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Betty Tompkins

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Rodolphe Janssen is pleased to announce Betty Tompkin's forth solo project with the gallery from January 18th to March 17th 2018.

Betty tompkins began painting large scale, photorealistic airbrush paintings of penetrations and masturbations in 1969.

Beside the feminist content of her work, her intention from the start was to have two distinct elements which would allow the abstract and the sexual content to coexists equally in the work. She achieved this by cropping the images in such a way that only the explicit sexual parts remain, without heads or other body parts.

After some group shows in the early 1970's, her work remained widely overlooked by the critics and art market due to its subject matter. In 1973, two of her works were held and confiscated by French customs for censorship reasons.

In 2003, Tompkins was invited by the New York curator Bob Nickas to take part in the 7th Biennale de Lyon which brought extraordinary attention to her work. After that, the Centre Georges Pompidou acquired Fuck Painting #1 (one of the two paintings that had been censored in 1973) for its permanent collection.

Since the late 1960's, Betty Tompkins has been painting her Fuck, Cunt or Kiss Paintings, studying different mediums going from airbrush to stamps, graphite powder or fingerprints. She imposes a distance with her explicit subjects, or as she says : « I see something intimate made monumental - we see a visual we don't usually see in a medium we don't expect. »

About the artist :

Betty Tompkins (born in 1945 in Washington D.C. USA) lives and works in New York, NY USA.

Her works have been shown at Kunstraum Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria; The FLAG Art Foundation, New York, NY USA; The Hall Art Foundation | Schloss Derneburg Museum, Derneburg, Germany; Fortnight Institute, New York, NY USA; Künstlerhaus Bremen, Bremen, Germany; Dallas Contemporary, Dallas, TX USA; Houston Museum of Modern Art, Houston, TX USA; Stamford Museum & Nature Center, Stamford, CT USA; PS1, New York, NY USA; Juniata Museum of Art, Huntingdon, PA USA and The Biennale de Lyon 2003 Lyon, France.

Her works are in some important collections such as The Brooklyn Museum, New York, NY USA; Allen Art Museum, Oberlin, OH USA; Centre Pompidou, Musee National d'Art Moderne, Paris, France; Islip Art Museum, East Islip, NY USA; Museum Of The City Of New York, NY USA; Stamford Museum, Stamford, CT USA and Zimmereli Art Museum, New Brunswick, NJ USA.

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Art in America

Beyond the F Word: An Interview with Betty Tompkins, by Wendy Vogel, Art in America, February 3, 2016

Betty Tompkins is no stranger to controversy. The 70-year-old artist started making her “Fuck Paintings”—large-scale photorealistic renderings of vaginal penetration—in 1969. The grayscale works’ source material was outlawed pornographic images. Earning dismissal from gallerists, the ire of the anti-pornography feminist wing, denial of entry into France (in 1973) and criticism for their clinical detail, Tompkins’s “Fuck Paintings” were known only to a handful of people until the early 2000s. Since then, they’ve had celebrated presentations, including at the 2003 Lyon Biennale.

Now, several examples from Tompkins’s iconic series are on view in “Black Sheep Feminism: The Art of Sexual Politics” at the Dallas Contemporary (through Mar. 20). The four-artist exhibition, curated by Alison Gingeras, considers the fringe feminism of Tompkins, Joan Semmel, Anita Steckel and Cosey Fanni Tutti. The artists used explicit figuration in their work, defying the anti-objectification edict of many second-wave feminists. The exhibition also parses the fractious nature of the ‘70s movement, staging conversations among artists who didn’t always see eye to eye four decades ago.

At New York’s FLAG Art Foundation, Tompkins is debuting “WOMEN Words, Phrases and Stories” (through May 14), a new suite of 1,000 paintings portraying words describing women against stylized backgrounds. For this work, Tompkins sent out emails soliciting phrases commonly used to describe women, first in 2002 and then again in 2013. The resulting salon-style hang of paintings, which range in size from 4 by 4 inches to 36 by 16 inches, produces loose configurations of meaning among words. Ranging from “Venus,” “divine” and “Baberaham Lincoln” to “burned at the stake,” “castrating bitch” and “easy lay,” the paintings provide an easy springboard into conversation about the state of gender and its oppressions today.

A.i.A. spoke to Tompkins at the FLAG Art Foundation about the arc of her career, remaining “theory-free,” and why her new “WOMEN Words” paintings are among her most dangerous to date.

WENDY VOGEL How did you start the process of collecting the words for “WOMEN Words, Phrases and Stories”? I read that there was an open call.

BETTY TOMPKINS I used to do figurative pieces that were composed only with language. If it was a cow, the piece would say “cow cow cow,” and the lightness and darkness within each letter formed the volume. In 2002 I sent a message to my email list: “I want to do another series using language. This time about women. Send me your words and phrases about women. If it’s not in English, send me a translation. Thank you.” I got around 1,500 unique words and phrases in seven languages. It was fascinating to me. Then when I actually started to paint them—which wasn’t until Jan. 1, 2013—I wondered if language had changed. So I sent the email out again and I got even more words and phrases. People sent stories, too. They made comments. It was very personal. But the same four words were the most popular. Actually nothing has changed.

VOGEL They were bitch, slut . . .

TOMPKINS . . . bitch, slut, cunt and mother. Go figure. That part was really discouraging. These words

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came from men and women—invective and praise in equal measure. There are some that when you read them, you know they're written by a guy. Like that one: "Women are asymmetric, unbalanced, curved and inside out, outside in. This is my point of view. Please let me know. Kisses." A guy sent that to me. He's basically called me a nutcase.

VOGEL When you were composing these paintings, did you start by deciding on the different background treatments?

TOMPKINS I went through so many painting processes. Part of the point was that my own work is already defined. It sits within certain parameters. I thought, Here's this project that's going to go on for God knows how long—as it turned out, 33 months of solid painting—so I might as well have a lot of fun with it and do different things. Somewhere along the line I also got the idea that I wanted to own some of the big boys. There are some Pollocks. I have the Richter painting film, so I wanted to do some Richters. There are a bunch that are Abstract Expressionist-ish. And there are some slashed Fontanas in here, too.

VOGEL And of course some are in your signature style, too.

TOMPKINS Oh, absolutely. You've got to own yourself. If I can't own myself, who will?

VOGEL How long were you working on the previous language series, the one that played with light and dark?

TOMPKINS I did those in the late '70s for about five or six years, immediately after the "Fuck Paintings" [1969-74], and then I moved away from that. I was never really done with those paintings.

VOGEL What prompted you to want to start working with language again?

TOMPKINS I did one painting of the Venus de Milo called Slut. I had just been in a show about the Venus de Milo ["A Disarming Beauty: Venus de Milo in 20th Century Art" at the Salvador Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, Fla., 2001], and when I got the catalogue I was thinking, What a slut! Anybody can do anything with her!

Right after that happened I was in the 2003 Lyon Biennale, courtesy of Bob Nickas, who had fought for me to be in the show. I said to my husband Bill, "I should do something for Bob to thank him. Let's get a stamp made that says Lyon on it, and I'll draw some of the images that are in the show." I made three drawings with the stamp and then the part that said Lyon fell off. I decided I would then start making some cunt images with stamps. I needed to find someone who would make the stamps, because the Lyon stamp fabricator wouldn't do it. It was against his principles. I was so impatient to get started that I looked through my own stamps. I found one that said COW and one that said CENSORED, from 1976. I did six or seven drawings with them, and each one got more complicated and dense. After I worked with the stamps on canvas for about two and a half years, I had tendonitis in both my arms. It was clear that I couldn't do it anymore so I moved on to the airbrush. Then I had my list of words, and I picked it up and started 11 years later. Some ideas take a while!

VOGEL How does the divide between language and image function in your work today? In the 1970s feminist discourse took a binary viewpoint to text and image—woman as the speaking subject vs. the passive object to be looked at.

TOMPKINS That was the attitude of one very dominant group of feminists. I was aware of them, but I

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was never invited to any meetings. I am free of theory, which I consider a blessing, to tell you the truth. My impression over the years was that you had to go to the consciousness-raising meetings and read the books. I read a lot of material on my own. Some of it I thought was really revolutionary, some of it was stuff I thought all my life, and some of it I didn't agree with. I didn't agree with the un-pleasure principle. I didn't think that was what life was about.

VOGEL Tell me more about the un-pleasure principle.

TOMPKINS It's when you take something that everyone wants to do and make it a negative and find a political framework for it. As far as women being treated as objects, well, it's a whole new generation and I don't see that much has changed, which makes me very unhappy. I worry very much about your generation, that you have no idea how much of a backlash there can be.

VOGEL When you haven't seen the other side it's easy to assume that certain kinds of progress, like reproductive rights, can't really erode.

TOMPKINS Exactly, and they already have in many states. It's absolutely horrifying to listen to these people talk about what laws they want to pass, what laws they have already passed.

VOGEL I'd like to know more about "Black Sheep Feminism" in Dallas, which features four artists—you, Joan Semmel, Anita Steckel and Cosey Fanni Tutti—who were often shunned for working with explicit imagery during the second-wave feminist moment. Did you know the other artists in the '70s?

TOMPKINS No, I didn't. I met Anita Steckel around 2003 or 2004. She and Joan Semmel and I were all showing with Mitchell Albus at the time, so we all kind of knew each other.

VOGEL Steckel and Semmel were part of an artist group called Fight Censorship in the '70s. Were you aware of it?

TOMPKINS No, I wasn't, and I was censored in 1973 by the French! It's very interesting to me in retrospect how isolated I was, considering what was going on around me. Your generation is more of a teamwork, lean-in generation. You somehow missed learning the attitude of "compete at all costs." In my generation and the generation before me, there was so little room for women that I think people thought that if you got something you kept it to yourself and you didn't share. I never had that attitude about it, but it would be really hard not to notice it from everybody else. I attribute a lot of what was going on at the time into that absolute lack of opportunity generally.

VOGEL The images that you were using in the "Fuck Paintings" were from pornography that was then outlawed.

TOMPKINS That's correct. My first husband was 12 years older than me, so let's just say he had more mature, developed interests. He lived in Everett, Wash., at the time, and he sought out ads for porn in the back of magazines. You could send a cashier's check to a PO box in Singapore or Hong Kong. Because it was against the law to send pornographic images through the mail in the United States, he got a PO box in Vancouver to have the pictures sent to. When he figured enough time had passed, he'd drive up to Vancouver, pick up the envelopes, hide them in the car and drive back across the border hoping he'd look like an all-American boy. Which he was!

So I was looking at the pictures one day. They were super tiny—2 by 3 inches, 3 by 4 inches. Formally

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they were mind-bogglingly gorgeous. Plus they were really charged images.

VOGEL What kind of work were you making before?

TOMPKINS I was coming out of Abstract Expressionism. That was my first love as a painter. I wanted to paint something that was abstractly and formally beautiful and challenging and varied. But when I saw the images my husband collected I said, "I'm doing these." And I started painting them the next day.

VOGEL Why did you start out working so big?

TOMPKINS I settled on 84 by 60 inches. At the time I had an Econoline van, and that was the biggest you could fit in the van. Very practical!

VOGEL The "Women Words" series started out with you working on 4-by-4-inch canvases, which is probably as close as you can get to the size of those original photographs.

TOMPKINS That didn't occur to me, but yes, you're right. Originally I thought all 1,000 of my series would be 4 by 4, but then I realized I had words that wouldn't fit. So I started moving on up.

VOGEL The sweet and nasty messages in the sans-serif font make me think of Valentine parody heart candies today.

TOMPKINS I was thinking if you took a cunt and packaged it and put it on a supermarket shelf, it would be about that size. It was not something I intended, but at a certain point Bill said it to me and I thought the words worked like brand names!

VOGEL I'm curious about how much the reception around your work, particularly the "Fuck Paintings," has changed so much over the years.

TOMPKINS Well, they disappeared for thirty-odd years. No one saw them. So when they were shown again in 2002 [at Mitchell Alpus] it was not just one, but three generations of people who had no idea about them. And even in my generation, there were five or six, maybe 12 people tops, who had seen them.

VOGEL Even formally the reception has changed. I read that a Texas critic in 1975 thought they had no value because they were so. . .

TOMPKINS Graphic. . .

VOGEL Yes. And that they looked like a medical textbook.

TOMPKINS That was the exact phrase. I was going to have my calling card say that. They were shown in an artist-run space. The person who put me in the show was Paul Schimmel, who had been a high school student of mine. At the time he was working for James Harithas [at the Contemporary Arts Museum of Houston.]

VOGEL What's interesting is that in the 1970s, the "Fuck Paintings" were critiqued for their graphic nature, and now the way the works are talked about is completely different, both in terms of their formal beauty and also the nostalgia for this era of soft-focus pornography.

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TOMPKINS It has completely flipped and I agree with you entirely.

VOGEL You talked about being theory-free and not being involved in consciousness-raising groups in the '60s and the '70s. Would you describe putting together this series as collaborative or community-building?

TOMPKINS I was having a moment of being tired of being alone in my studio, and this was an easy way to reach out and satisfy a curiosity I had about the language describing women without being responsible for the words. I was curious to see what would come in when I did the open call. When I first started to paint the words, I thought they were among the most dangerous paintings that I had ever done. By now I am so inured to the language, but in the beginning I would think, "I can't believe that I am painting this! This is an awful, awful thought! If someone said this to me I would deck them, without question."

VOGEL Do you feel that today these words have more violence than images, because we're in such an image-saturated world?

TOMPKINS I think we're also in a language-saturated world. People still get upset when they see my paintings. I just can't be responsible for their actions.

VOGEL Do you have any thoughts about the new wave of figurative painting?

TOMPKINS It never went away. Every year we try to kill off painting. What death throes are left?

VOGEL Now it's the death of abstraction.

TOMPKINS There's always action and reaction. I see it as a cycle that will reverse itself in a short period of time. The art world is always wondering what's fresh looking and what's new. There are some people who get bored very easily. That's their problem. My problem is to keep myself engaged in my studio. It's very easy. I know what my job is: Get up in the morning and do something.

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FROM CENSORED TO CELEBRATED: AN INTERVIEW WITH BETTY TOMPKINS, by Ana Finel Honigman, ArtSlant, March 2014



Betty Tompkins, *kiss grid painting #1*, 26x26", 2007, acrylic on paper; Courtesy of the artist.

New York, Mar. 2014: Before Jeff Koons, Thomas Ruff, Terry Richardson and their raffish ilk appropriated porn for high-art settings, Betty Tompkins was meticulously reproducing scenes of heterosexual penetration in pencil, acrylic, airbrush and ink. Her monochrome images make it clear that porn, not real-life sex, is her subject and underscore the harsh binary responses to her controversial subject and artwork, and to her identity as a woman artist.

Tompkins' large-scale images of furry, shaved and pierced vaginas are portraits of their eras and our shifting sexual trends. But they're also as timeless as Courbet's *L'Origine du monde*. Her work is blunt but appealing. Her straightforward, tactically rendered work appears apolitical, amoral and sensual instead of dogmatic or demanding. She does not shout for rights but claims them while casually demonstrating the illogic of denying them to her. As the art-world's under-sung Erica Jong, Tompkins boldly but warmly proclaims women's equal rights to lust and respect.

However, Tompkins's photorealistic renderings of porn-images were suppressed and censored until 2003, when her wall-sized works from 1969 and 1974 were shown at the Lyon Biennial. She now has a (relatively demure) print rendition from her 2008 "Sex Grid" series for sale with Exhibition A. In "A Chromatic Loss," curated by Jeffrey Uslip at Manhattan's prestigious Bortolami Gallery, Tompkins's work joined art by John Coplans, Nancy Grossman and others representing the complexity of black and white art about the body. Currently, her work is included in the exhibition "AFTERSHOCK: The Impact

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of Radical Art” at Edelman Gallery curated by Dara Schaefer. Tompkins’s work is in the collection of the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and has been exhibited in London, New York and Vienna. Yet the arc of her story exposes the art-world’s even recent history of prudishness and sexism. For a generation of women who take the pleasure of porn for granted, Tompkins’s story isn’t about porn or sexuality but sexism and expression. Here is how her images went from bootlegged photos to gallery walls.

Ana Finel Honigman: Your work is receiving a lot of attention now. Can you explain to me the history of your work and its public reception?

Betty Tompkins: I started the Fuck Paintings in 1969 a few months after finishing graduate school. The source photos belonged to my first husband who was twelve years older than me. He had gotten them from Singapore or Hong Kong many years earlier when he lived in Everett, WA. Unlike our sex saturated culture now, it was illegal to send photos like these through the US mail and it was hard to get and see porn. He got a postal box in Vancouver, BC, waited for what he hoped was the appropriate amount of time, drove up to Vancouver, hid the photos in his car, hoped he looked like an all-American boy and drove back across the border. When we moved to New York so he could attend Teacher’s College for his doctoral degree, we lived in student housing which meant we had a two-room apartment. He used the living room as his studio and study place. The bedroom doubled as my studio. It was a small room. I spent time with all the pillows in the bathtub if I didn’t want to look at any art. I did one painting as a transition from spray guns to the airbrush. And then I did Fuck Painting #1. Just jumped right in. I had no idea what I was doing. They were very slow to make because I had a full-time teaching job at a private school. I only managed to make two to three of them in the two years I was in that apartment. I did have a few people over to see them. Artists and dealers both. The art world was so much smaller then. I remember one man walked in the room, ran out of the room, and then backed in. An early indication that I was doing something unexpected and startling.

AFH: When did you start showing them?

BT: In 1973 I managed to get work in group shows at Warren Benedek Gallery and LoGuiduce Gallery, both in Soho. Then I was invited into a show/auction in Paris and my work was not let into the country. My first censorship. It took me a year to get the paintings repatriated. After that, nothing. In 1997 I had a small retrospective at Monmouth University’s 800 Gallery. I had one of the Fuck Paintings and one of the Cow/Cunt Paintings stretched up and included them in the show. Bill Arning wrote the essay and helped me pick out the work for the show. It was the first he knew of that whole group of work. Then a lot more nothing until I had a show of the Fuck Paintings at Mitchell Albus Gallery in 2002. That started something. The paintings were included in the 2003 Lyon Biennale. Bob Nickas paired them with the work of Steve Parrino and from there Camille Morineau presented Fuck Painting #1 to the Acquisition Committee of Centre Pompidou. She was a new curator there and this was her first presentation. She is a bold, courageous person. When she wrote to tell me that the museum was buying the painting, I burst into tears. I couldn’t believe that it had worked.

AFH: It sounds like you believed having more explicit imagery in the world was an important and positive contribution. Is that true? If so, why? And has our contemporary porn culture changed your mind about that?

BT: When I first came to NYC, the art world was so much smaller and concentrated. All of the galleries were either on 57th Street or the Upper East Side. It was possible to see everything in two afternoons a month. So I did. I was often in and out of a gallery in under a minute or two. I was often bored by what

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I was seeing. I was often not engaged. I was looking for risk-taking and was thrilled to find it but often did not. This made me really think about subject matter and abstract elements and if I could get them to work or fight with each other on one surface. That was the genesis of the idea. I did think the subject was riveting enough to engage viewers long enough so that they could see what I was doing as a painter. I have always seen the two – subject/image and abstract elements – as working or not in tandem. And nothing has changed that.

AFH: Can you talk about the sensuality of airbrushing these images? How does working with that medium relate to touch or the absence of physical touch for you?

BT: Oh. I love this question. I think of my airbrushes as my magic wands. I stand here and the painting comes out there. It is a very cool process. I never touch the painting. Totally hands off. And art is, to me, a magic act so the airbrushes are the perfect tools for me to be working with. I use two for the black and white paintings and three for anything with color. There was also a period when I used the hottest approach I could think of. When I came back to the sex subject in 2003, I didn't want to do what I had done. When I was in Lyon for the 2003 Lyon Biennale, I got the idea to get a stamp made that said "LYON" and do some drawings with it. I thought if one of them came out ok, I would give it to Bob Nickas who had curated me into the show as a thank-you. After three drawings, the LYON fell off the wood part so that was the end of that. I liked how the idea was developing though so Bill and I made up a bunch of words and I used them in drawings and in paintings. After a few years though, I got tendonitis in both arms and was, at the same time, having dreams about painting with an airbrush again. I treated myself to two new ones, set them up and started working with them. My hand knew just what to do. A "welcome home" moment. I have come to the conclusion that my best work with paint does not involve paint brushes but some other means to move the paint from the tube or jar onto the canvas.

AFH: Please tell me about your "cow cunt" series. Was it a visual play on words? Were you using the word "cow" in the British sense, as a derogatory term for an frumpy, noisy, probably conservative older woman?

BT: It did not occur to me for some time that there was a pun in there even though now I find them funny. I was very very serious when younger and I was in a miserable marriage so my sense of humor verbally only showed up as self-deprecating sarcasm. My idea had to do with scale reversal. Take something small and delicate and make it big. Take something big and clunky and make it small and delicate. The cunt images all came from what were called "beaver magazines". A photographer friend in Ellensburg WA, took some cow photos for me. I had had a COW stamp made when I had my CENSORED stamp made in 1975 and kept it. In 2003 when I came back to the sex subject, I wanted to make the images with the stamps and the only one I had that would work was the COW stamp. I thought it was the perfect pejorative for a woman. I did three drawings with the COW stamp while waiting for other stamps to arrive.

AFH: Are any of your works self-portraits?

BT: Sorry, Ana. I promised Jerry Saltz more than ten years ago that I would never tell. I suppose it is a natural question for you to ask but I am curious about what difference it would make if it was known that they were.

AFH: Jerry knows best! I confess this question was motivated by my assumptions about the feminist mentality when you were making these early works. I associate the early seventies as an era of self-discovery and "personal is political" statements of identity. I also assume viewers might, respectfully or wolfishly, extrapolate assumptions about you from your images. Is this a question you get asked often?

BT: Thanks. I follow your reasoning here. I used to get asked this question all of the time. Then it stopped.

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AFH: How do you think your gender has affected your work's reception? Can you tell some stories about peoples' responses to your work based on you being a woman?

BT: This is something I have wondered about since 1969. In the '70's when it became very clear to me that the NYC art world was not interested in young artists and in particular they were not interested in young artists with breasts, I used to beg my then husband to take my slides around as his own. He was the right gender and he was also twelve years older than me so he was the right age. He refused to do it so I will never know. My only experience is as a female. I have no other basis for comparison. My mother had always worked; I was raised to be independent minded (certainly the childhood excuse of "all my friends are going/doing this" never worked in my family), and I went to an all-girls high school where we were expected to excel. So I arrived at college (coed) without having undergone the typical girls experiences. I was therefore totally unprepared for the chauvinism I was exposed to by the all-male faculty. One professor said he didn't know why he wasted time on me as I was only going to get married and have babies. Another said the only way I would make it in New York was on my back which led to my being so terrified at my first appointment to show slides at a gallery some years later that I threw up. When I was in my 20's, when I could persuade a dealer to come to my studio, the question of whether I was planning to have children ALWAYS came up. At a certain point, a law was passed that made it illegal to ask these kind of questions directly. The issue was still there but they were forced to be more subtle about it. Men were never asked this question. With the exception of those two early group shows, the rejection of my work was so total that I never knew if it was because of the subject matter or because of me. Probably both in every case.

—Ana Finel Honigman