

## Part III: Dueling Gazes

[the cut.com/2018/04/can-a-male-artist-still-paint-a-female-nude.html](https://www.thecut.com/2018/04/can-a-male-artist-still-paint-a-female-nude.html)

By Michael Slenske and Molly Langmuir

April 18, 2018



### Part I: “I quit doing the figure. I’m only doing abstract art.”

*Male artists wonder whether they can work with the female form, while the world questions what their intentions were in the first place. By Michael Slenske*

The western art canon is in no small part a parade of famous female nudes, from Praxiteles’s *Aphrodite of Knidos* from the fourth century B.C. to Manet’s 19th-century prostitutes (notably the recumbent, unamused *Olympia*) to John Currin’s *Playboy-meets-Fragonard* women — and almost all of them have been made by white male artists. Of course, as art historian Linda Nochlin famously observed, it was difficult for women to paint nudes when historically they weren’t even allowed to attend figure-drawing classes because of the naked people necessarily present.

While feminist art critics have for decades pointed out the shortcomings of the “male gaze,” the post-#MeToo reckoning with the art world’s systemic sexism, its finger-on-the-scale preference for male genius, has given that critique a newly powerful force. And the question of the moment has become: Is it still an artistically justifiable pursuit for a man to paint a naked woman?

To answer this question, I reached out to a number of prominent male artists known for doing just that (as well as for painting nude men). But most of them — including Currin, Carroll Dunham, Jeff Koons, and the young Mexican-American painter Alex Becerra (some of whose nudes are drawn from escort ads) — declined to talk about their work’s relationship to the current social climate. Presumably, they worried about unintentionally saying the wrong thing that would then echo endlessly across social media, damaging their reputations. For emerging artists, there is the fear of a possibly career-derailing gestalt fail. “I’ve been in conversations with other [male artists], and they were just like, ‘I quit working with the figure. I’m only doing abstract work, because I don’t want to touch it,’ ” says Marty Schnapf while walking me through his recent solo show “Fissures in the Fold” at Wilding Cran Gallery in Los Angeles. He thinks we could be living through “a new Victorian age” — or at least that’s his explanation for the mixed responses he’s received for his gender-confusing neo-Cubist nudes, which play out sexualized fantasies in hotel rooms and surrealist swimming-pool dreamscapes, and evoke Joan Semmel’s erotic works from the 1970s. “I counted: There’s actually more male nudes in my show,” Schnapf says, though it wasn’t immediately discernible to my eye, which is perhaps the point. One of Schnapf’s female artist friends grilled him about the intent of the work, while a few collectors even gasped when confronted with the infinity loop of breasts, Day-Glo mane, and charcoal-blackened genital geometries of his ghost-lit spider dame, *Will-o’-the-wisp*.