

**NEW YORK
FAX**

MAR 30 1994 06:50PM FROM DAVID HUMPHREY

John Currin at ANDREA ROSEN, 25 January–5 March
Lucian Freud at METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, 16 December–27 March
Hannah Wilke at RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS, 8 January–19 February

John Currin's new paintings promote anxieties about the connection of the face to an individual's psychology. Currin's work previously consisted of a highly conventionalized presentation of types, like those found in high school yearbooks or commercial portraiture. His new, ostensibly more "expressive" works establish similar rhythms between the individual and the generic; an uneasy psychology quickly emerges between the artist, his subjects, and the spectator, especially concerning the power relations in sexual coupling. What does Currin think about his subjects? It would be naïve to speculate about the thoughts of these fictional characters, but their conjured specificity invites us to begin a relationship with them, leaving Currin not far away.

The Never-Ending Story (1994), like many works in the exhibition, shows a ruddy, blond-bearded man with a younger female companion. He stares earnestly off-frame while she gazes up with nubile attentiveness. This dapper Mr. Important strikes a pose of self-possession while demonstrating his possession of the woman's affection. Nearly all of Currin's paintings of couples contrast the male's autonomy with the female's dependence. Even in those paintings where the couple's mutual gaze turns inward, the woman hangs on or leans into the man. The sitters' untroubled self-consciousness leaks into each painting's organization. It is as if Currin were acting as an obliging commission-artist for these fictional subjects. The accomplished thrift-store conservatism of Currin's facture renders Mr. Special Somebody's radiant charisma and expansive potency as a pathetic self-advertisement. The shrewd fellow acts like he has it all—except that he does not exist. He aspires only to be a representation. In this respect, Currin remains elusive, paint-

ing representations of representations of types. A deadpan urbanity allows these paintings to pose as jokes, provocations, or something potentially earnest.

Some critics have noted what they see as Currin's condescension or mockery of his subjects. While the history of portraiture could be characterized as a general honoring or memorializing of its subjects, there also exists a tradition of cruelty in the act of representation. Forms of realism and caricature both emphasize the imperfections of subjects and eschew idealization—Currin upends this discourse by producing caricatures of the idealizations his imperfect subjects attempt to project.

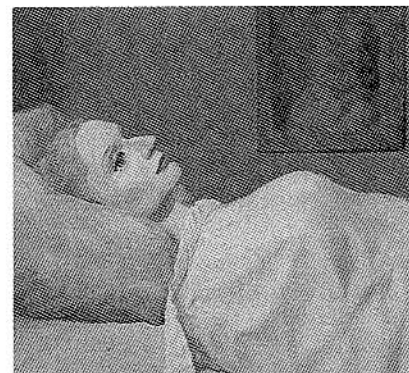
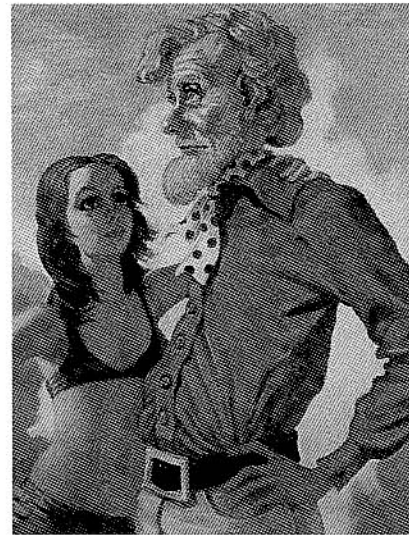
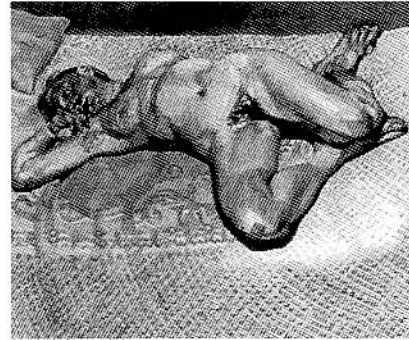
Lucian Freud, an artist whose popular media attention is hard to ignore, paints with a completely unidealized relationship to his subjects. In *Blond Girl on a Bed* (1987), for example, Freud laboriously builds and revises the mass of the woman's body; the seamless continuity of its surface is interrupted by accumulated bumps of painterly crust. The girl's bent position and flushed extremities highlight her awkward nakedness. He turns the act of observation into an austere power that reigns in, as it seeks to represent, the human body. Freud's paintings torture his subjects into existence. The overbearing force of his gaze and its labored translation into impastoed paint conjures sitters onto the canvas as brute matter. The metaphoric equivalence he constructs between flesh and paint, rather than illuminating the feelings of his sitters, speaks of their existence unconnected to any social context, other than the oddly incarcerative one with Freud in his unadorned studio. The paintings nonetheless articulate an unbridgeable gap between the artist and

Hannah Wilke
February 20, 1992/August 18, 1992: #7, 1992-93
Chromatic supergloss prints
2 panels: 47-1/2" x 71-1/2" each
Photo: Dennis Cowley

his subjects. Each sitter's enforced immobility and intensified specificity, their deanimated status as a still life, anticipates what will eventually be true—that they each will be dead.

Hannah Wilke's final series of works, "Intra-Venus," speaks from a time immediately prior to her death in 1993. With the help of her husband Donald Goddard, Wilke created life-sized photographs of herself during her treatment for lymphoma. These documents, alongside the images and objects surrounding them in the exhibition, evidence the deformation of her body wrought by illness and its treatment, as well as Wilke's complex relationship to her own physical decay. *Brushstrokes* places bunches of the artist's hair, lost during treatment, in picture frames. *March 18, 1992* presents four bandages from a "bone marrow harvest." The precise dating of the works chronicles and memorializes a grotesque medicalized dying as well as Wilke's irrepressible vitality throughout that process. Her art-making becomes an intense form of living, and an extension of the terms and preoccupations of her life's work. These images have a retroactive effect on interpretations of her earlier body-performance photographs, functioning as an epilogue to what is now starting to acquire an almost narrative structure. The consistent depiction of her nakedness over the course of her career navigates through the dynamics of public and private relations, exhibitionism, narcissism, feminism, and sexual politics. The act of undressing becomes a kind of dressing-up under extreme duress. Wilke invariably treated the public gaze as a medium in which she vacillated between provocation and confession, a playful yet deadly serious game. The camera and its surrogate—our attention—acquire a kind a magic potential in Wilke's hands, establishing an unstable relation of power that is both pleasurable and deforming.

Wilke's life-long commitment to depict her naked body in public has a political component. These last images testify to the voicelessness of physical pain. The silence of the pictures is highlighted in a pair of open-mouthed photographs, *June 10, 1992/May 5, 1992*, in which the raw and bloody inside of Wilke's mouth and plugged nose goes from bad to worse, suggesting what nineteenth-century author J.K. Huysmans called the "useless, unjust, incomprehensible, inept abomination that is physical pain." Pain resists language, and perhaps even destroys it. The mute indignity of suffering usually causes people to shrink from the public gaze and urges culture to quarantine the dying. Wilke's earlier documentation of the death of her mother sought to heighten the living within dying. These last works, yet again, are a dramatic substantiation of her specific certainties of sex, death, and pain. As opposed to a great deal of contemporary art that proceeds from doubt or ironic distance, this art is an elegiac testament to certainty.



David Humphrey is a painter who shows at McKee Gallery. His New York Fax appears regularly in *Art issues*.

Lucian Freud
Blond Girl on a Bed, 1987
Oil on canvas

John Currin
The Never-Ending Story, 1994
Oil on canvas
38" x 30"

John Currin
Girl in Bed, 1993
Oil on canvas
30-1/4" x 34"
Photo: Fred Scruton