

# Alec Soth's Archived Blog

November 11, 2006

## The perv humor of Currin & Freud

Filed under: [aesthetics](#), [artists](#) — alecsothblog @ 2:21 am



Entertaining Mr. Acker Bilk (1995), John Currin

Just back from a business one-nighter in NYC. Hungry to see new work, I made a whirlwind tour of Chelsea on Thursday. Let's just say that it isn't always healthy for the malnourished to visit an all-you-can-eat buffet. I'm sure plenty of good work crossed my eyes, but I remember little. On Friday I headed for the more serene Madison Avenue galleries. Low ceilings, carpet...my taste buds started coming back. At Gagosian I saw a preview of John Currin's [new show](#). I've always been a fan of Currin. But ever since he became a household name I started second-guessing myself.

[Note: Household name is not hyperbole. Only a couple of weeks ago I saw Currin referenced in the Bridget Jones sequel. In the movie Hugh Grant plays a television reporter who says of Currin: "If you want something smooth on your wall, you could do worse than John Currin. He is about the only contemporary painter who can paint. There's usually something interesting and allegorical, plus of course, there is a very high perv quotient."]

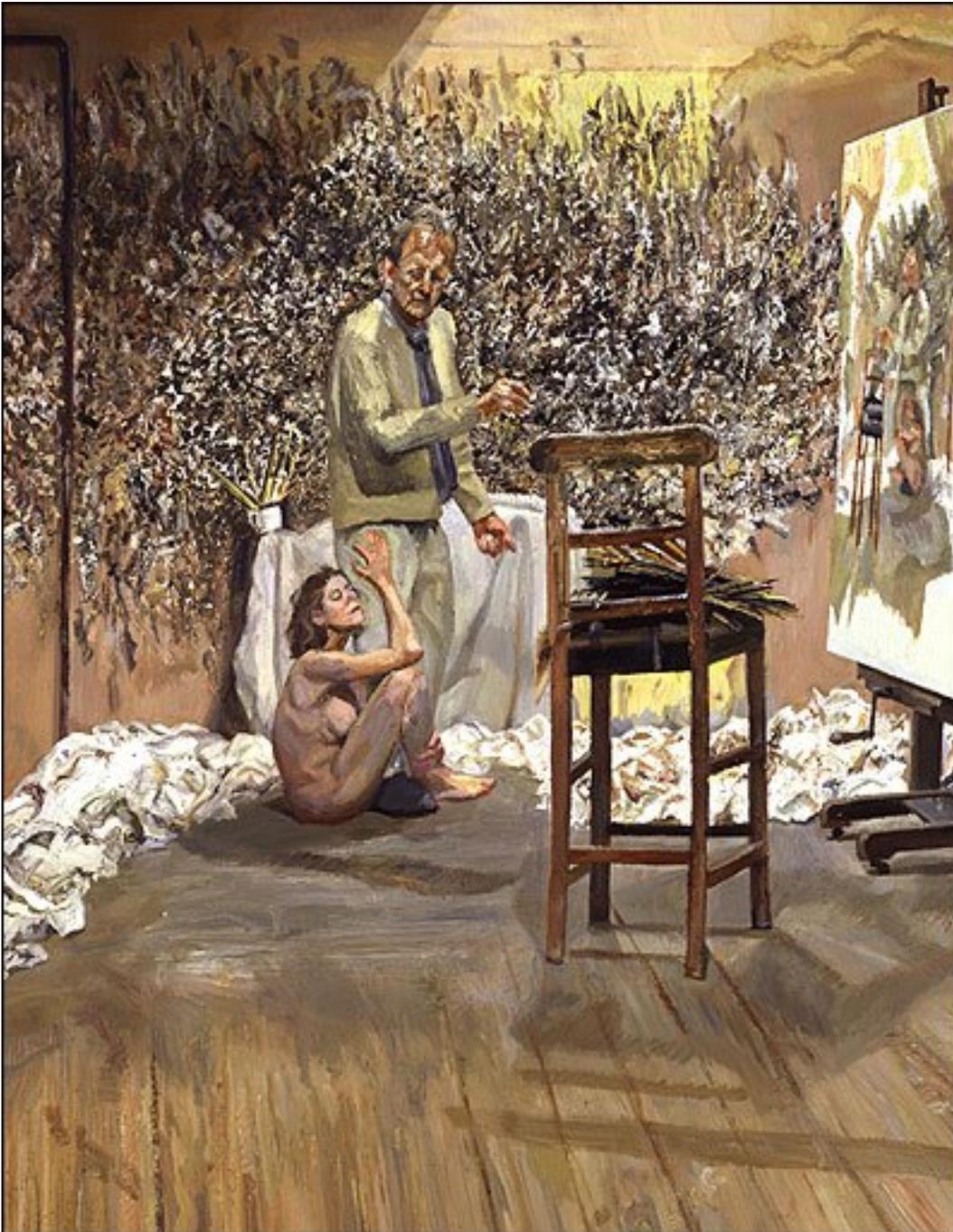
I guess it is Currin's 'perv quotient' that I started second-guessing. Is Currin just a high-end Playboy cartoonist like [Eldon Dedini](#)?



*"Gosh! No wonder you keep making passes at me!"*

After seeing the new show, the answer is no. Not only is he an outrageously talented painter, there is genuine affection in the work. While there is still no shortage of humor (and 'perv quotient'), the work is far from being a one-liner.

After the Currin show I saw Lucien Freud's new paintings at [Aquavella](#). While I tried to experience the work on its own terms, I kept wondering what Freud thinks of Currin. My assumption would be that Freud, the 'serious' painter, would deem Currin too clever. But now I'm not sure. In the Aquavella show Freud included a humorous and Currin-esque painting called *The Painter Surprised by a Naked Admirer*.



Along with the paintings, Aquavella displayed a handful of photographs by Freud's assistant, David Dawson from the book *Freud At Work*.



The book includes a long interview with Freud by Sebastian Smee in which Freud discusses the issue of humor in painting. In this quote, Freud almost sounds like he is speaking of Currin:

"I've thought, looking at paintings that I like, that they've nearly always got a joke in them, of sorts. With Ingres, for instance, it's in nearly everything. That feeling of 'Is this serious?' It's to do with extreme things, to do with his attitude to women, the richness of people. You can't help thinking, 'This isn't quite...' You know? But it's not a literary thing – it's absolutely visual."

- Ten people respond to *The Painter Surprised by a Naked Admirer* [here](#)
- Freud's assistant, David Dawson, talks about Life with Lucien [here](#)
- More 'perv' humor by Lisa Yuskavage on view [here](#)
- More on Playboy cartoonist Eldon Dedini [here](#)

## 10 Comments

1. I'd still take thee Billy Childish over them both, and I wouldn't blink a perv eye about it...

*Comment by [harold hollingsworth](#) — November 11, 2006 @ [8:40 am](#)*

2. OK, I'm going to focus in on the perv stuff, and try to provide a few links to another Playboy cartoonist of note.

Eldon Dedini's cartoons definitely have a more painterly look to them, but John Dempsey is another of my favorite Playboy cartoonist. He even has a [page on Artnet](#).

And this is [Playboy Press' collection of Dempsey work](#).

*Comment by [Christian](#) — November 11, 2006 @ [1:47 pm](#)*

3. Freud can a really uneven painter, despite his stratospheric reputation here in the UK.

His smaller works like his portraits, head studies and single nudes are often absolutely amazing; but his bigger set-piece multi-figure paintings often seem to me weirdly wonky and overblown. He seems to make up composition and perspective on the hoof.

But he's one of the few painters I know who's work can look fantastic from the far end of the gallery.

Currin just looks like a bad one-liner to me.

*Comment by [guybatey](#) — November 11, 2006 @ [4:27 pm](#)*

4. The photo looks better than the painting.....

*Comment by [Rgate](#) — November 11, 2006 @ [4:37 pm](#)*

5. Alec – I think you might like Donald McGill's work – the archetypal British saucy postcard – real connections to both Currin and Botero:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald\\_McGill](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald_McGill)

*Comment by [guybatey](#) — November 11, 2006 @ [4:38 pm](#)*

6. Offtopic, but it seemed to belong here more than in an email to "studio@alecsoth.com": I would be very interested in your response to this piece:

<http://bostonreview.net/BR31.5/linfield.html>

*Comment by [Bill](#) — November 12, 2006 @ [12:31 am](#)*

7. And not a word of Balthus. Schjeldahl wrote a somewhat ineffectual (I thought) condemnation of that guy (dealing with perversity), but I can't find it now.

In lieu of that, and for reference, the very famous piece Orwell wrote on Donald McGill.

[http://www.george-orwell.org/The\\_Art\\_of\\_Donald\\_McGill/0.html](http://www.george-orwell.org/The_Art_of_Donald_McGill/0.html)

*Comment by [zbs](#) — November 13, 2006 @ [3:04 pm](#)*

8. ah yes, Balthus, nice pick, good recall, his paintings always jar me into a funny place!

*Comment by [harold hollingsworth](#) — November 14, 2006 @ [1:44 am](#)*

9. Alec, thanks for the news on the Currin and Freud shows. There's a new book out by Richard Halpern that links Currin's particular kind of perversity to Norman Rockwell's influence. Halpern connects Eric Fischl to Rockwell in the same way, and might have linked Lucien Freud to Rockwell also. (Full disclosure: I was the editor for Halpern's book at the University of Chicago Press. It's titled Norman Rockwell: The Underside of Innocence.) Halpern's argument is basically that Rockwell raises themes of voyeurism in his paintings while disavowing them through an elaborate staging of innocence. The book is not quite as academic as that sounds (Halpern wears his Freud—that is Sigmund Freud—lightly) and the argument is ultimately in the service of taking Rockwell as a serious and complex artist. I'm not sure, but maybe his account of Rockwell will make us look differently at mid-century photographers who were after similar innocence-effects.

*Comment by [Alan Thomas](#) — November 15, 2006 @ [10:37 am](#)*

10. this doesnt really fit anywhere, but when de kooning was painting his women, he clipped and hung dedini cartoons in the studio

*Comment by [Anthony](#) — November 16, 2006 @ [9:29 pm](#)*