

## 'THE LAST TABOO IS THE PENIS': JOHN CHEIM ON 'THE FEMALE GAZE, PART II: WOMEN LOOKING AT MEN' AT CHEIM & READ

BY *Tessa Goldsber* POSTED 08/05/16 10:00 AM



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Installation view with works by Louise Bourgeois, Diane Arbus, and Alice Neel.

BRIAN BUCKLEY/CHEIM & READ

["The Female Gaze, Part II: Women Looking at Men,"](#) a group show that runs at Cheim & Read through September 2, is as ambitious in scope as it is in ideology, showcasing work by a wide range of artists—including Tracey Emin, Alice Neel, Diane Arbus, and Jenny Holzer—who have applied a nontraditional lens to viewing and depicting the male figure.

Organized by John Cheim, the show comes seven years after the first edition of the show he put on at his gallery, and tracks a history, from the early 20th century to the present, of representations in which men and the rigid concept of manliness are notions to be turned on their head—and ultimately even laughed at. Several times in the exhibition, the male nude is pared down to its essential parts, a move Cheim likened to the framing that occurs in Gustave Courbet's *Origin of the World* (1866).

I recently met with Cheim at his gallery to hear about curating the show, the function of genitalia in art, and why Tracy Emin reminds him of Amy Schumer. An interview, edited and condensed, follows below.

**ARTnews: When you did "Women Look at Women" in 2009, were you already planning on a second exhibition?**

John Cheim: I didn't think I was going to be doing part two. That was almost eight years ago and I just felt like doing it. It's not like *Kill Bill Vol. 1* and *Kill Bill Vol. 2*.



Lynda Benglis, *SMILE*, 1974.  
BRIAN BUCKLEY/CHEIM & READ

**Many of the works have a certain cheeky, irreverent relationship with the theme. Were you interested in poking fun at the traditional concept of masculinity, or is it more a question of why these works are funny or especially charged in the first place?**

I would say there are a number of works that directly approach the phallus, which is basically the last taboo in Western culture—it's very shrouded and guarded. Certainly female genitalia are commonplace in art, from Wesselmann to Jeff Koons to Picasso, from Courbet's *Origin of the World*. You're seeing younger women that deal with this in a very direct and transgressive way.

Lynda Benglis, she says she's a feminist, but she considers herself a playful feminist. The work is from 1971 and is called *Smile*. This is related to her famous *Artforum* ad, the one she did with the dildo. That caused a firestorm in its time, but it was really in a way her taking control of the phallus, as a power image, and saying, "I'm controlling it."

And Alice Neel, who I just think is a great painter, was really great early on in addressing portraiture in way that had not been done before. She did a great portrait that I wanted to use in the show, but it wasn't available, of the critic John Perrault. And he's splayed on the couch, genitalia completely on view. So we found this, a man in a position sometimes referred to as "manspreading," and then there is a great Diane Arbus of a character in a similar position, which I thought was fun to put next to each other. So you have the woman here looking directly to Diane Arbus, and the man is turned away, so he's become basically the object.



Installation view with Emin's *Is This a Joke*, 2009.

BRIAN BUCKLEY/CHEIM & READ

And this is [*Is This a Joke* by] Tracy Emin, and it makes me think of the movie with Amy Schumer, called *Trainwreck*. If you see that movie, in it, she had that meathead boyfriend that she's trying to—do you recall that scene? Well this makes me think of that. It's what I think of.



Nicole Wittenberg—I've known about her through Alex Katz—asked me to go see her and visit her in her studio. I was not aware of her work before. I think she's a really good painter, and when I went to see her, she said, "I've been looking at a lot of porn lately." Then she got all these paintings of gay male porn, and I thought it was really interesting the way she just turned it upside down. But they are beautiful paintings.



Nicole Wittenberg, *Red Handed, Again*, 2014  
BRIAN BUCKLEY/CHEIM & READ

**The concept of gender as it relates to authorship and viewership looms large over this exhibition. Were you curious as a curator how your own perspective shifted and molded the view of the subject?**

Not by design, through being attracted to their work, [I] have ended up working with a number of artists who are women. So I've thought about these issues. I've worked with Louise Bourgeois, with Lynda Benglis, with Alice Neel, Jenny Holzer, Ghada Amer. And sexuality has to be a part of it when you are working with these people because you do become aware of the history and the limitations that have been put on women historically.

As I said, I see so many shows that strike me, where I'll walk in and the show will be all male artists and the subject is the female artisan or the artist and his muse. So I couldn't help but think about it. Jeff Koons or Tom Wesselmann or Richard Prince, the list goes on. I think people are still uncomfortable with the male nude, and it is because of the power structure. The last taboo is the penis. It is the last thing you're not supposed to see. And why is that? Well, I think it's about control and power.

There was a collector who once told me a story, and he was a speculator collector, so [he was] looking to buy art with the investment in mind. He said, "I have two rules of art: never buy a green painting, and never buy a painting with a willy in it, because it won't have any value." So there you have it.

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#### ARTICLE TAGS

THE FEMALE GAZE  
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FEMINIST ART

JOHN CHEIM