

Erin Currier: Rogues and Reinas

Blue Rain Gallery
544 South Guadalupe Street

IN ERIN CURRIER'S ART, PRAXIS MAKES PERFECT. IN A WAY LIKE MANET'S. AMONG THE SOURCES

that inform her work, Currier cites the social realism of Latin American mural tradition—which traces back to Courbet's realism—and themes and motifs from Eastern spirituality. Of course, if the art is strong, it often doesn't matter to the viewer how the artist got there. But where the art is especially strong, as here, it should.

On its face, *Rogues and Reinas* (September 16–30) is a thoroughly engaging portrait gallery of public figures from New Mexico who serve as “vivid examples of roguish rebellion and queenly dignity personified. . . fighting to keep cultural traditions alive, to preserve the natural world, and to defend those who cannot defend themselves against police brutality and corporate abuse” (artist's statement). For Currier, what sustains their struggles are the “unique, living, and ever-transforming traditions that New Mexico has given rise to—in the fields of fine art, mixed martial arts, language, culture, and activism.”

But Currier's artistic path to the living traditions of New Mexico culture runs through mid-19th century Paris. Few visitors to the Musée d'Orsay today focus on the ladies of Manet's *Le balcon* (1868–69), or link Manet's *Le balcon* to Goya's *Las majas en el balcón* (1810–12), in which two cheeky girls stare directly

at the viewer. But it helps, if we are to “get” Manet there—and Currier here. The bourgeois vignette of *Le balcon* breaks with academic convention by rejecting the need for a narrative—the seated ladies are not depicted as protagonists in a story; they are simply portrayed—depicted as themselves, one of whom gazes directly at us.

The full import of that gaze is also on view at the Musée d'Orsay. It can be seen in Manet's earlier *Luncheon on the Grass* (*Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*) (1862–63) and above all in his *Olympia* (1863), in which a clearly contemporary nude model, smiling at the viewer with the artful aplomb of the Peplos Kore, mischievously dispels the four-century Renaissance convention of suspension of disbelief by her provocative pose and by that direct gaze at—and thus, engagement with—the viewer/voyeur. That gaze is arguably the harbinger of modernism, whose core thesis is that authentic art deals with contemporary life. That's a lesson not lost in Currier's art.

Rogues and Reinas is so rich in visual and iconographic import, because Currier's praxis relies upon an “unapologetically narrative” approach that, like Manet's, has a dual resonance: it is at once traditional and modern. Currier's portraits convey

both the immediacy of an Annie Leibovitz photo portrait—where cryptic narrative is implicit in the sitter's celebrity status—and the iconic quality of a Trecento or a Byzantine saint altarpiece, replete with motifs recounting the saint's story. Yet Currier eschews biographic attributes that directly identify the subject, opting instead for discarded food and candy wrappers, torn ads, and poster fragments—a “collage constructed of disherited consumer waste”—which she recycles to create an iconography that tells the subject's own story. That iconography is often built around a central attribute which the subjects hold to indicate their achievement and impact.

The result in each case is art that is both portrait and painting. Recalling Manet's frontal gaze and open artifice, Currier's subjects are at the same time iconic and iconoclastic, part homage and part reportage. Currier's subtle iconography raises portraiture in *Rogues and Reinas* to the level of painting, and it elevates socio-political issues from agitprop to humanistic art.

A humanist chronicling the status of women could draw a feminist line from Goya's *majas*—seeking a life for themselves as courtesans—to Currier's maids in *Harvey Girls de Nuevo Mexico*, each of whom holds a book that alludes to modern women's, and their own, empowerment. The centerpiece of Currier's series is *American Women (Dismantling the Border)*. The large canvas anchors the recurrent theme of *Rogues and Reinas*, depicting a row of indigenous women against a sweep of desert panorama scarred by a man-made border wall topped with barbed wire and stretching to the horizon. The women hold long metal bars whose purpose is revealed by the dismantled portion of the wall just behind them. The quiet stance and self-assurance with which they face the viewer convey a powerful iconography of activism as a response to discrimination and oppression.

Rogues and Reinas is about prominent New Mexicans in struggles for cultural identity and social justice—that's what makes it local. What makes Currier's portraits universal is her ability to invest her subjects with the true stature of icons—exemplars of the human spirit. So while Currier's rogues and *reinas* would be at home in the New Mexico Museum of Art, I would submit, *pace* Manet, they would make an even better fit in the Musée d'Orsay.

—Richard Tobin



Erin Currier, *American Women (Dismantling the Border)*, 2016, acrylic and mixed media on panel, 48 x 72 in.