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KATHLEEN GILJE
at
FRANCIS NAUMANN GALLERY



*It [contemporary art] is confiscating banality,
waste and mediocrity to turn them
into values and ideologies.*

Baudrillard

by Miles Mathis

I quit critiquing the [Art Renewal Center Salons](#) a couple of years ago, I was so fed up with new realism. But I stumbled across something today so incredibly awful, so outlandishly horrible, I had to return to my attack on realism. For those of you who don't know, I am myself a realist who paints nudes, so don't read this as one more assault on figuration or classicism by the avant garde. If you think that is what this is, not only are you not keeping up with my writings, you aren't keeping up with art history. New York decided to embrace realism about five years ago, after flirting with the idea for decades. It had already gotten a toe wet with Lucian Freud decades ago, so it then decided to test the waters with a couple of other fish like Fishl, Currin, Saville and so on. This test was so successful that at last it just let down the gates. At that point Odd Nerdrum walked through, and then hundreds of others followed. The National Gallery in Washington had a National Portrait Competition in 2006 as a signal of what they wanted from new realists, and it goes without saying that they found a gaggle of aspiring artists willing to do anything to make it. That is why people go to the big cities, of course: to find the biggest, flabbiest, richest butt so that they can attach their lips directly to it, like a remora sucking on the belly of some billionaire shark.

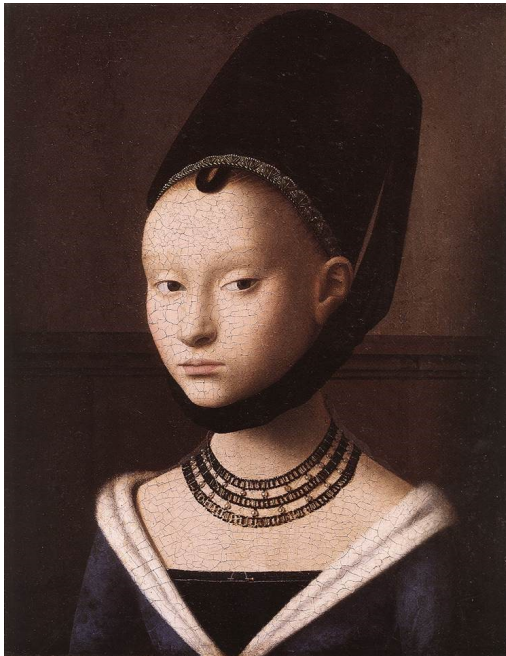


As it happens, this was my introduction to Kathleen Gilje, since I singled her out in [my review of the National Portrait Competition](#). At that time, she had the surpassingly sycophantic and obsequious idea of painting a series of portraits of critics and curators. Her entry was a portrait of Robert Rosenblum, the curator at the Guggenheim, with his head pasted on Gilje's copy of Ingres' Marquis de Pastoret. So the portrait was two bad ideas in one: 1) suck up to an overbearing and tasteless curator, 2) suck up to said curator while bastardizing and thoroughly defiling a great work of art. Of course Rosenblum, being tasteless, found nothing wrong with that. These critics and curators don't love art. They actually hate art, as they have made clear by all their actions in the past century. So the fact that Ingres' portrait was defaced with his own face seemed to him just as it should be.

These curators do things like this all the time. In 2003, the curator of the Tate Britain allowed a contemporary “artist” to wrap Rodin's *The Kiss* in string. It was good there was [a public outcry](#), or the next thing we would have seen would have been Millais' *Ophelia* tagged by a graffiti artist, or the *Rokeby Venus* slashed in a period recreation of feminism**. In 2004, Constable's *The Haywain* was cut into a mosaic and transported from various parts of England to London, where it was put back together in front of a screaming mob. The fact that it was not the actual painting that was cut up does not make

this less vulgar. My point being that contemporary critics, curators, and other administrators of art actually care nothing for art. They only care about spectacle, and this portrait of Rosenblum as Pastoret is just another very clear example of that. Gilje could have stolen into the Art Institute in the dead of night and painted Rosenblum's head on Ingres' actual painting: Rosenblum would only have chuckled and preened. He would have said to himself, “*That* is the true sign of the power of the curator over the artist! If I had told her I would give her a show if she *ate* Ingres' painting, including the frame, she would have done it.”

You would have thought that Gilje had scraped the bottom of the barrel of vulgarity, transparent toadyism, and artistic miscalculation with that, but no. She was back in 2009 at the same gallery with an even worse idea: take some great historical portraits of women and “restore” them. You see, she had worked for a while in restoration at New York University, so this is what she knew. But she didn't want to work in the conservation department, doing necessary work. She wanted to be an *artiste*. Since she had no ideas for paintings of her own, she thought, “Why not piss on other people's paintings? They are dead and can't stop me. The avant garde have already proved that 'quoting' and 'sampling' are a goldmine, and are protected by the courts, so this will be seen as progressive.” As, of course, will shallow politicization and nodding to culture as a sign of relevance.



With this in mind, she “restored” Petrus Christus' portrait above by adding multiple piercings in ear, brow, nose, and lip. Wow, that is exceedingly clever, as you see. This is what Gilje herself has to say about it:

Marring her appearance in this way is a shock to the viewer. It is incongruous and causes us to re-examine our contemporary view of 'beauty'. It moves the impression of a regal, 16th century figure into the realm of contemporary punk culture. The 'restoration' is subtle, but profound in its impact.*

No, it doesn't, and isn't. It causes any sensible person to re-examine contemporary levels of how low an artist will stoop to get into a gallery, how low a gallery will stoop to be part of the game, and how low a writer will stoop to get an article in print. Moving a regal portrait into the realm of punk would only be

interesting to punks, one would think, and what punks have money enough to buy paintings out of Manhattan galleries? But wait, we remember that the rich people in Manhattan have made their money in so many boring and dirty ways, they are desperate to look cool to each other. Even being as cool as a punk is better than anything they have ever achieved or ever will achieve, with their expensive haircuts and sneakers and distressed jeans. They don't have the balls to wear their pants below their buttocks, so this is the best they can do. Won't the party guests be impressed by their verve and daring, buying such a painting and putting it in the living room, next to the big plastic cube and the 40-foot technicolor popsicle?



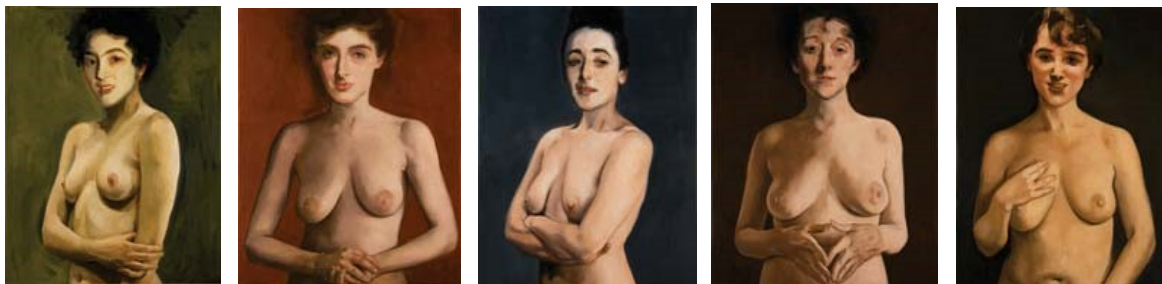
Forty eight of Gilje's "restorations" are affronts to Sargent. That's right, 48. The one above is a redo of his *The Countess of Rocksavage*. I will use it to sharpen my critique a bit. In all of Gilje's paintings, including the one of Rosenblum, the head looks pasted on the body. She is terrible at transitions. We see that again here, where the face isn't even lit like the body. The face has dark shadows to one side, but the body doesn't. And what happened to her skintone? It isn't even close. In Sargent's painting we have lovely alabaster skin lit by natural light; Gilje gives us skin heated up by modern lightbulbs. The lovely touchlights in the eyes are gone as well, so that where Sargent's lady sparkles, Gilje's looks dreary and almost stoned. There is much more dark under the eyes of the copy, and this also adds to this heavy, enervated effect. All lightness is gone. Gilje cuts the hands out, because, well, she doesn't have time for that, but why lop off the top of the head? She does that on all of them. Some bit of veiled aggression? Gilje also tries to mimic Sargent's bravura brushwork, but doesn't have the skill to do it. It is bad enough in the face, where we just get slop (look at the lid fold, oh my god!), but in the body we have a trainwreck. Gilje tries to stay loose in the wide open areas, like above the breasts, but when she gets near a line, she reverts to her old tight style. The arms are nothing like Sargent; they look more like Hockney with his lenses. Witness those elbows. One is a noodle and one is an amateur block-in. And what is the line under the right breast? The shadow is on the other side, so that must be a scar. Why would Gilje add a large chest scar to someone she was "empowering"? [More on that below.]

All her Sargent redo's look like she was on a deadline. They are extremely lazy and rushed. Couldn't she find more than one nude model in all of Manhattan? In the three posted with the article*, we find the same sagging breasts, flabby belly, and formless arms. Don't believe me? Look here,



Another disaster. The head is too big, the skintones are again ghastly, and the figure has been outlined. Why wouldn't she try to match those gorgeous skintones? Why wouldn't she just copy the lovely hands that are already there? And where did that green come from, Army Surplus? Gilje couldn't use Sargent's beige background with a nude, but did she have to give us this olive with way too much yellow? It just proves how lost Gilje is when she isn't copying or restoring. More evidence is the brushwork in the background, which is square on one side and jagged on the other. She should be told that if you are going to let brushstrokes show, you should let more than a couple show. Five or six chicken scratches is not bravura.

And there are worse ones than these. I post only a few thumbs from the gallery page:



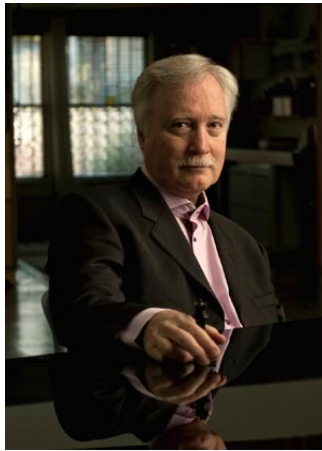
In reviewing Gilje, I also have to review the writer of the piece I read*, Richard Friswell, and the publisher, Artes Magazine. Friswell says,

Kathleen Gilje liberates many of these women of the past, empowering and enabling them in ways that both magnify and celebrate what they could have or did accomplish in their own time.

So showing your tits or getting pierced is now an accomplishment? C'mon, I'm a painter of nudes and a supporter of feminism, but even I don't buy it. To start with, you can't liberate dead women: they are dead. Unless Gilje or Friswell is also a voodoo re-animator, that clause is illogical. In the same way, you can't magnify or celebrate something they did *not* accomplish. And if they *did* accomplish it, they don't need to be empowered or enabled by Gilje and Friswell, do they? The presumption of both artist and writer is incredible. I bet neither one of them bothered to do any research on these women, to see who they really were. Perhaps they weren't in need of any restoration. Perhaps they could paint better than Gilje. Maybe they funded the suffragettes. Most likely they could write better than Friswell. He doesn't even know how to put together a sensible sentence. He is just trying to sell us something by stringing us along with platitudes and political correctness. Same for the magazine. The heading tells us that Artes is "passionate for fine art," but I see no evidence of that here. Anyone who was passionate for fine art wouldn't publish articles like this.

I had finished this article and was about to post it when my fiancée happened to take a look at Gilje's restorations. She saw some things I didn't. Not only did she point out that the crowns of the heads were cropped off, she noticed that the restorations actually looked much less empowered than the originals. And it has nothing to do with the nudity, it has to do with the way the poses have been subtly altered, with a shortening of the neck, an increased slouch, a yellowing of the skin, a stress added to the eyes and countenance, and a cropping of limbs and crown. She suggested that Gilje didn't make these women look worse just because she can't paint as well as Sargent. She made them look worse because she hates them as much as she hates Sargent. It should be clear by now that Gilje didn't choose Sargent because she wanted to create an homage. She chose Sargent because he is considered to be regressive, the last painter of aristocrats. As such, he and his sitters are fair game. "We can and should paint over their paintings, since they are outmoded and politically incorrect." That is the political reading, but the psychological reading is even grubbier. Those who can read the signs can see the veiled aggression. Gilje hates Sargent, not because he painted the rich (she does, too), but because he could paint better than she can. And he actually got paid well for painting the rich, while she has to paint these curators and critics for nothing. They didn't commission the series, she did it on speculation. Is that empowerment, for women or artists? No, it is prostration. As for her attitude toward her sisters of the past, it, too, is black in all ways. She's not empowering them. That is just misdirection. She never intended to empower them. With her lopping of their crowns, she is psychologically scalping them. Nor is she stripping their bodices off to empower them, she is doing it to try to shame them. If she had wanted to empower them, she would have made them look better nude, not worse. These women look ridiculous, and it isn't because they are nude. It is because of the way they are painted, cropped, and presented. This presentation was *not* an accident.

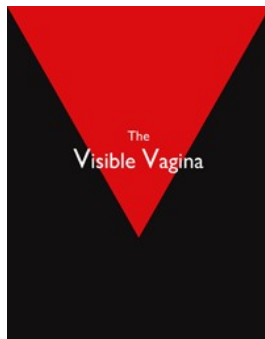
If I blame the writer and the magazine, I have to blame Francis Naumann as well. As it happens, he is also an easy target, leaving himself wide open for deconstruction and psychoanalysis, as we can see from his photo and his email moniker LHOOQ@francisnaumann.com.



Notice that smug, overfed look, like a cat that just ate too much kibble. Also note that he is holding a chesspiece, looks like a queen. And LHOQQ means “She has a hot ass.” Could be avant garde porn lingo, but I assume he is just telling us he loves Duchamp. Why is that important? Duchamp defaced the Mona Lisa by drawing a mustache on her and writing LHOQQ below her.



That is how much Naumann loves art. Naumann shows Duchamp and Picabia in his gallery, as well as realists like Gilje (but he only shows realists if they slather themselves in contemporary pseudopolitics, as we have seen, or deface works by greater artists, like his hero Duchamp did). Duchamp quit art early on to play chess all the time, and for some reason Naumann finds that compelling. He sells Duchamp's book on chess on his front page, just below a book called *The Visible Vagina*.



This vagina book tells us that pictures of the vagina are “intended, in almost all cases, for the exclusive pleasure of men. The goal of this publication is to remove these prurient connotations, implicit even in works of art, ever since the pudendum was prudishly covered by a fig leaf.” Since Naumann and a guy named David Nolan put the book and exhibition together, I guess we are supposed to think they got no “prurient pleasure” from it.

See, we once again have timid prudes trying to convince us they are progressive fence burners. Gilje, through Friswell, tells us that she is trying to empower these women, when what she is really doing is defacing them, in both meanings of that word. We are told that the nudity is an attempt to enable them, when what it really is is the attempt to shame and defile them. Her Sargent restorations are like her other restorations: defilement. Was Duchamp trying to empower either Leonardo or Mona Lisa by drawing a mustache on her? Of course not. Duchamp said it himself, he wanted to destroy the past. Gilje's piercings and strippings are like Duchamp's mustache, a purposeful marring. A destruction of the past, not because it was regressive, but because it contained levels of skill and beauty that he and she cannot match. But at least Duchamp was honest about his resentment. He didn't try to hide it behind pseudo-politics. If he attacked Leonardo or Michelangelo, he did it head on. Gilje defiles and then tries to tell you it is empowerment.

With Francis Naumann, we see the same attitude. For instance, I assume that most people will see his vagina book as progressive, but I just see it as sad. It is so transparent. A couple of guys trying to profit, in bed and out, from the Vagina Monologues phenomenon. I have no use for Eve Ensler, but Naumann and Nolan could have learned one thing from her, at least. That word “prurient” is the giveaway. No one who is really liberated, male or female, still thinks it is prurient to be interested in sex or genitals. If you want to have a look, have a look. It's just a little skin. That is one thing Ensler got right. I'll tell you a secret, Mr. Naumann. Women, *especially* liberated women, like to show you their naughty bits, and you don't have to pretend you don't want to look. Your problem is you are holed up in Manhattan with a bunch of frigid cunts, the kind that gravitate to the arts and just bitch and moan all day long about being liberated, because they aren't. It isn't society or men that are keeping them from being liberated, either, it is their own pent up and frustrated characters that are doing that. If you want to get laid by someone who isn't a headcase, who won't require you pretend you don't like squeezing her ass, Mr. Naumann, all you have to do is move out of the big city. There are plenty of intelligent and empowered women who weren't corrupted by women's studies classes at New York University or Columbia, and they may make a man out of you.

Some readers won't understand why I would include the gallery owner in this review, or why I would attack all these people so viciously, but these readers simply don't understand the damage that has been done to art by “administration” of this sort, over the past 12 decades or so. When people like this are in charge of what goes into the museums and galleries and what doesn't, we can only see a continued devolution. When we still see art, both realism and the avant garde, run by people who find Duchamp fascinating, we know we are in some semi-permanent hell, some feedback loop of smallness and *ressentiment*. When will it end? When will this horrible cycle of non-art end? It won't end until people get angry enough to end it. And it isn't neo-conservatives who should be cleansing art of these fakes and phonies, it is artists who should be doing it. All the Naumanns should be permanently drummed out of art, through sheer embarrassment. We can see right through you, Francis Naumann. We aren't impressed by your money or your gallery or your expensive dinner jacket or your vagina books or your chess pieces. Go home and play with your pawns!

These same readers also won't understand why I now go out of my way to avoid an academic style, instead using colorful language that some will consider to be raw. Just a few years ago I was so

elevated and intellectual. What happened? What happened is that I want to separate myself from the academics just as much as from the liberals and conservatives. I don't want to be mistaken as a critic or academic, or a liberal or conservative. I am not in any of those categories. I am an artist and will speak as one. I wish to confound all readers. They will expect me to attack Gilje and Naumann for being too sexy, and I attack them for not being sexy enough. The "liberals" aren't used to an informed attack from *their* left, making them look not only like transparent money grubbers, but making them look repressed, unliberated, unrealized, and irrelevant. This is language they claim to understand.

In the same way, I find it delicious, using their own weapons against these people. They have been deconstructing and psychoanalyzing for half a century or more, and using both as weapons in the art wars. And they have done this while leaving their flanks wide open. Almost no one before me saw the opening, which is why they have had a pass for so long. Only Baudrillard and a few others thought to use deconstruction against the left, or did it well, and no painter or sculptor has done so, that I know of.

But enough of that. Back to Gilje. It is just possible that I dislike her work even more than I dislike [Agnes Martin](#) or [John Currin](#) or [Jenny Saville](#). Modernism and postmodernism were bad enough, but watching realism being gutted is perhaps even worse. It is like watching your beautiful sister slowly transform into a ghastly hooker. It is like watching a young virgin being gang-raped by a carload of diesel dykes. It is like finding the tender shoot of a plant you thought extinct, the first bud that has survived the brutal snows for a century, and then having to watch as a booted political thug treads it into the mud, claiming that this is empowering or enabling for the shoot. And Gilje seems even more contrived and transparent than Saville and Currin and Nerdrum and the rest. She is far more dishonest about her intentions. At least they seem somewhat aware of their horrible psychoses and neuroses, and revel in them. Where Saville is not shy about exhibiting her symptoms, Gilje prefers to hang back. These new realists need far more "intellectual" cover, too. The Naumanns and Friswells can't weave the verbal mazes that are necessary to justify and obscure what is really going on. You need thousands of hungry art history graduates churning out millions of words a year to do that, and we don't have the excitement left in the market to propel them. Even the insiders and the very young have seen what a sham it all is. The only ones left are the vampires, sucking one another for the last drops of blood. And their fangs show more each year. It is only a matter of time before someone rips the heavy drapes from the windows, and the sunlight comes roaring into the room.

*<http://www.artsmagazine.com/2010/07/new-york-artist-kathleen-gilje-revisits-john-singer-sargent%E2%80%99s-portraits-2/>

**It *was* slashed by a suffragette in 1914

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