

MODERN PAINTERS

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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

