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Julia Wachtel
ELIZABETH DEE GALLERY

Julia Wachtel, *Time and Again*, 2014, oil and screenprint on canvas, 60 x 93 1/2 inches

In *Stripe*, 2014, the friezelike centerpiece of her recent exhibition "Empowerment," Julia Wachtel pairs silk-screened images of North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un with painted cartoons of South Korean pop star Psy, singer of the once ubiquitous "Gangnam Style." The juxtaposition is cemented visually by the gray band that gives the work its title. In comparing these figures, the artist prompts us to ask where the real power lies -- totalitarian military might or Web-age celebrity -- and how the mass media work to reinforce or undermine its status. It's an area that Wachtel, influenced by the Pictures generation, has been exploring since the 1980s.

Wachtel began appropriating cartoonsin her earliest works, borrowing them from cheap greeting cards to comment on our psychosocial condition as consumers of images and goods. This strategy remains central to her visual language, the often crass drawings functioning as a kind of debased Greek chorus when presented alongside reproductions of historial or contemporary import. In "Empowerment," cartoons crop up several times, in more or less mocking cast. *Wild*, 2014, for example, features hazy silk screens of a California wildfire surrounding a grotesque anthropomorphized cigarette holding up a lighter and leering in wicked satisfaction. Is this the too-obvious parable of cause and effect it appears to be? Or rather, as Wachtel has hinted, about "the experience of 'making sense,'" a meditation on the viewer's own assumptions?

In her essay on Wachtel's work for the catalogue that accompanied the artist's 2014-15 survey at The Cleveland Museum of Art, Quinn Latimer argues, compellingly, that Wachtel's juxtapositions not only tackle but also transcend issues around the significatory power of existing images and the politics of their appropriation, thereby taking on our "emotional and economic investment" therein. Latimer

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writes: "That these images are so often of figures suggests her interest in them: in emotion and psychology and the figurative person at their center, even if that person is simply a cipher, a vessel, or projection surface for some other subjectivity."

"Empowerment was certainly crowded with figures, plucked from wildly diverse periods and genres, and from fact, fiction, and places in between. Perhaps the most striking -- and the most topical -- of these personages could be found in *Spirit*, 2014, in which a silk-screened image of Hilary Clinton, backed by Old Glory, looks nobly out from the left portion of the canvas while two painted representations of a rotund prehistoric carving, the famous Kostenki Venus, occupy its remaining two thirds. Where *Spirit* seems to emblematize feminine power, *The Execution of Abstraction*, 2015, depicts a man cowed into submission by technology, crawling around at the base of a room-filling mainframe as if hunting in vain for a blown fuse and perhaps, given the title, for the roots and direction of representation itself.

Wachtel's repeated transcendence of the aesthetic barriers raised by taste and social class canbe invigorating. And considered in isolation, the near-endless flexibility of her visual grammar is a clear strength. Yet ironically, this very open-enedness often also has a flattening, even deadening effect, especially when accompanied by the curiously muted coloration of such works as *Wild* and *Time and Again*, 2014. The art of online image search has made pointed visual juxtaposition easy for artists and non-artists alike; in "Empowerment," Wachtel, an early adopter of this mode of artmaking, revealed herself suddenly racing to keep up.

--Michael Wilson