

JULIA WACHTEL

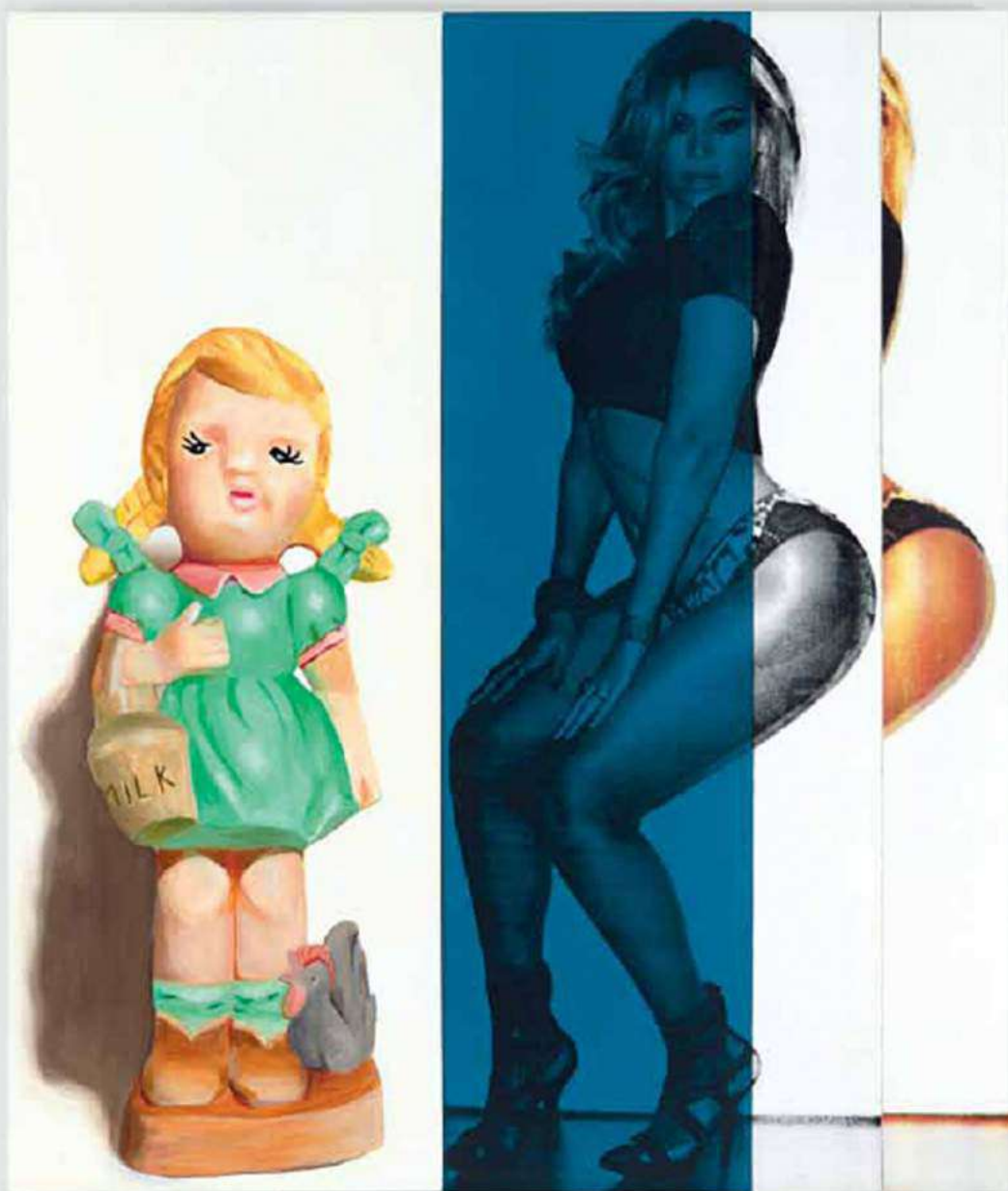
PRESS

# L'OFFICIEL ART PARIS

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**Julia Wachtel**

Ai Benjamin Meyers, Nicolas Party, Max Hooper Schneider, Matthew Lutz-Kinoy, Xavier Veilhan, Andreas Angelidakis, Michael Smith, Cerith Wyn Evans, Peter Fend, Hiwa K, Jacqueline de Jong



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JULIA WACHTEL VIT  
ET TRAVAILLE À NEW YORK.  
ELLE EST REPRÉSENTÉE  
PAR LA GALERIE ELIZABETH  
DEE, NEW YORK.



# Julia Wachtel American Landscapes

Propos recueillis par Pierre-Alexandre Mateos & Charles Teyssou

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Julia Wachtel, *Massapega*, 1992, huile et acrylique sur toile, 71,1 x 200,7 cm.

PART OF THE SEMINAL EXHIBITION "INFOTAINMENT" IN THE MID 1980S, JULIA WACHTEL HAS BEEN KNOWN SINCE THEN FOR HER PANORAMIC LANDSCAPE PAINTING, WHICH JUXTAPOSE NEWS ITEMS WITH GROTESQUE CARTOONS. AHEAD OF HER SOLO-EXHIBITION AT ELIZABETH DEE

GALLEY IN NOVEMBER, JULIA WACHTEL DISCUSSES THE INCEPTION OF HER PRACTICE, THE EAST VILLAGE CONCEPTUALISTS SCENE CENTRED AROUND THE ICONIC NATURE MORTE GALLERY, AND THE BLOSSOMING OF MEME CULTURE.



A gauche, Julia Wachtel, *Within and Between*, 1984, huile sur toile, 274,3 x 61 cm. Page de droite, de haut en bas : Julia Wachtel, *I'm OK, You're OK*, 1992, huile et acrylique sur toile, 121,9 x 182,9 cm ; Julia Wachtel, *You Disappear Me*, 1987, huile et laque sur toile, 122 x 269 cm.

PHOTO ETIENNE PROSSARD COURTESY DE L'ARTISTE ET ELIZABETH DEE, NEW YORK.

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**Titre : American Landscapes**

Chapo: Part of the seminal exhibition infotainment of the mid 80's, Julia Wachtel has been known since then for her landscape painting that were commenting the actual socio-political climate by juxtaposing a pop and cartoon iconography with news images. Ahead of her solo-exhibition at Elizabeth Dee Galley in November, Julia Wachtel discuss the inception of her practice, the East Village Conceptualists scene around the iconic Nature Morte gallery and the blossoming of meme culture.

**On which project are you currently working on?**

Right now, I am working on a solo exhibition scheduled for this November at Elizabeth Dee Gallery in New York. I will be presenting 9 large scale paintings. It's a continuation of my last show at the gallery. This new body of work is more focused on the t.v. scape, and an emotional response to the post truth American landscape.

**Let's go back to the very beginning of your practice. You finished your studies in 1979 in New York by graduating from the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program. What do you consider being your first artwork?**

Discounting the fact that I've been making artworks since childhood, I guess I would start with the installation piece I made for my very first exhibition in 1979 at PS1 in NYC. I was given my own small room in which I created a living room situation. I placed a t.v. on a table as one would normally see in a home. On the t.v. was a loop of "home movies". I shot them in super 8, in b&w and color and then transferred it to video. There were home stereo speakers in the room that played a soundtrack loop comprised of dialogue from t.v. soap operas, that I edited. The work dealt with a collision between the filmed intimate interactions I set up with friends and and the sampled soundtrack.

**Was it your first and only installation?**

I had been setting up installations in my loft in Soho. I was making billboard like structures made out of metal construction studs and sheet metal. They were essentially minimal sculptures upon which I projected images. I had found a discarded box on the sidewalk, with hundreds of slides that included everything from family snapshots to industrial photography. It was so random, and a resource I mined for some time. It was based on that work that I was invited to be in the P.S. 1 exhibition. But the slides were soon replaced by store bought posters that I arranged on the wall. I never went back to installation work.

**Could you describe the poster work?**

The posters were the kind that you might imagine a kid would put up in their bedroom. Jimi Hendrix, Albert Einstein, Debby Harry, a cat dipping it's paw into a goldfish bowl, etc. You have to remember that at this time there was no internet and image culture was disseminated through a much more limited variety of platforms. I set up the posters in a row on the wall. Almost like cells on a film strip. I would then project shadows of viewers onto the posters, and trace the shadow and fill in with magic marker. It was my version of graffiti. The posters when exhibited would be wheat pasted directly to the wall and scraped off after the exhibition. So they only existed for the duration of the show

**Later on, in 1983 you started your greeting cards series in which you appropriated cartoon images.**

As I said I was working with posters which obviously meant going to a store to buy them. The posters were expensive. To save money I would do the first selection and rough edit in my head standing in the store. I'd be there for an hour or so composing the work. I'd then buy maybe 15 posters and take them back to the studio to work out the piece. So my familiarity with the store as studio I believe influenced the transition to the greeting cards. One day I was in a stationary store and saw some cards that immediately attracted me. They were what are called "studio cards". Vertical in format with a cartoon character that typically expressed some kind



of vulnerability or inadequacy. "I would have written you a card myself, but I'm too stupid" – being a typical kind of message. I liked the fact that the cards were proxies for expression, which in some respect could be said for an artwork. The cartoon figures were often standing in a space that looked like a modernist painting. The backgrounds might resemble a Jackson Pollack or Clyfford Still painting, for instance. The fact that there was such a painterly element in these cards led me to the idea to restage them in paintings. It was somewhat of a eureka moment as the greeting cards coalesced so many things I was interested in. They described a ground zero position of subjectivity that dealt with class and anxiety. Scaling them up to nearly life size and putting them in paintings elevated the significance of the cartoons while at the same time focusing on our complicated need for validation in the way we interact with and assign value to systems of representation.

**I am very interested by the intellectual context that you were referring to. Could you tell us more about the East Village Conceptualists scene that was revolving around Nature Morte gallery founded by Alan Belcher and Peter Nagy?**

As well as Nature Morte, there was International With Monument which first showed Jeff Koons and was founded by Meyer Vaisman, Kent Klamen and Elizabeth Koury and Cash-Newhouse Gallery which was founded by Oliver. We were looking at the work of artists such as Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine, Jack Goldstein, Vito Acconci, Louise Lawler, to name a few. Those three galleries were the core galleries that were involved in conceptual based programs. Other galleries like Cable and Jay Gorney followed. This scene was all happening while at the same time the Graffiti Art scene and Neo Expressionists were also getting a lot of attention. We felt there was a lot at stake, remember Ronald Reagan was elected during this period and the aids epidemic was ravaging the art world. Not that the work was literally activist, but we viewed ourselves as having a social responsibility to not turn our back on the mechanisms of power. But we were also very pleasure oriented and looking to exploit that as well. Maybe you could call it the politics and aesthetics of seduction.

**I have read Haim Steinbach statement that the Picture Generation had "a cool approach to hot culture" unlike your generation who his embracing the seduction inherent to mainstream media.**

I will speak for myself because I think we have all approached this somewhat differently. I took the Duchampian idea of appropriation via the work of Warhol, Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine, as a given. I didn't see appropriation as a radical act as I felt it had already been fully absorbed. At that time, my interest was more psychoanalytical. I was focused on how our identities are embedded into a representational system. That was more my focus rather than a media critique per se or an exploration into the idea of the death of originality. I used poetic strategies with the aim of putting the viewer inside a visual and emotional space rather than locating the viewer "coolly" outside the artwork and critically looking in. I wanted the viewer to have to dig their way out.

**This interest was epitomized in the American Colour series that you first showed at American Fine Arts in the early 90's. You painted people confessing their personal stories or actors in overwrought moments from daytime TV shows.**

I've been interested in what we now call reality t.v. since it's inception. I remember being glued to the t.v. as a kid in 1971 watching the t.v. documentary "An American Family", which one could arguably cite as the first reality t.v. show. But in the early 90s, reality t.v. as a term didn't exist. What did exist were t.v. shows such as the Oprah Winfrey Show in which people would come and tell stories of their personal traumas – they were sexually abused, drug addicts or something else. At the time, I coined the term confessional t.v. to describe the imagery I was using. I saw this voluntary self-revelation as a form of public confession and hoped-for redemption. So from Warhol's 15 minutes of fame we flip the coin to the other side, where it's not just 15 minutes in the spotlight but the hope that t.v. exposure will allow for a transformative experience. It's a very perverse idea. The evolution of this of course is the snapchat – Facebook culture in which our lives are being constantly externalized into pictures or short videos.

**Your work embodies Julia Kristeva assumption that the monopoly of religion into building collective myth has been atomized by our image culture which now constitute the new sacred.**



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De haut en bas, Julia Wachtel, *The Dissipation of Authority*, 2014, huile et acrylique sur toile, 152,4 x 229,9 cm ; Julia Wachtel, *Proof*, 2015, huile et acrylique sur toile, 152,4 x 248 cm.

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**Your work embodies Julia Kristeva assumption that the monopoly of religion into building collective myth has been atomized by our image culture which now constitute the new sacred.**

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The media is the new sacred and it is all surface. It is not tied to vertical storytelling and history. It's constantly regenerating and is disposable. There is little depth left in representation as it streams into our lives. We have become super computers in our ability to process more and more pictures. Our operating system continually updates to accommodate more information. And our nervous system keeps recalibrating accordingly. To some degree the aesthetics or poetics of my paintings is a visual response to that, to recreate that in the form of a painting, to put that into a static object that is meant for contemplation.

**From TV culture, you shifted to the digital realm. What has been the implication of the meme culture and 4chan in your practice?**

Meme culture is fascinating. It's a vibrant aspect of the democratic nature of the internet but of course it's not value free, and functions for multiple ends. That said I'm amazed at how much time and energy people put into creating memes that are let loose on the internet. The production value is often really high and I'm always amazed at how invested these anonymous content providers are. I've made one painting which I showed in my last show at Elizabeth Dee gallery that used memes. The painting, which is titled Stripe, paired the image of Kim Jong-Un with Psy from Gang Nam style video. I not only used stills from the video, but also two different memes of Psy dancing that I found on the internet. The memes were created as how-to-draw Psy instructional diagrams.

**From the late 80s until now, you have adopted one of painting's most traditional genres, the landscape. You collided political content from Chernobyl to the Berlin Wall, the great fiction of banality: reality television. What was the initial impulse behind it?**

The first painting from my Landscape painting series was made in 1989. I had posed the question what would a contemporary history painting look like. I realized that I couldn't abandon illusionistic space as the painting had to stand up to television and newspapers which were depicting the same scenes. Instead I tried to disrupt the integrity of the image with the color panels to at least create a sense of dislocation. As it turned out momentous worldwide events unfolded shortly after I made the first of this series – namely the taking down of the Berlin Wall and the Tiananmen Square Massacre in Beijing both in 1989.

**Celebrity culture has had as well a profound influence on your practice.**

If one is making paintings of the media landscape it's almost impossible to ignore celebrity culture. Back in the 80s I sourced a lot of imagery from People magazine. At that time the magazine featured stories of everyday people who for whatever reason were newsworthy, whether it was a crime related story or some sort of personal achievement. Now I would say most of the editorial revolves around celebrities. I would guess that more people know the names of Kim Kardashian and Kanye West's children than they do the name of our vice president or Speaker of the House. As images celebrities hold a lot of power. They are projected into our intimate physical environment, whether on our laptop in bed or on the grocery line. I'm trying to reabsorb this kind of imagery in a way that brings the power back to us as it was produced for our consumption in the first place.

**To conclude, which image has impacted you lately?**

The image of Trump with Russian diplomat Sergey Kislyak in the oval office. Betraying classified info, all smiles.

Julia Wachtel lives and works in New York. She is represented by Elizabeth Dee Gallery, New York.





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Julia Wachtel, *Bad*, 2015, huile et acrylique sur toile,  
152,4 x 381 cm.