

SPIKE

SUMMER 2015

Portrait

Julia Wachtel Party Crashers



MILK, 2014 75
Oil, acrylic ink on canvas 152 x 129 cm; Courtesy of Elisabeth Wingate

Text by Bob Nickas

pages 74-85

In her collages from the beginning of the 1980s, Julia Wachtel made the image-worlds of Pop and trash collide. When she turned to painting, she remained loyal to her technique of hard cuts – which she has maintained ever since. Bob Nickas looks back on the era of infotainment, when picture-making was reinvented.



HOPE, 2015

Oil, acrylic ink, on canvas, 152 x 329 cm; Courtesy of Vilma Gold, London

In an age of content providers sought after by information or entertainment services, the recent market ascendance of vacant abstraction may be difficult to grasp. While content is valued, its lack on canvas, painted and unpainted, is overvalued. How exactly did this come to pass? Is it possible that although content within business is desired, its presence in pictures, to use an old-fashioned term for paintings, is burdensome? For the shopkeeper, content is problematic because it must be explained. For the buyer, it must be reconciled with politics, morality and taste, though it may provide guilty pleasure. For artists, the “burden” is much more fundamental. What is my subject? How shall it be rendered? Where will its meaning reside or recede?

Picture-making designates the invention and replication of images – whether painted, drawn, filmed or photographed, as opposed to stained, bleached, sun-dried and stonewashed. It is an activity that can be seen in relation to its history and its prospects, at times as faithfully promiscuous. Yet the sort of painting that has found favor in recent years may be thought of as picture un-making, inhabiting a present without reflecting its time, or only unwittingly. An indelible image: The vampire remains invisible in the mirror, even to itself. And so we endure a desultory parade of canvases spun round washing machines, trampled on the studio floor, doused with turpentine, and electroplated. Where representation appears, to say “my child could do that” is to rudely insult the child. Negation, apparently, is its own reward. Consider Rauschenberg’s Erased de Kooning Drawing: today there would be no de Kooning, only an erasure...

...You Disappear Me.

Thirty years after the last significant period of representation, the Pictures Generation, our meager inheritance adds up, rather unspectacularly, to an Un-Pictures Generation. Despite creating a deficit for art historians and the story thus far – and no farther? – it’s clear that lacking ideas for what to paint, or the capacity to paint at all, has generated many happy returns. (An old joke from the 1980s rears its bratty head. Q. “What’s this painting about?” A. “It’s about \$40,000.”) And yet in the marriage of art and its markets, increasingly with underage partners, how is a lasting fidelity possible when commitments between artists and their projects are paper-thin? Art as a certificate of inauthenticity? How substantial, one wonders, is the artist’s investment? When it’s indifferent, the art, like a tiresome boyfriend, is unceremoniously dumped. The relations on display, devoid of human contact, suggest that the vulnerability required of human engagement, its messiness, confusion, and anxiety, are ...

... Relations Of Absence.

This is the title of a 1981 photo-based installation by Julia Wachtel. Commercially available posters – of an eroticized waif, John Travolta as the boy-next-door, a woman defiantly bared, and Mussolini in full dictatorial pose – were pasted to the wall, sequenced in repetition, and over-painted with the silhouette of a male-female couple. What’s missing, what can only be visualized as negative space, are viewers who attempt to inhabit and make sense of these images, at once Infoseamless and fragmentary. Appropriation in this period transformed collage, which was no longer a matter of pieces overlaid and

interlocked, but individual images presented in their entirety. The image-world of the 80s, in its fatal attractions, would provide a source of libidinal repulsion and fascination. In this charged atmosphere, Wachtel was among a number of artists, including Jessica Diamond, Gretchen Bender, Alan Belcher, Sarah Charlesworth, Peter Nagy, and Steven Parrino, whose diverse works were brought together in the mid 80s under the banner of Infotainment – the pop-inflected merging of information and entertainment – and in a moment, then as now, when movements were a thing of the past. Even as it was propped up, the status of painting was addressed. Nagy's *Painting of Value* (1984), was in actuality a black-and-white photocopy based on an ad for jewelry. Parrino's misstretched and distorted canvases allowed the monochrome to be seen as disfigurative and once again radical. Wachtel's representations, shown in proximity, also courted disfiguration. Infotainment could not possibly evade content. This was the very material with which it was made. Picture-making, which it flirted, embraced, and collided with, was its primary activity. By 1982, Wachtel dispensed with printed posters and began to paint individual figures, placing them side-by-side. The silhouettes were replaced by the artist's belief that viewers, suitably provoked, would complete the picture. Wachtel understood that an audience can catch itself in laughter and wonder how it is that they're laughing.

Just the Two of Us, from that year, presents a double image of a poised young woman and an awkward little girl, both appropriated from greeting cards. Wachtel not only turned to a traditional medium, but drew her content from lowly, suspect sources: representations found on the covers of cheap romance novels or donated to Goodwill stores. (Her works from this time call to mind Jim Shaw's "Thrift Store" paintings, Mike Kelley's *Missing Time Color Exercise* (1998), based on *Sex To Sixty* cartoons from the late 60s/early 70s, and the pulp illustration that fuels recent work by Richard Prince.) The doubling in Wachtel's work sets up a myriad of exchanges – between illustration and painting, painting and photography, manual and mechanical reproduction, abstraction and representation, high and low. Pairing cartoons and "primitives" (figures sourced from folk art and archaeology) and marrying cartoon characters to celebrities, her paintings resemble a schizophrenic shotgun wedding – most memorably in the coupling of Cher and a toothless peg-leg pirate in *You Disappear Me* (1987). Cartoons and primitives are isolated on monochrome and painterly grounds. Celebrities occupy the grit and transparency of the screen print. Sequentially arranged in multiple color chart panels, they look like chromatic progressions by Ellsworth Kelly that inexplicably reflect the befuddled performers before them. Wachtel's mirroring may be regarded by purists as that of the funhouse. Yet her insertion of the unexpected – party-crashers, as it were – parallels the entry of Pop artists



RELATIONS OF ABSENCE, 1981

Magic marker on posters, 122 x 371 cm ; Courtesy of the artist



JUST THE TWO OF US, 1982

Oil on canvas, 188 x 198 cm;

Courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art



CHAMPAGNE LIFE, 2014

Oil, flashe, lacquer ink on canvas, 152 x 470 cm



THE EXECUTION OF ABSTRACTION, 2015

Oil, flashe and acrylic ink on canvas, 152 x 386 cm; Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Dee

who came from commercial work, window decoration, and sign painting, as well as abstract painters with backgrounds in graphic and product design, who, in the 60s, laid the foundation for neo-geo. Wachtel has said that her original attraction to greeting cards was due to the characters and the emotions they signified, as well as the painted stage they occupied. Ultimately, two forms of pantomime. In the wake of 80s neo-expressionism, Wachtel's representations offered a rejoinder to an overwrought emotionality, enacted on its own terms – the “hallowed” space of painting – heightened and distanced.

By the late 80s, Wachtel adopted one of painting's most traditional genres, the landscape. Animating its

politicized ground, she engaged with discontent and its fallout. Chernobyl, the Berlin Wall, the spectacle of selfhelp, better living through chemistry, government follies, police brutality, and that great fiction of banality: reality television. After a nearly tenyear hiatus, a stepping back not uncommon among artists from that time who are now being re-discovered, whose earlier work is seen as prescient – from Ericka Beckman and Sarah Charlesworth to Troy Brauntuch and Joel Otterso – Wachtel returned to painting. Since 2011, her cast of characters, vocabulary, and concerns have been rearticulated in works addressing much of what we remain consumed by: war and protest, politics as entertainment, corporate greed and environmental negligence, celebrity culture, billions of images with no end in sight, and conspicu-



MASSAPEQUA, 1992
Acrylic and screen ink on canvas, 70 x 201 cm; Courtesy Vilma Gold, London

ous consumption itself. This brings us back to where this essay started, haunted and appalled by the specter of art being hi-jacked – nothing personal, it’s only business – and artists who obligingly purge their work of bothersome content. To the non-expressionists we dedicate Wachtel’s 2015 canvas, The Execution of Abstraction. Clearly, artists who have

returned to working and exhibiting – and selling – do so in an even more heatedly absurd environment than the so-called big, bad 80s. The engagement with picture-making remains not only a matter of unfinished business, but a cause which painting may continue to serve. Bob Nickas is a critic and curator. He lives in New York.



THE KISS, 2015
Oil, acrylic ink on canvas, 153 x 307 cm; Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Dee, New York



HANDMADE, 2011

Oil on linen, 97 x 206 cm; Courtesy of the artist and Vilma Gold Gallery



JULIA WACHTEL, born 1956 in New York. Lives in New York.

EXHIBITIONS: Toys Redux – On Play and Critique, Migros Museum, Zurich; Empowerment, Elizabeth Dee, New York (solo) (2015); The Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio (solo); Bergen Kunsthall (solo) (2014); Vilma Gold, London (solo) (2013); In Twenty-Five Minutes, The Artist's Institute, New York; The Old, The New, The Different, Kunsthalle Bern; Remote Control, ICA, London (2012). REPRESENTED BY Elizabeth Dee, New York; Vilma Gold, London

VANITY FAIR

—| Spotlight |—

SOCIAL LANDSCAPES



Julia Wachtel, photographed with works in progress at her studio in Bridgewater, Connecticut.

WACHTEL WEARS A SHIRT BY BANANA REPUBLIC.

Julia Wachtel's pictures are the stuff of serious play—a poetic simulation of everything wonderful and horrible all at once, part pop culture, part formal, abstract construction. Wachtel—who oversaw production of the U.K. edition of *Vanity Fair* for more than a decade—mounted recent solo exhibitions at the Cleveland Museum of Art and New York's Elizabeth Dee Gallery, and this fall will be part of "Champagne Life," a group show opening at London's Saatchi Gallery. "Julia is whip-smart and funny, exactly like her paintings," says Chelsea gallerist Elizabeth Dee. "She's a deep thinker on a political and social level. Her paintings predicted key cultural shifts: the end of television in its 20th-century form, the beginning of reality/confessional pop culture, the emergence and dominance of celebrity culture."

"The biggest challenge is to compete, in the best sense of the word, to grab someone's attention," Wachtel says. Working with source material, she explores the idea that images accrue meaning through repetition: "It exposes the act of painting—what I'm doing is mimicking myself." Wachtel's *Stripe* features North Korea's Kim Jong Un juxtaposed with South Korean Internet sensation Psy (of "Gangnam Style" fame), in a Warholian collision of world domination and celebrity. And in *Spirit*, a screen-printed Hillary Clinton poses beside two paintings of a prehistoric Venus fertility sculpture. The two images are almost identical, but not exactly—the presence of the human in the mechanical interests Wachtel. "We know the monumental human suffering that takes place, and the question is how we morally, ethically reconcile that," she says. "The message is: Holy shit—let's figure out what is going on here."

—A. M. HOMES

PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTIN BISHOP

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MODERN PAINTERS

FEBRUARY 2015

SPOTLIGHT // JULIA WACHTEL



CRITICAL POP

Mixing high and low (plus Kanye and Miley)

TEXT BY SCOTT INDRISEK

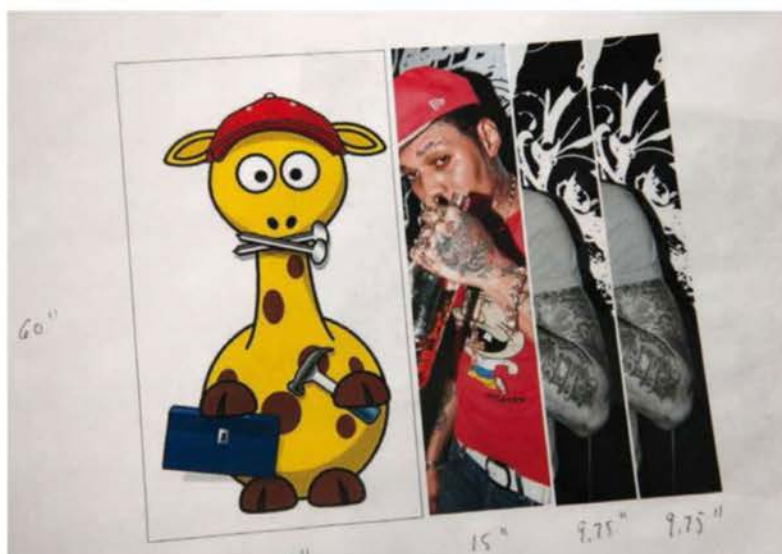
FOR ALL HER INTENSE FOCUS on the ever-fluctuating topography of popular culture, Julia Wachtel's practice has remained remarkably consistent for decades, juxtaposing various types of high- and lowbrow found images and mixing the hand-painted with the silkscreened. A selection of Wachtel's work from the 1980s and '90s, recently on view at Bergen Kunsthall in Norway, and a just-closed retrospective survey at the Cleveland Museum of Art made that point concisely; the latter included works like *Punched Up*, 1986 (which mixes a serial image of Janis Joplin with three doofy cartoons of hippie stereotypes), and a series of "Landscape"

works, which combine archival images—government meetings, protests in Tiananmen Square—with irreverent figures, often appropriated from greeting cards, many of whom are picking their noses, crying, or just staring cockeyed into space. It's an aesthetic that has been borrowed, somewhat liberally, by Jordan Wolfson, among others.

Recently Wachtel has spliced more contemporary disposable icons into the paintings, from Kim Kardashian and Kanye West to a barely dressed Miley Cyrus. A massive, multipanel work-in-progress, destined for a May solo show at Elizabeth Dee in New York, has her

"thinking a lot about memes," pairing a political leader with a viral video sensation (she asked to keep the specific details veiled until the opening). Another mixes appropriated stills from the reality show *The Voice* with classic Uncle Sam poster imagery. Wachtel isn't always a fan of the material she appropriates—she "can't stand" Kim and Kanye, for instance, and they appear upside down in her painting in which they have a cameo—but *The Voice* she genuinely appreciates. "As critical as I am as a viewer and observer of media, I watch it, and actually think it's a good show," she says.

KRISTINE LARSEN



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT:
A study for a painting
tentatively titled *Depth
of Field*.

An Ikea chair in concrete
in Wachtel's studio.
The piece was designed
by her ex-husband,
Matthew Antezzo.

Encore, 1988.
Acrylic and silkscreen ink
on canvas across three
panels, total dimensions
65 x 97½ in.

A Dream of Symmetry,
1988. Oil and lacquer ink
on canvas across
four panels, total
dimensions 4 x 11½ feet.

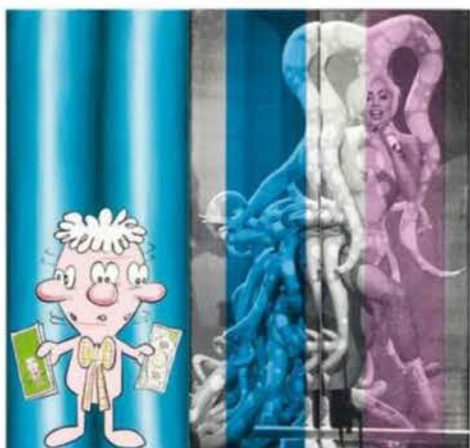
A 1990 Absolut vodka
ad using Wachtel's work,
with the cover of the
magazine in which it ran.

OPPOSITE:
The artist with two
works-in-progress in her
Brooklyn studio.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: TWO IMAGES, KRISTINE LARSEN; TWO IMAGES, JULIA WACHTEL AND ELIZABETH DEE; NEW YORK, KRISTINE LARSEN

SPOTLIGHT // JULIA WACHTEL



ABOVE, FROM LEFT:
Grasp, 2014.
Oil, lacquer ink, and
Flashe on canvas
across three panels,
total dimensions
60 x 80 in.

A box of art books
and greeting cards in
Wachtel's studio.

BELOW:
Installation view
of two paintings
included in Wachtel's
2014 exhibition at
the Cleveland
Museum of Art.



Wachtel has an endearing way of discussing her work and parsing the decision-making process involved in the selection of various images. She'll follow a loose trail of association—news reports about Ebola got her thinking about some vintage images of hazmat suits on NASA's website, for example—before admitting with a shrug that it's all a bit instinctual. "Why *that* with *that*?" she ponders, discussing a painting that places images of video-game militia soldiers next to a cartoon of an inebriated hot dog slumped against a lamppost. "I can't tell you." Sometimes the association is more clear-cut, as in another painting-in-progress mixing a found photograph of a wildfire with a hand-painted "crazy, kooky cigarette that's lighting itself." Often, she says, the cartoon protagonists within the paintings are a type of stand-in for herself, or for the viewer. So in this case, I wonder, is Wachtel the cigarette? "I am the cigarette," she concurs. "But you're the cigarette too."

The Internet has been a major boon for Wachtel's wandering curiosity. "The variations, and the time people

spend creating content there, generated from found stuff, is absolutely mind-boggling," she says, "and the production value on a lot of it is really high. Anything you can conjure up in your brain, there's going to be some representation of that. If you want a Polish, brown-eyed basketball player with a pink hat—you'll find it." One half-complete work hanging in the studio borrows an enigmatic giraffe cartoon found on the Web with a sliced-and-diced photo of Jamaican dancehall star Vybz Kartel. Another jams two hand-painted renditions of a 20,000 B.C. fertility sculpture with a silkscreened photo of Hillary Clinton. A necessarily impartial list of other references and imagery in the new work would include Brazil soccer player Neymar's back being broken during the World Cup; Jeff Koons; Ranger Smith from the Yogi Bear cartoon franchise; and the plush-animal dress-up fetishists known as Furies. Wachtel wants to place the viewer in "the landscape, in the political environment, the packaging environment, or the Internet environment—it's all about being mixed up in this irrational, swirling universe of imagery and information."

Despite the emphasis on recognizable figurative elements, abstraction is paramount for the artist. When she first began sourcing cartoon figures from greeting cards more than 20 years ago, she says, her initial interest was piqued by the cards' abstract backgrounds. "They were painterly," she says, "evocative of a Jasper Johns or Clyfford Still or Jackson Pollock." Wachtel injects her own work with abstract elements, from colored boxes of paint that occlude or censor parts of the images to long horizontal stripes that run across multiple panels. "If you take away the layer of representation, you have an abstract painting behind it," she says. "I realized that that's what my work boiled down to: I'm trying to turn representation into abstraction, to turn the representational image inside out." In a way, all those familiar faces—from SpongeBob SquarePants to a foam-finger-wearing Miley Cyrus—might just be means to that surprisingly traditional end. **MP**



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: JULIA WACHTEL AND ELIZABETH DEE; KRISTINE LARSEN; JULIA WACHTEL, ELIZABETH DEE, AND VILMA GOLD GALLERY, LONDON

NORWAY

JULIA WACHTEL

Kunsthalle Bergen

Brightly coloured portraits of cartoon men with round faces and rotund midriffs rollick beside paintings of black and white wooden sculptures that resemble pillaged archaeological artefacts. All in all, nine works, each about 60 cm high and hung almost touching one another, form Julia Wachtel's intriguingly titled series 'Emotional Appeal' (1986) (originally displayed at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1991 as a full set of 12 paintings). As I stared at them, I wondered what these ugly, embarrassing, perhaps intoxicated guys their portraits mainly sourced from greeting cards - were trying to tell me. The fat guy on the end holds a trombone across his bare midriff, his gut busting out of lime green trousers (Horn Player, 1986). A skinny, ginger haired man is wrapped in a white bandage, restricting his arms like a straight jacket, whilst his mouth is sealed with two Band-Aids and his left leg weighed down by a ball and chain (Speechless, 1986). In between them, an Inca-like fertility goddess figurine, with large ears and stumpy legs, head held high (Mouse, 1986).

Even 28 years after she painted them, Wachtel's combination of renditions of cartoons and sculptures is both funny and baffling in its weirdness. Humour and, specifically, caricature is a multi-purpose tool: it can be used to speak the unspeakable, to refer to highly problematic issues, or to keep us going when things are literally falling apart around us. The best satire dissects and reduces its subject matter - often as a kind of behavioural assassination - to a series of signifiers, some of which are literal; others, like the representations of caricature Wachtel uses in 'Emotional Appeal', rely on our intuition and emotion to be interpreted. Yet they can also be down right mean, and more revealing of the person who created them than anything else. Here, Wachtel's sad, slightly grotesque men and the supposedly 'primitive' figures, construct a kind of anthropological commentary on the reductive stereotypes conveyed in this pairing of imagery. Wachtel herself, in an interview with Bob Nickas in the exhibition's accompanying publication, discusses the idea that these idol-like figures represent 'naïve' emotions, or some form of 'authentic and unmediated expression', and goes on to state: 'I feel that this view of them as pure unsophisticated and unsocialized is a complete misreading, and is an interpretation filled with racist and materialist overtones.'

Alongside 'Emotional Appeal', the exhibition included two large works that paired screen-printed photographs with painted cartoon characters - Landscape No 7 (?) (1990) and Landscape No 4 (Inside and Outside) (1990) - part of a larger series of 'landscapes' in which Wachtel juxtaposed political imagery from 1980s media, such as the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and Tiananmen Square massacre, alongside slightly hysterical caricatures of little men. The former is a screen print of a woman in a white dress holding a crucifix, being followed by armed police. The latter comprises seven panels, five of which depict screen prints of a pro-Palestinian demonstration, in monochromes of black and white, green and orange, interspersed with two identical panels of a little dude in a multi-coloured suit laughing his ass off.

Wachtel's work has been discussed within an art-historical lineage that began in the context of appropriation art of the 1980s. In some ways, her work is akin to the darkly subversive use of popular culture and objects as a form of social commentary by artists like Mike Kelley.

However, it seems more pertinent to consider her work in relation to everyday life today, as we are bombarded with imagery more than ever: the highly constructed aesthetics of acts of terror, the staged forms of 'affect' disseminated via our news sources, the multiple, performed selves both famous and non-famous people create, all co-exist in a kind of neverending virtual schizophrenia. Fundamentally, Wachtel's work was getting at questions of how we can read and interpret the act of representation critically, in order to consider how it may or may not function as a form of 'authenticity' and 'truth', and how to make sense of it when all these representations exist simultaneously with little hierarchy. In that sense, her 'Emotional Appeal' is more urgent than ever.

KATHY NOBLE



Interview

5/27/2015

ART

ONLINE

Critically Thinking

By EMILY MCDERMOTT

Julia Wachtel developed her practice in New York in the 1980s, and the influences of artists like Andy Warhol and Sherrie Levine are clearly seen in artworks. The artist makes them her own, however, by pairing painted cartoons with silkscreen reproductions of pop culture imagery. And, while this approach could seem antiquated, Wachtel makes her works contemporary through her engagement with current topics, ranging from Kim, Kanye, and Miley to ISIS, Hillary Clinton, and Kim Jong-un. Currently on view at Elizabeth Dee Gallery in New York is “Empowerment,” a show offering six new paintings completed in the past year.

Upon walking into the space, viewers are greeted by North Korea’s dictator juxtaposed with South Korean internet sensation, Psy (responsible for “Gangnam Style”) on the left wall, while on the right, a screen-printed Hillary Clinton regally poses next to paintings of pre-historic sculptures in the shape of Venus. The two political figures hang directly opposite each other, and, when combined with Psy and the B.C. sculptures, force the viewer to consider current popular culture in relation to history, power, and politics.



Julia Wachtel, *Spirit*, 2014. Oil and acrylic ink on canvas. Three panels, overall 60 x 92.5 in.

“The larger project is to, in a full spectrum, represent the world,” the New York-based artist says. “If you see me as a landscape painter, then I’m painting a city, a farm, a factory, a war.”

Wachtel’s consideration of images has evolved with time. She started as a sculpture major at Middlebury College, where she made assemblages and tombstone-like sculptures, but then received her MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York, where, she says, she became more conceptually minded. Since then, the artist has progressed from painting appropriated images to incorporating silkscreen and creating more narratives and coherency within the works and her chosen juxtapositions. A few days after the opening of “Empowerment,” we spoke with Wachtel at Elizabeth Dee.



Julia Wachtel, *Stripe*, 2014. Oil, flashe, and acrylic ink on canvas. Five panels, overall 60 x 152 in.

EMILY MCDERMOTT: The first piece you made for this show was *Stripe*, with Kim Jong-un, right? It’s interesting having him and Hillary Clinton stare at each other across the room.

JULIA WACHTEL: Correct, but I generate drawings and plans for the pieces, and I work on multiple pieces at the same time. The Hillary Clinton one was at about the same time. I came up with the idea for Kim Jong-un and I wanted to balance it out—not seem so cynical—with someone who I admire.

MCDERMOTT: What made you want to focus on Kim Jong-un to begin with?

WACHTEL: When I do a painting, a lot of different things initiate the start. Sometimes I have a super clear idea and I go after it. Like, I wanted to do a painting of Hillary Clinton, so I searched for [images of] Hillary Clinton. Other times, other things get me there. In the case of that painting, *Stripe*, I was actually interested in memes. The originating point for the image search wasn’t Kim Jong-un; it was this meme culture. I knew that “Gangnam Style” was, and still is, the most viewed video in the history of YouTube, so I found all these memes and had this idea of Kim Jong-un. Of course, it’s so Warholian; it reminds me of Warhol’s Mao paintings in a ridiculous way. So, there was the obvious connection between North and South Korea—the idea of a viral video being the embodiment of free circulation of expression, versus the completely repressive regime. It was extremely obvious, almost didactic, but I thought it was hilarious, image-wise.

MCDERMOTT: It’s interesting that you work on multiple pieces at once. For some artists that’s really hard to do.

WACHTEL: I used to only work on one piece at a time and I would love the luxury of doing that. But, if you have the pressures of exhibitions, and now art fairs, you'd get nothing done if you just worked on one piece at a time. So I work on the drawings, the studies that I do in InDesign, continuously. Then they go up on my wall and as I commit to making a piece, then I put the [silkscreen] panels into production, order the stretcher, and it takes more than a month before it's delivered. A lot of the work with silkscreen is preparing it on canvases and I have an assistant who does that. Then I usually block out a week and do four or five paintings. So I go from having nothing to a full studio. It's kind of like Christmas—you've ordered all the presents, then Amazon delivers it, and there they are!

MCDERMOTT: I know you originally were only painting, and then adopted screen printing. What initiated that change?

WACHTEL: I actually started screen printing like a month after Warhol died in 1987. The work was always about pop culture, but I never really thought to make screen prints. It didn't even occur to me. Warhol was probably the most important influence on me, but as I said, I wasn't thinking, "That's a process I want to use." Then, after he died, I thought, "Oh, this process is available to me." I don't think I would've ever made silkscreen prints while he was making work, because you would just be in the shadow of him. Once he died, it was like, "This is a tool I can use," and it seemed very adaptable to what I was doing. The first image I did was actually Janis Joplin, a very pop image.

MCDERMOTT: Growing up, what was the first piece of art you saw that made you realize you could take pop culture imagery and turn it into something else?



Julia Wachtel, *Compression*, 2014. Oil and acrylic ink on canvas. Four panels, overall 60 x 68.5 in.

2033 2037 FIFTH AVE

WACHTEL: I remember it very clearly. It was Roy Lichtenstein. I was in high school, and I had always made art—as a kid I always liked to paint and draw—but my senior project was an art project. I didn't live in a [bubble]—I traveled around with my parents, had been to Europe, lived in the suburbs of New York—but I had never been to MoMA. So [I finally went in high school] and saw the Roy Lichtenstein painting *Girl with a Beach Ball*. It was a revelation. It was like separation at birth, a kindred spirit. I just couldn't believe the painting. Seeing it...it's so painterly. That was the first painting I saw that made me think, "I can be an artist."

MCDERMOTT: Where did you go from there?

WACHTEL: I started making, in my first year of college at Middlebury, Rauschenberg-y assemblage things and then I became aware of minimalism. I was looking at Donald Judd and making minimalist, cube structures that were built and wrapped in black plastic. Then I went to SVA and studied with Joseph Kosuth, Vito Accorci, and Joan Jonas. I became much more conceptual-minded, but it was always connected to a pop vernacular. That's been consistent from when I was 10 until now. Not much has changed.

MCDERMOTT: I like what you've said in interviews before, that you consider your work to act like a speed bump.

WACHTEL: I could make photographs, but I very purposefully make paintings because paintings, ideally, should slow you down. I put benches in the gallery to encourage people to sit down and spend more time. Everyone's always in a rush and speeding around, but a painting should be an object of contemplation, something you can sit with. You should keep looking at it over time and things will reveal themselves.

When I started making appropriation work and entered into the gallery system, no one was painting appropriations. There was painting going on, like Julian Schnabel and neo-abstract painting and graffiti art, but no one was doing critical theory and appropriation paintings. It was considered a bad thing to do, because painting was associated with the market and institutional authority and other ideas that critically minded people were trying to deconstruct. It was a real act of perversity on my part to decide that painting was going to be the platform I would engage in these ideas.



Julia Wachtel, *Time and Time Again*, 2014. Oil and acrylic ink on canvas. Four panels, overall 60 x 93.5 in.

MCDERMOTT: So did you receive a lot of criticism when you first emerged?

WACHTEL: The work was well received, but it wasn't really well received in the market. It was a little rough for collectors to want to have these really goofy, pathetic, cartoon characters. They were the kind of images people wanted to disassociate, not associate, themselves with. I intentionally used them because I was trying to undercut the un-critical identification with glamour. You can be Richard Prince and take reproduced serial images and deconstruct the power of those images, but if you do it with the same glossiness, you retain the patina and the aura of the glamour. I was trying to say, "I'm not going that route. I'm not going to reinvest in the thing you guys are trying to criticize." I think that made it hard for collectors to get behind.



Julia Wachtel, *Wild*, 2014. Oil, flashe, and acrylic ink on canvas. Five panels, overall 60 x 117 in.

MCDERMOTT: How do you feel personally about popular culture and its proliferation?

WACHTEL: You know, if you're a fireman, I think you love fire, even if you're trying to put the fire out. That would be a very good analogy to my relationship with pop culture. I love it, but it's obviously extremely powerful, in a lot of negative ways, in terms of identity and self, particularly for women. Not exclusively women, but young girls, with the internet—YouTube and videos about image and concerns, there's pro-bulimia websites. It's not just pop culture now; it's social media. A lot of it is user-generated, but it's reproducing like a virus. The term viral is apt. But I love pop culture, too. I love the Gangnam video.

MCDERMOTT: When you're working on paintings, do you see them as a collection that you're going to show together or do you seem them individually?

WACHTEL: For this show, I did think of it as a collection. I curated the drawings to put together a group for an exhibition. Not that they're similar, but I wanted to have a full spectrum of what I do and have them work together. But when my London gallery, Vilma Gold, and Elizabeth Dee go to the art fair, that work is not seen as a group.

MCDERMOTT: With the increased number and relative importance of fairs, what's it like knowing that you have to create work, rather than making it from your own will?

WACHTEL: It's not good. I mean, thank god it's an opportunity to sell my work, so I can't complain, but it's like, I hate having to buy a dress because I'm going to a wedding. Do I like buying dresses? Yes, but under the right circumstances.

MCDERMOTT: You also worked at Vanity Fair as the production manager for the U.K. edition and on the U.S. side of things as well. How did that impact your personal work or vice versa?

WACHTEL: The funny thing about working at Vanity Fair is that I have some kind of facial dyslexia. I can't distinguish one white actress from another. [laughs] Kate Hudson could be on the cover and I would have no idea who it was. It's hilarious that I'm working with celebrities, I'm working with images, and I can't even tell one from the other. But I have to say, I miss the camaraderie of an office environment. It's nice to work with other people in a collaborative way.

“EMPOWERMENT” IS ON VIEW AT ELIZABETH DEE GALLERY IN CHELSEA THROUGH JUNE 27.
FOR MORE ON THE ARTIST, VISIT HER WEBSITE : JULIAWACHTEL.COM

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JULIA WACHTEL ON KIMYE AND THE CHAMPAGNE LIFE

The [Independent Art Fair](#) took place last week in New York, and one of the most talked about (and Instagrammed) things there was by Julia Wachtel, presented by [Elizabeth Dee](#) Gallery. The work was Champagne Life, made up of silkscreened images of Kim Kardashian and Kanye West, turned upside-down, interspersed with two (nearly) identical paintings of a Minnie Mouse figurine. It was completely spot on, wonderfully relevant, and our personal favorite thing we saw all week.

We spoke to Wachtel a few days before we got to see the work in-person at the fair.

WHITEWALL: At the Independent Art Fair, you have new paintings on view at Elizabeth Dee's booth. Can you tell me a bit about those works?

JULIA WACHTEL: I have five paintings on view representing two related series: the "Landscape" series and the "Celebrity" series.

Essentially my work is about locating myself within the overwhelming reality that we are passive consumers of unquantifiable representations of the world on a daily basis. The "Landscape" series deals with the world of politics and history and the "Celebrity" series deals with the world of entertainment/advertising. On the side of the political, I see the cartoon characters as witnesses

reflecting the existential condition of exposure to the global reality of horror and deprivation that exists somewhere on earth all the time. Whether it's famine, civil war, genocide, etc., we are exposed to these realities and updated continuously in real time.

On the side of the entertainment/advertising reality, I see it as a shimmering surface, a Mobius strip of exteriority that captivates us, but that has no gravity or place to enter into it. The cartoon characters here represent a place of interiority. Even though they are found images, taken from the commercial world of representation, they reflect a vulnerability both in content and in the fact that they are handmade, and reveal a sense of intimacy. What I'm attempting to do is find some kind of suggestive, emotionally true feeling in respect to both of those realities. So that's the larger project, which hopefully the five paintings I have at Independent address in different ways.

WW: Right, the painting *Champagne Life*, featuring Kanye West and Kim Kardashian, is sort of the pinnacle of our entertainment/advertising moment right now. Why did you want to focus on them?

JW: Kim Kardashian really is the embodiment of the idea of pure exteriority. Her entire life is broadcast by reality TV, and there seems to be no moment that is kept private from public consumption. The pursuit of physical perfection/beauty as well as luxury consumption is an obsession that is shared by the entire Kardashian clan, and constitutes the lion's share of content on their TV show not to mention the tabloid press. Kanye attempts to have a critical relationship to social issues, but I feel his message is largely overpowered by his identification with the power of fame. Kanye sees himself as a rap music version of a conceptual artist. I find that interesting.

In the painting I take their image and literally turn it upside down. It is my attempt to control my relationship to the imagery. At this point I see myself less as an appropriation artist and more of a reclamation artist. We are forced to be consumers of media. Even if you don't want to be, you're sitting on the subway and it's there. I consider it to be my right to reclaim that imagery and to try to re-conceptualize it, to personalize it for my use.

Next to the silkscreen repeated images of Kim and Kanye I have two repeated Minnie Mouse hand-painted oil paintings. The Minnies are duplicates like the silkscreen panels, but because I am not a machine, they are not exactly the same and reveal my own subjectivity through those differences. Needless to say I have always employed comedy as well as pathos in my selection of the cartoons. One can't take oneself too seriously!

WW: Why Minnie Mouse?

JW: Minnie Mouse is an image that I found on the Internet that is many iterations away from the original Minnie Mouse. It is a painting of a cheap plastic figurine of Minnie. For me it has a poignancy that I hope entwines the institutional with the personal.

WW: I don't know if you know this, but Kanye has compared himself to Walt Disney in recent interviews.

JW: I didn't even know that, that is so interesting. He's also compared himself to God!

WW: And the title of the piece, *Champagne Life*, how did you come up with that?

JW: That is the title of a Ne-Yo song from 2010. That song is all about living the “champagne life,” “where dreams and reality are one in the same.” Images of champagne are so widely referenced in hip hop and pop music because it’s probably the cheapest way to have the affect of luxury. You don’t have to buy a \$500 bottle of champagne, you could buy a \$20 bottle and still have the feeling that you are living the glamorous lifestyle. And Disneyland, represents the more pedestrian reality of where those fantasies land for most people.

WW: Earlier you broke down your practice into two categories, political and celebrity. Do you think since you started your practice, our relationship has changed with how we consume and process images of each?

JW: There has been a giant change of scale of information and distribution due to the Internet which did not exist when I first started making those respective series. We have knowledge of and access to massive amounts of information that is beyond our emotional not to mention brain capacity to reconcile. On political issues, such as President Obama’s citizenship, or environmental issues such as global warming, people choose from a myriad of information sources to establish the truth. To a frightening degree, truth has become untethered from any empirical reality, and is just one amongst many consumer choices.

When I first started making my work I was more interested in a psychoanalytic investigation into the ways in which subjectivity is inscribed and defined through our relationship to the media. I now take that as a given and even though the subject matter is essentially the same and the basic strategy of making the painting is the same, my focus is more about the vibration of all of that information rippling through our emotions and brains and creating a visual aesthetic experience that reflects this.

KATY DONOGHUE | MARCH 14, 2014

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Julia Wachtel : la pop culture au service de l'art

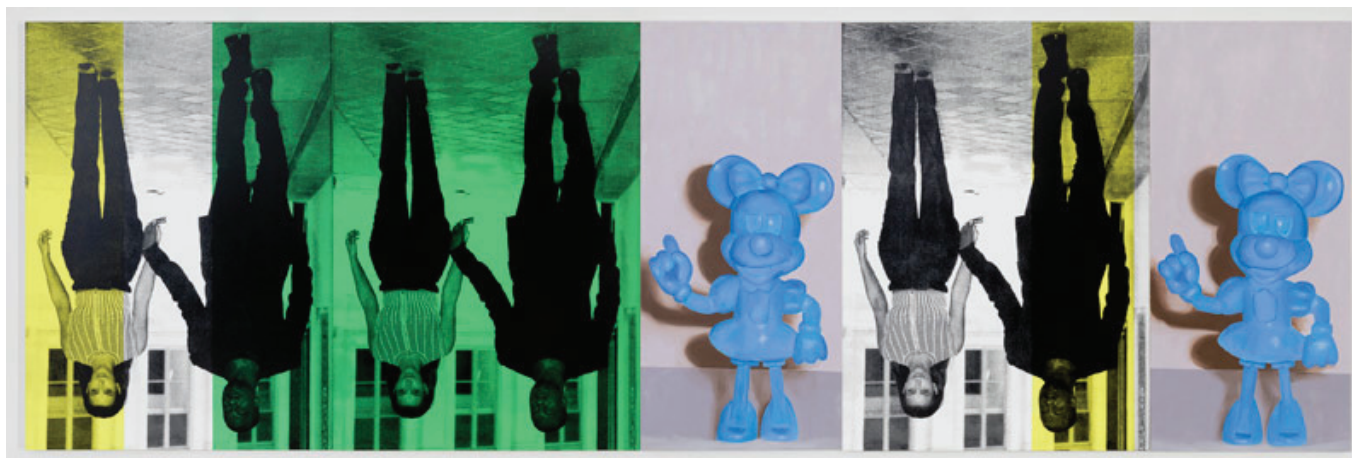
Par Eric Troncy

Depuis les années 80, Julia Wachtel compose des fresques colorées mêlant personnages de cartoon et images empruntées à notre culture contemporaine. exposée de Londres à New York, l'œuvre de la sexagénaire n'en finit pas de fasciner.

Au détour d'une exposition collective à la Saatchi Gallery, d'une autre – personnelle – dans sa galerie londonienne Vilma Gold au début de l'année, et d'une autre encore, l'été dernier, chez Elizabeth Dee (sa galerie new-yorkaise), et de quelques œuvres remarquées sur les stands de ces mêmes galeries lors de récentes foires internationales d'art, Julia Wachtel se rappelle au bon souvenir de ceux qui l'auraient peut-être oubliée. Comment l'oublier, pourtant, quand la nouvelle ère des images imposée par Internet et les tristement célèbres "réseaux sociaux" donnent aux interrogations qui hantent son travail, amorcé bien avant eux, une actualité redoutable ?



Compression 2014, 60 x 68.5" 152.4cm x 174cm oil and acrylic ink on canvas



Champagne Life 2014, 60 x 185" 152.4cm x 470cm oil, flashe, lacquer ink on canvas

L'exposition londonienne de la Saatchi Gallery s'intitule Champagne Life. Bien qu'il s'agisse d'un événement rassemblant les créations d'une quinzaine de femmes de diverses nationalités (devenant ainsi "the first all-female art exhibition at Saatchi", comme le nota le Guardian), elle emprunte son titre à une œuvre de Julia Wachtel de 5 m de longueur sur 1,5 m de hauteur. Paradoxalement, ce n'est pas grâce à sa taille que la toile en question se distingue. En matière de gigantisme, elle est en effet battue à plate couture par celle de Maha Malluh : 10 m de longueur et plus de 4 m de hauteur. Ce sont d'autres qualités qui rendent ce polyptyque remarquable. D'abord, le dosage précis de couleurs, utilisées en nombre compté (jaune, bleu, vert). Mais aussi le rythme que l'artiste impulse au tableau à la fois par l'ajustement de ses cinq parties, les motifs et l'exquise manipulation du noir et du blanc jusque dans l'ombre du sujet principal, une figurine de Minnie (la compagne de Mickey Mouse) bleu vif, deux fois répétée sur deux panneaux distincts, les autres – placés résolument à l'envers – représentant Kanye West et Kim Kardashian se tenant par la main



Stripe 2014, 60 x 185" 152.4cm x 541cm oil, acrylic ink and Flashe on canvas

Chez Elizabeth Dee, l'an passé, l'œuvre de Wachtel intitulée *Stripe* se distinguait, elle, par l'utilisation d'images du chanteur sud-coréen Psy, combinées avec une représentation du même Psy façon cartoon et une image deux fois répétée de l'actuel dirigeant de la Corée du Nord, Kim Jong-un. Depuis leur apparition au début des années 80, les œuvres de Julia Wachtel ont d'ailleurs affirmé une belle constance dans leur forme. Ce sont généralement plusieurs panneaux assemblés, qui mélangent des images d'actualité (personnages ou scènes plus complexes) et des héros de cartoon, semblables à ceux qui furent si populaires aux États-Unis, dans les Années 60 et 70, sur les enseignes publicitaires, sur des cartes de vœux, des dessins satiriques... Si les célébrités et les images de cartoon sont convoquées à tort et à travers – il semble qu'elles doivent aujourd'hui justifier absolument n'importe quoi – l'influence war-holienne est ici bel et bien réelle, dans la forme comme dans le fond, et sans détour. Wachtel s'en saisit à une époque où, il faut le rappeler, Warhol n'avait guère de succès que pour sa frivolité et sa mondanité, autant dire pas vraiment de succès dans l'industrie de l'art, qui d'ailleurs n'en était pas encore réellement une.

Julia Wachtel étudia à la School of Visual Arts de New York et suivit l'enseignement de l'Independent Study Program du Whitney Museum, mais, pour elle, tout commença peut-être avec une exposition à laquelle elle ne participait pas. Organisée par le critique américain Douglas Crimp à l'Artists Space de New York à l'automne 1977, l'exposition s'intitulait *Pictures* et rassemblait les œuvres de cinq jeunes artistes : Robert Longo, Sherrie Levine, Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein et Philip Smith. Le texte qui accompagnait l'exposition fit rapidement figure de manifeste pour une génération pressée d'en découdre avec le legs imposant de l'art minimal et de l'art conceptuel, pressée, surtout, d'injecter dans les œuvres des préoccupations directement



Spirit 2015, 60 x 92" 152.4cm x 234cm oil and acrylic ink on canvas

inspirées par le poids spectaculaire pris par les images dans la vie ordinaire, et par leur complexité latente affleurant sous une apparence quasi publicitaire. "Jamais nous n'avons été à ce point gouvernés par les images. Celles des journaux, des magazines, de la télévision, du cinéma. Notre expérience directe, elle, recule, jusqu'à paraître triviale. Alors qu'elles avaient auparavant pour fonction d'interpréter la réalité, il semble qu'elles aient désormais usurpé sa place. Il devient donc impératif de comprendre l'image en soi, non pas comme un accès à une réalité perdue, mais plutôt comme une structure qui a sa signification propre. Car les images sont caractérisées par un phénomène qui, pour être souvent noté, est insuffisamment compris : c'est que leur contenu nous échappe, leur sens est extraordinairement opaque. L'événement réel et l'événement fictif, l'anodin et l'horrible, l'ordinaire et l'exotique, le possible et le fantastique : tout est confondu dans l'universelle similarité de l'image", écrit notamment Douglas Crimp dans ce catalogue.

Les artistes qui prirent part à cette exposition se retrouvèrent d'ailleurs dans la première manifestation d'une galerie qui allait s'imposer comme une figure de proue de l'avant-garde : la Metro Pictures. Fondée par Helene Winer, une ancienne directrice de l'Artists Space, et par Janelle Reiring, de la galerie Leo Castelli, son nom renvoyait autant à l'industrie cinématographique qu'au texte de Douglas Crimp. Julia Wachtel rejoint, quant à elle, Nature Morte, un espace autogéré par les artistes fondé en 1982 par Peter Nagy et Alan Belcher, qui fut, pendant quelques années, le lieu de nouvelles propositions artis-

Lorsqu'il définit, en 1977, le terrain d'apparition de ces images jugées moins inoffensives qu'il y paraît, Douglas Crimp évoque le cinéma, la télévision, les journaux et les magazines. Mais, presque quarante ans plus tard, tandis qu'Internet a donné à ces images une massive, constante et ininterrompue réalité, ses propos résonnent d'une saisissante façon. La fiabilité des images, leur complexité, questionnées sinon dénoncées alors, ne sont aujourd'hui qu'un vague bruit de fond accompagnant leur consommation immodérée. Dans cet environnement, l'œuvre de Julia Wachtel



WTF! 2014, 60 x 106" 152.4cm x 269cm oil, flashe, lacquer ink on canvas

peut sans crainte affirmer une grande permanence – et si, dans les années 80, elle utilisait des images imprimées, ce sont désormais celles qui apparaissent et disparaissent sous forme digitale qui constituent son matériau principal. Dans ses tableaux, ces images sont toujours combinées avec les mêmes personnages de cartoon. Leur qualité graphique rythme la composition qui, linéaire, semble fonctionner comme une succession de notes de musique déployées sur une partition, se répétant parfois à l'identique. On ne sait quel beat elles expriment en sourdine, et même lorsqu'il semble évident, le sens de leur combinaison (cette succession qui les apparente aux éléments d'une phrase) excède ce qui affleure à leur surface. Ce portrait d'Hillary Clinton accolé à l'image, répétée deux fois, d'une statuette de vénus préhistorique de la fertilité (Spirit, 2014) a ainsi bien d'autres choses à exprimer que ce qu'elle semble indiquer au premier abord.

Au fond, il serait délicat d'interpréter ces toiles de manière littérale – comme trop d'œuvres actuelles invitent à le faire. Elles ne sont pas des commentaires scolaires sur le monde. Que le côté dramatique ou le côté comique l'emporte, elles offrent aux images qui les composent – et à leur circulation – une alternative, une échappatoire poétique et onirique. Elles se présentent comme de petits morceaux de phrases, mais parlent le langage des arts visuels, pas celui de la littérature ou du journalisme. C'est un langage que chacun croit pouvoir posséder aujourd'hui, mais qui, en vérité, demande un apprentissage qui s'apparente à celui d'une langue étrangère, avec ses règles, sa grammaire et ses figures de style. Tandis qu'elle fête cette année ses 60 ans, Julia Wachtel possède à la perfection ce langage : ses peintures, où s'expriment aussi d'époustouflantes qualités de coloriste, sont comme de grandes fresques qui raconteront notre époque aux générations futures, si toutefois elles veulent bien apprendre le langage de l'art.



Girl 2014, 60 x 80" 152.4cm x 203.2cm oil, flashe, lacquer ink on canvas