, and she framed the shots with her fingers. “I said, ‘Now *that's* a charged image.’”

By now, it's getting late. I've been in Wittenberg's studio for almost three hours. She never seems to tire. She never sits down. She has shown us paintings of a beautiful naked woman straddling a log and paintings of an orgy based on a porn video she found by searching “after school special”—she likes to use weird search terms like “back to nature” or “grassy knoll” because they generate unusual images.

Once she lands on a video she likes, she'll print out 50 different stills at different moments and play with them, “meshing” one drawing to the next. “I'll spend days just, like, distancing myself from the photograph and living it, until the direction of the emotional content” sinks in. “I'd be like, ‘Oh, that image really feels red.’ You know?” Sometimes she's chasing something as simple as a shadow, or a curl of the mouth.

Wittenberg takes us to her newest series: paintings of two men kissing so hard their faces almost merge into one. She's done drawings, monotypes, paintings in black and white and in red and white. The latest is the size of a small car and mostly yellow, with streaks of drippy red that look, in an oddly beautiful way, like oozing blood. She wants to express all the “conditions of the kiss: the unwanted kiss, the loving kiss, the kiss of death, the kiss of Judas, the eternal kiss of God.” Eventually, she wants to do three faces kissing themselves into a single face.

Finally, at my request, she shows us the series of paintings that led to *Red Handed, Again*. She tells the story of the famous painter who first saw them. “I was fussing around, and he took the brush out of my hand and he just pulled it right up as one stroke—‘The dick is one thing,’ he said. ‘Part of painting is making a choice and sticking to it. Commit! Go with your gut!’”

This seems like the right time to ask the question that started this adventure. “You said to me it's the hardest thing in the world to sell these paintings,” I say. “So what happened when you showed them to collectors and gallery owners?”

At last, she sits down. The very question seems to sap her energy. But her rat-a-tat answer reveals her true spirit—repeating her favorite word about 30 times in rapid succession, she says that art curators in both Miami and the Midwest asked for one of her paintings and insisted that Miami and the Midwest were ready for explicit male imagery, eager for it, hungry for it, drooling for it. So she sent a painting out and quickly got the message that Miami and the Midwest weren't quite so eager for it or hungry for it or drooling for it after all. “So it's been sent to Miami and back,

and to the Midwest and back, and now this guy is calling me from Los Angeles for a show in October, and I'm inclined to send him the same dick."

Why?

"Because I feel like it's the most digestible one in the studio—it has nice colors, it's kind of a softer image. It's slightly more decorative."

I look where she's pointing. It's one of her yellow ones, very pretty.

"There doesn't seem to be any real home for any of these," she continues a bit sadly. "It doesn't go in the kids' room; it doesn't go in the living room; it doesn't go in the dining room. Decoration is still an important element for painting, and when you have something with an aggressive subject matter, it doesn't know its place."

But does she intend to keep doing them, I ask, even if they don't sell?

"Yeah," she answers. "I mean, I might die with all these dicks, for all I care."

At that moment, her parrot lands on her shoulder, and Wittenberg breaks into a smile. She takes the bird in her hand and pushes its feathers apart. "Look at those colors," she says. ■



THE PHILOSOPHER QUEEN

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Although Solnit, as she says, "looked like a punk rocker and still was not the greatest communicator with people I regarded as grown-ups," she was given the task of researching and writing about major works of art for the museum's fiftieth-anniversary catalogue. When she finished at Berkeley at 23, Solnit was hired almost immediately as a full-time critic by *Artweek* magazine on the strength of her work at MoMA. She was officially a writer.

IT WAS IN THE EARLY aughts that Solnit started to add overtly political essays to her repertoire, writing predominantly for smaller lefty publications. "I give this to the Bush era," she says, explaining how she wanted to address the "incredible despair around me as the war in Iraq broke out." The specific catalyst came during a banner week in 2003: First, New York University convened a panel that brought together neurologist Oliver Sacks, historian Simon Schama, artist Chuck Close, and Solnit to talk about Eadweard Muybridge, that mansplained subject of her then-upcoming book, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (which would go on to win a Guggenheim Award). Her book *Wanderlust* was an answer on *Jeopardy* ("For \$1,200, this impulse to travel is the title of Rebecca Solnit's book"). And she met Susan Sontag, at a New York Institute for the Humanities lunch. Afterward, Sontag invited Solnit to her apartment, and over hard-boiled eggs with pepper flakes in the famous critic's kitchen, Sontag asked for Solnit's input on a speech she was writing to honor a figure in Israel's anti-occupation movement. At which point Solnit remembers thinking, "Why am I not speaking directly to

the hopes and fears of this very moment?"

The impulse birthed *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, her 2004 exploration of a concept that would become synonymous with the campaign of America's first black president—and which Solnit made available for free as an e-book the morning after Donald Trump's election. (It's since been downloaded 31,500-plus times.) "Here, in this book," she writes, "I want to propose a new vision of how change happens; I want to count a few of the victories that get overlooked.... I want to start over, with an imagination adequate to the possibilities and the strangeness and the dangers on this earth in this moment." The pointillist essays in *Hope in the Dark* unpack a dizzying array of sociopolitical movements, showing how we got from the raising of the Berlin Wall to its dismantling in just 31 years; from a tiny group of "original activists" in London's nascent abolitionist crusade in 1785 to its flowering a quarter-century later in the U.S.; from the 1930s extinction of overhunted wolves in Yellowstone National Park to their return in 1995. "We are not who we were not very long ago," she writes.

When I reach Solnit at home in San Francisco the week after the election, she's the one who seems to need an injection of hope. "This is a massive disruption and crisis, and a lot of things could come of it," she says. "The scary thing is, a lot of what comes of it is up to us."

IN HER THIRTIES, SOLNIT tells me, she and her brother were chatting about how much they both liked to run in Golden Gate Park. He ran only on back trails, he told her, so he could avoid seeing any cars. She was shocked—she ran only on the main road, because she was afraid of lurking men. This, to her, is perhaps one of the most profound and unsettling differences between men and women: the former's propensity for violence, often against the latter.

A few days before I was to meet Solnit for the first time, one of my college friends—a poet who for a few years postgraduation lived just blocks from my Brooklyn apartment—was stabbed to death, at home, by her male roommate. Almost in spite of myself, I tell Solnit about Carolyn—that was her name. I can't comprehend the young man's violence, I say, as anything but the result of a psychotic break. "Part of what I've tried to fight in my feminism is these stories that are exculpatory," Solnit replies. "If it's white men, they had mental health issues." Obviously some do, she continues, but the automatic assumption "avoids discussing how most violence, of every kind, is largely perpetrated by men," she says. "Mental illness, whether depression or psychosis, just disinhibits men. They follow patterns that are built into the culture."

One cause, she argues, is the "great renunciation" demanded by masculinity. "Emotions, expressiveness, receptiveness, a whole array of possibilities get renounced by successful boys and men in everyday life," Solnit writes in *The Mother of All Questions*. This level of repression is dangerous, she believes, making men both heavily armored and extraordinarily brittle.

I thought of Carolyn so many times over the hours I spent talking with Solnit. The Golden Gate Park story stopped me cold, for one, echoing as it does the famous Margaret Atwood line: "Men are afraid women will laugh at them. Women are afraid men will kill them." In a newspaper interview, Carolyn's murderer said that before he stabbed her he'd been disoriented and had asked Carolyn how to use his cell phone; her response, he said, was to ask if he was okay—and to laugh.

While I'm still reeling from the horror of Caro-

lyn's death, the frame Solnit helped me put around it, her willingness to look at the thing straight on, was comforting. "In my taxi on the way over, there was a little scroll across the TV about a man who killed his girlfriend and himself," she says. "We don't talk about it as a pattern, let alone an epidemic. And we so need to. Things become so familiar they're invisible, and part of what you can do is look at it from the outside. I mean, What will they think of us in the future when it's like, 'We had buildings all over America for women and children to hide from fathers and husbands?'" ■



THE MESSENGER

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and occasionally, I'd go with braids—silky locks or jumbo ones. Once while I was in the lounge at my dorm at the predominantly white University of Pennsylvania, I heard a group of white women expressing wonder at my braids, and before I knew it, and without asking for permission, they were running their hands through my hair. I can still remember recoiling at the touch—their fingers now a phantom limb that makes me dread the day when my four-year-old daughter comes home with a similar tale. So when I heard Solange's "Don't Touch My Hair" for the first time, it moved me deeply. It wasn't a feeling of sadness, or stick-it-to-em thrill at her exposure of the everyday entitlement of white people. I felt *seen*.

Columbia University African American studies and English professor Farah Jasmine Griffin says Solange's speak-softly approach reminds her of 1970s singers like Minnie Riperton and Deniece Williams, who achieve an electrifyingly intimate effect by singing in the upper reaches of their vocal range. "Quieting things down calls for a kind of introspection on the part of the artist and the listener," she says. "The music becomes more about black interiority, which to me is about humanity." The bombardment of images of violence against black people is "traumatizing," Griffin says, and Solange's "aesthetic reminds us that we are people who have an interior self that needs to be tended to."

Which is not to say, of course, that there's not a place for what Solange calls "powerhouse vocals," her sister's specialty, after all. Remarkably, 2016 was also the year of Beyoncé's protest album, the chart-topping *Lemonade*, which proudly reclaimed the black female experience as it relates to everything from police brutality and Hurricane Katrina to infidelity and fashion. "Beyoncé has become more verbal, and part of that is the influence of Solange," their mother says. "And Solange has become more confident as a musician. They've clearly influenced each other in good ways."

In fact, it doesn't seem too fanciful to say that *Lemonade* and *A Seat at the Table* coexist in delicious and important conversation with each other, like two sisters whispering the inner secrets of black women for all the world to hear. ■