

Marc Dennis: “Paint is sex. Photography is not sex.”

By Kayla Tanenbaum

Looking at his work quickly, you’ll probably think Marc Dennis is a photographer. Look a bit closer, though, and there’s something a bit off about the scenes he portrays: destabilizing and hyperreal, infused with a manic energy. His most recent solo show, “An artist, a curator and a rabbi walk into a bar...” plays with themes of psychology, human behavior and art itself, all finished with a glossy, colorful sheen. The exhibit consists mainly of Dennis’ paintings of famous paintings (think Picasso, Corbet, Caravaggio) with silhouettes of female viewers placed between you and the work, interrupting your experience to the original work as you are forced to consider theirs.

Paintings within paintings, open-ended narratives, meta-jokes — Dennis’ work is smart and slightly subversive. TBQ talked to him about iconography, the art history canon, and why painting is just so much sexier than photography.



Mark Dennis, *The Necessity of Judgement*, 2013. Courtesy of the Artist and Hasted Kraeutler, NYC.

TBQ: I think your work has a very voyeuristic quality. What are you trying to achieve with that effect?

Marc Dennis: My favorite painting in the world is probably *Las Meninas* by [Diego] Velázquez. I think what he does more than anything is to create this invisible foreground where you're actually a participant in the paintings as opposed to a passive witness. In that painting where everybody seems to be staring out at you, there's still some element of voyeurism, and I just simply wanted to take that idea and to push it and to make it a little more tongue in cheek, because I think the art world lacks a sense of humor and I think I'm a funny guy.

And what do you think this painting [The End of the World] says about female genitals?

What's more intriguing about this is that we have to imagine them. When I went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2008 to see the Corbet retrospective, somebody actually stepped directly in front of me and stood like that, and I thought it made it more interesting because it all of a sudden elevated it in to a humorous light.

I also get the sense that you're playing with iconography. You're taking hugely canonized works and putting people right at the glory spots, if you will.

I think what's iconic in the art world is that people are always stepping in front of us. That the stance and the pose and the position alone has become iconic. We are always looking at art from behind someone else's head. Nowadays with people's phones — it's more about *your* experience *with* the art being recorded in your own private little mobile device.

Do you find that our constant recording of art interferes with the way that we're supposed to interact with art?

I look at the glass half full. I think it's not interference; I think it's participation. It's included a lot of people who have never really considered looking at art.

Do you look at art that way? Do you take photos of of the works?

I take photos of people looking at the art.

To produce art, though. I think the hyperrealistic quality of your work could be achieved through photography. I actually didn't realize you were a painter when I was just looking at the images.

I think we're all photographers. But we're not all painters. I think a paintbrush has way more magic than a camera. Paint is sex. Photography is not sex. Seduction, maybe. Push paint around with some linseed oil — it's an orgy.



Marc Dennis, *Uncontrollable Beauty*, 2013. Courtesy of the Artist and Hasted Kraeutler, NYC.

One of the paintings that looks especially photorealistic is *Uncontrollable Beauty*.

The idea was to create a sculpture and have it on this floor. But instead of making a sculpture — because I'm not a sculptor — I made a painting of my idea of a sculpture.

So your work is kind of multimedia. Even though it's not.

That's a good way of putting it. I'm playing with your senses. People ask me sometimes, "Where is this sculpture in real life? Like, where does it exist?" And I say, "Right there." And they're like, "What do you mean?" I'm like, "That's my idea of a sculpture."

So you think you can totally and completely transcend the flatness of painting?

Bingo. Which is also why I'm putting people between you and the work. You have to imagine what's between.

Before when I asked you which was the most difficult to do, you answered me in a sort of technical way. But I'm wondering —

I love where you're going. Maybe the one I shouldn't have done? *The Arousal of Admiration*.

Do you think you're being cheeky or disrespectful?

Totally cheeky.

Where's the line?

Disrespectful is in your mind, not mine. All I know if Caravaggio walked in the door today he would say, "That's fucking great." I love Caravaggio a lot. I think it's Caravaggio of anyone *distinctly* has an erotic tension in his paintings, so I wanted to play with that. In a way I'm also being respectful, 'cause I'm not putting a penis in your face. I'm not putting a vagina in your face.

Yeah, but if I say, "Don't look at my left foot," the first thing you do is think about my left foot, right? It's kind of the same thing — you put a head in front of a crotch...

Okay, that's an argument. I'll take that.

In looking at all these pieces I'm forced to think of my relationship with these great masters of ours and the great works that have been canonized.

I want to enable to viewer, to encourage her to consider her relationship to not just my painting but to the painting that someone else is standing in front of. I'm taking art history, poking at it, biting at it, and tugging at it.

How do you feel about painting such famous works? Because I know you said you're not trying to imitate the masters, but it takes some balls to reproduce Caravaggio's cupid.

All paintings from initial stage on learn to mimic nature, learn to capture the outside world on an inside flat plane. I think the idea of mimicry has a lot of potential to open up new doors. And I thought, "Well if I'm going to mimic anything, forget nature; I'll just mimic what nature has produced," as we are, you know, we are nature. I really *admire* Caravaggio. I admire mythology. I admire folklore, so this is called *The Arousal of Imagination*.



Mark Dennis, *The Arousal of Admiration*, 2013. Courtesy of the Artist and Hasted Kraeutler, NYC.

Do you come up with a title before you paint to guide the image?

Oh, titles come way after. Months sometimes. Never, never during, never before. *Never*. Once you title something, too, you're also lending a pathway; you're shoveling the walk and you're saying, "Come this way."

Well, a title is a way to control the viewer's response to what you're producing.

I've been told I'm a little controlling.

I can see that, especially in the way you play with perspective. If I were really in a museum, if I were just a bit off, the angle wouldn't look like she's giving Cupid a blow job. But here, no matter where I stand...

Exactly. And the same thing with a portrait — no matter where you go in a room they're staring at you. What did you think of this one?

This is Damien Hirst, right? I guess I thought, "Why is Damien Hirst so wealthy?"

There you go. Perfect. Because this shark tank is at least \$30 million. Who knew what the shark stood for? But a shark that size — that monstrous — is kind of aggressive. It's kind of arrogant. Walking through [the exhibit] you think, "Is it really beautiful?" I really care about beauty. I wanted to take the idea of this massive spectacle — this arrogant spectacle — and reduce it.

You said that you don't find this piece beautiful. But do you think that you've rendered it beautiful by painting something not beautifully?

Absolutely. This is my favorite color.