
Mette Tommerup

Full Salute

November 19, 2011 – January 28, 2012



Mette Tommerup began speaking to contemporary art historian, critic and theorist Alpesh Kantilal Patel about her work while preparing for her show “*Full Salute*” at Dorsch Gallery in November 2011. In this brochure, you’ll find excerpts from their conversations and an essay by Patel reflecting on her work.

A: Can you talk about what you have been working on recently and how you became interested in making still life paintings?

M: I recently finished a body of work related to ideas of the sublime in the landscape based on the work of Casper David Friedrich. I updated signifiers from the romantic landscape tradition such as the moon. I turned the moon into the act of mooning in the landscape (and had my sister in Denmark moon the landscape on chalky cliffs, very similar to the ones found in Friedrich’s work). In the process of researching consumer items that dealt with the idea of mooning and protest I came across a mooning garden gnome figurine, which I purchased online and then painted as a traditional still life.

We’ve talked a lot about identity and post-identity, how do the still lifes operate within those discussions? The paintings of vegetables aim to go the core of the question: Is post-identity even possible? Innocent tomatoes and peppers become stand-ins for an exploration of gender, race and sexuality. In this bizarre post-feminist, post-black, post-gay, post-straight, post-post-colonial garden of vegetables and gnomes, no object is spared from being classi-

fied. In general, contemporary critical thinking systems seem to polarize discussions of identity into a subject/object dualism.

Most of the paintings in the show are direct still life paintings of objects. There is one exception which is a revised version of Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* (O.J.). Why did you include this piece in the exhibition? What are you offering in your revised version? I have long found the use of the 5 prostitutes - two wearing African masks - wildly out of date and inappropriate, but it is mind-boggling that despite how offensive the work is, *Les Femmes d’Alger* continues to be situated outside of these concerns. For instance, here is art critic Jonathan Jones’ description of *Les Femmes d’Alger* on its 100 year anniversary in the British newspaper *The Guardian* in 2007:

*Picasso picked his subject matter precisely because it was a cliché: he wanted to show that originality in art does not lie in narrative, or morality, but in formal invention. This is why it’s misguided to see *Les Femmes d’Alger* as a painting “about” brothels, prostitutes or colo-*

rialism. The great, lamentable tragedy of 18th- and 19th-century art, compared with the brilliance of a Michelangelo, had been to lose sight of the act of creation. That’s what Picasso blasts away. Modernism in the arts meant exactly this victory of form over content.

It strikes me that if content is irrelevant, then why use forms that are still recognizable as woman and African masks?

Can you explain the process of creating your revised version of Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* – and your work in general? My process included taking the original Picasso painting and making a photomontage in which I kept the fruit, but then replaced the female objects with the band Village People and two African-American men holding hands. I tried a lot of different permutations of the latter before settling on one photomontage from which I made an oil painting.

Typically, my sources of imagery come from the internet (mostly images that have gone viral), photomontages I create from disparate sources, photos I take myself, as well as objects I buy and paint from life. When I use appropriated images as a

starting point I usually put the source away while the work is being painted. These images are just points of departure. The editing and installation of my small paintings - a non linear, sometimes absurd juxtaposition of images - help unravel traditional readings of my work as a group of paintings.

Can you talk about how the paintings of weapons of various sorts fit into you thinking about post-identity? Incredible new form was invented to support identity based work; and work described as formal was hardly disembodied. I’m thinking of the evocative color field paintings which Clement Greenberg somehow hijacked into his limiting theory of formalism. When I think of post-identity it points to the limitations of a subject/object discourse and the failure of the systems of analysis we have for discussing artworks. One of my still life paintings, *Portable gun case with green foam*, depicts a weapon in an open case where the negative impression of the gun can be seen in the foam in the lid. I was going for a color field looking painting within the box opposed to the gun. I wanted to do a painting that synthesized the themes that the exhibition title “*Full Salute*” brings to the fore.



Opposite page
clockwise from
top left

*Garden Gnome
(3/4 Rear View)*
2011
Oil on Linen 16x12"

*Portable Gun Box
with Green Foam*
2011
Oil on Linen,
16x12"



*Les Demoiselles
Stand-ins*
2011
Oil on Canvas,
24x24"



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This page

Still Life Eggplant
2011
Oil on Linen,
12x16"

*Still Life Green
Pepper*
2011
Oil on Linen,
12x16"



Still Life Tomatoes
2011
Oil on Linen,
12x16"



Post-Identity Garden of Failure

By Alpesh Kantilal Patel

In the Western art world, a curious alliance has formed between those that are sympathetic to identity politics and those that have always been suspect of aesthetic judgment being tied to any notion of identity: both groups agree that we are in a ‘post-identity’ era. The former does so purportedly to distinguish between different waves of artistic production concerned with primarily racial, gendered, and sexual difference, but seems to fall back on conceptualizing identity as positional or fixed; while the latter suggests that we are post or over identity, but only to return artistic value back to a dis-embodied art object.¹ Mette Tommerup’s works make a timely intervention in these debates by suggesting a much more complex understanding of artistic meaning and identity formation.

From Identity to Post-Identity

Before launching into a full-fledged discussion of the exhibition, I animate my points above by mapping out briefly the ideological shift from identity to post-identity in the contemporary Western art world.

A useful point of departure is the 1993 Whitney Biennial exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. A watershed moment in the debates on identity, the exhibition received a “maelstrom of negative criticism” for tackling issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality, as Biennial curator Elisabeth Sussman notes.² For instance, art historian Rosalind Krauss bemoaned what she claimed was the tendency in the exhibition to ignore the forms of the artwork—the materials used and the compositional arrangement—and to conflate the meaning of the artworks with the politics of the artists’ perceived identification (racial, sexual, gendered, etc.).³ She claimed that the true meaning of the artwork transcended the identification of the artists—a position characteristic of modernist formalists.

By the late 1990s, rhetoric about globalization often cited the proliferation of international art biennials to infer that the margin had become indistinguishable from and seamlessly enfolded within the center. In addition, a plethora of discourses emerged declaring identity as being “post,” or in some sense irrelevant, in the art world, as well as in academia and the general

press.⁴ For example, one of the curators of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, Thelma Golden, described the artworks of emerging African-American artists in the 2001 “Freestyle” exhibition she organized as “post-black.”⁵ Associate Curator of “Freestyle” Christine Kim explained that artworks in the exhibition were suggestive of an incipient aesthetic sensibility that was distinct from the generation of African-American artists—such as Glenn Ligon, Kara Walker, and Lorna Simpson—who had become well-known during the heyday of identity politics in the early 1990s.⁶ She implied that the coining of the term “post-black” was not meant to suggest that racial identity was no longer relevant for a new generation of African-American artists.

As art historian Amelia Jones notes, however, “post-black” was taken up zealously by conservative art critics who leapt to posit that Golden’s exhibition is axiomatic, or proof, that we are “beyond” identity.⁷ For instance, the *New Yorker’s* Peter Schjeldahl wrote that “the ordeal of race in America may be verging on an upbeat phase that is without precedent” in his review of the exhibition.⁸ His comment, however, seems unduly optimistic and myopic in the context

of those by *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter, who considered with incredulity the term “post-identity” within broader socio-historical issues present in the United States in 2001:

*...when affirmative action is in retreat; when poverty is a constant; when prisons continue to be holding pens for minority men; when American culture persists in reminding minorities, in ways large and small, that they are a problem... a wholesale rejection of identity-based art at the behest of a white-dominated art market and critical establishment would seem, to say the least, short-sighted.*⁹

Cotter’s statement is written just a little more than two months before 9/11—a sobering reminder of what is at stake in facile claims such as post-identity.

Schjeldahl also wrote that “as a prominent curator at the Whitney throughout the nineties, Golden was a doyenne of multiculturalism, pushing agendas that she has now magnanimously set aside.”¹⁰ In other words, Schjeldahl embraces post-black as an aesthetic precisely because he believes

Continued on poster

⁴ See, for instance, the emergence of the term, “post-straight,” perhaps the most surprising use of the “post” label: Chris Nutter, “Post-Straight: How Gay Men Are Remodeling Regular Guys,” *Village Voice*, 8-14 August 2001, accessed October 3, 2011, <http://www.villagevoice.com/2001-08-07/news/post-straight/>.

⁵ Thelma Golden, Christine Y. Kim, Hamza Walker, et al., *Freestyle*, exhibition catalogue, (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001), 14.

⁶ Jori Finkel, “A Reluctant Fraternity, Thinking Post-Black,” *New York Times*, 10 June 2007, accessed October 3, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/10/arts/design/10fink.html?pagewanted=>

⁷ Amelia Jones, “Post Black Bomb,” *Tema Celeste* (March/April 2002): 52-55.

⁸ Peter Schjeldahl, “Breaking Away: A Flowering of Young African-American Artists,” *New Yorker*, 11 June 2001, accessed October 3, 2011, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2001/06/11/010611craw_artworld.

⁹ Holland Cotter, “Beyond Multiculturalism, Freedom?,” *New York Times*, 29 July 2001, accessed October 3, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/29/arts/architecture-beyond-multiculturalism-freedom.html?scp=1&sq=%22Beyond%20Multiculturalism.%20Freedom%22&st=cse>.

¹⁰ Schjeldahl, “Breaking Away.”

¹ These points are exaggerated for the sake of polemics.

² Elisabeth Sussman, “Then and Now: Whitney Biennial 1993,” *Art Journal* 62: 1 (Spring 2005): 74-79.

³ Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, Silvia Kolbowski, Rosalind Krauss, and Miwon Kwon, “The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial,” *October* 66 (Fall 1993): 3-27.

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Detail from front page of booklet is of *Still Life Eggplant*.
The full image of this painting appears on p 5 of the booklet.

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exhibition “*Full Salute*” by Mette Tommerup, at Dorsch Gallery
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Interview by Alpesh Kantilal Patel and Mette Tommerup.
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