

Cunt, slut, bitch, mother
Betty Tompkins, interviewed by Elliot Albrecht

It was late afternoon in early June 2018—as the sun split through the trees onto the brownstones and street hawkers outside—that Betty Tompkins welcomed Wil and I into her Soho studio. Having just returned to New York from her house in Pennsylvania, Tompkins shuffled around canvases and books piled high on the hardwood floors as she led us to a congregation of mismatched chairs.

Born in Washington D.C. in 1945, Tompkins is best known for her *Fuck Paintings*: monochrome, photorealist images of closely-cropped sexual acts and genitalia which she began in the late 1960s. Pornography is an inexhaustible treasure trove of reference material for those who desire to render the body, and Tompkins, following her graduation from Syracuse University, began to make the works from her first husband's collection of dirty magazines, partially sourced from Asia through Vancouver, as pornography mailed through the U.S. Postal System was an imprisonable offense at the time. Tompkins clipped from the magazines the images which struck her as beautiful, rendering them verily with an airbrush to achieve a smooth, photorealistic surface. Many dozens of such works are stacked against the walls of her New York studio: erect penises in coitus with hairless vaginas (some with pierced clitorises); glossy, pink vulvas; and mouths with wet tongues curved around one another like roots sprouting from the bodies' lascivious cores.

Though New York gallerists in the 1970s declined to show her paintings on the grounds of her being a woman, and many feminists of the era rejected her work as being just as exploitative as the pornography they also condemned, Tompkins has recently been reassessed as a pioneer of feminist art and has subsequently experienced a surge of attention in the past two decades. Concurrent with that recognition, in 2002, she embarked on a brand-new series titled *Women Words*. Sending out a request to her network to e-mail her lists of words used to describe women, Tompkins painted the terms (ranging from affectionate words like "babe" to objectifying classifiers such as "cock smoker", "tease", "feminazi" and "girl next door") onto small canvases. Many of the backgrounds of the works riff on the 20th-century "boy's club" art world she lived among; she imitates the squeegee look of Richters in her own paintings with a wry sense of humour. Originally setting out to make 1000 of the paintings, Tompkins quickly surpassed that mark and continues to ask people to contribute their own at her exhibitions or by e-mail (womenwords1000@gmail.com).

As we settled down to discuss *Women Words*, Tompkins took her seat in front an enormous, greyscale painting depicting a close-up shot of a finger inserted into a vagina. Tompkins' head of wild, curly grey hair ("It took me a long time to grow it out like this", she said) was almost the exact same cloudy hue as the image; the outline of her head was distinguishable only by its halo, backlit from the window behind.

When and how did you decide to become an artist?

Originally, I wanted to be an archaeological artist. I went to Mexico for a summer when I was sixteen to study and travel around. You fall over archaeological digs in a place like Mexico. It was very interesting to see the artists on site and what they were charged with doing: to take some itty bitty object—which to me meant nothing—and figure out where it came from. I thought that was really interesting. And I was young, and I liked to travel. So I thought—well that would be a nice life! Just to travel all over the world and do this interesting stuff, see things, and nobody pressures you to get married or anything like that. So I thought, alright, I'll need a doctorate degree in archaeology, and a degree in languages, and in art history. I started with art. But in my sophomore year, I walked into my first painting class, and that was it. All the rest of it went out the window immediately. The first time I picked up a paintbrush, I wasn't very good at it, but it felt really good.

How did you learn the realistic techniques in your paintings?

I taught myself. No one taught me how to do this. I'm not a natural drawer. I'm so envious of people who are natural drawers—my husband is one. He said a very interesting thing to me once, years ago. We had gotten some tulips and every night after dinner we would do a little drawing of them. His were beautiful, and really looked like tulips—loose and gorgeous. Mine were terrible—I mean they were really, really bad. He said to me: "I noticed something about you. If you don't have a concept or an idea that you're putting your time into, you can't do this." And he's right. It's a good thing to know about yourself, but he was the first one to really articulate it. For me, it was very confusing. Why couldn't I make a nice drawing of these flowers, when I can sit and draw all day long on my own work?

Tell me about the Women Word paintings. You've mentioned that the most common four words you receive are "bitch", "slut", "cunt" and "mother".

None of the words or phrases are mine; people sent them to me by e-mail or social media or by commenting on articles. I'm still getting them. One of the ways I keep the piece going without repetition is to put index cards, push pins and markers at exhibitions of the paintings and encourage people to add their own words. The paintings I'm doing now are from comment cards from previous shows.

This is what the world thinks of women, and this is what women think of their own experiences; I was sort of the middle man. I think I'm just giving back to the world what they gave me. In fact, some of the worst ones I got were from women—embedded misogyny is a real thing. Numerous studies have been done about how women judge other women more harshly than they do men, and it's been consistent through the years. Fortunately, I have a really good sense of humour. I'm working on a piece right now that says: "And then he blew his load into her face, but it was okay because she was a slut".

Oof. Did you edit down any of the responses? Were there any that you just couldn't bear to paint?

No, there none that I wouldn't paint. Actually, if I thought things were getting a little too sweet, I'd go towards these nasty ones. I just did a painting that said "I'm going to Jackson Pollock all over her face". I thought it was hysterically funny. It's got an art reference!

Do you ever see painting the words as amplifying or normalizing misogyny? Can they give people permission to call women such offensive words?

My intent was that people respond to them however they want. My own experience was that sometimes men would get very defensive reading them. They want to think that they're not that guy. In the current atmosphere, it may look like permission to people. This is a different time than when I started. I didn't see it myself when I first did it, but I did get a lot of questions about how I could stand to do it. My only answer is that a lot of the worst ones really made me laugh. I mean, reading some, you know who this guy is. I tended always to laugh at guys like that.

I think that may be their worst fear.

Right. I just didn't have much tolerance for them, so I would just laugh.

Many men around the world are having the same reaction to the #MeToo movement—one of distancing from, defence and denial of structural sexism.

Absolutely. They can't take for granted the kind of casual misogyny that is so prevalent. I was reading an article about Katherine Heigl yesterday. In 2008, she said that when she made *Knocked Up* with Seth Rogen and Judd Apatow, she loved doing 98% of the film, but there

was 2% that she thought was really misogynist and caricatured both men and women. [Heigl was quoted as saying the that film "paints the women as shrews, as humourless and uptight, and it paints the men as lovable, goofy, fun-loving guys".] Rogen and Apatow really pushed back at the statement, and her career really went south afterwards because of it. Later, Rogen was very casual about having destroyed her career. There we have it, straight from the horse's mouth: casual misogyny.

It's interesting to see how blatant the caricaturisation of women is in film and television from even ten years ago. Sex and the City, for example, feels rather un-feminist and non-intersectional where it once was deemed progressive. One can chart progress of our times through the portrayal of women in the media landscape.

Yes, it has actually really changed how we can see them. Even for somebody of my age, you can't look at them so innocently. How can you?

What has your observation been of the evolution of feminism since you began working as an artist?

I really like to say that it's changed everything. What's happening right now with the #MeToo movement is certainly a big push. I hope that it will continue on its very merry way, despite the pushback on it. But I've been looking at statistics about the mistreatment of women in the art world, and between 25 years ago to recent years, the improvement is minimal at most. It's almost virtually the same. I find that really discouraging.

The other thing is that the #MeToo movement is the tip of the iceberg. Men abusing their power towards women who are scrambling to get a toe-hold in this world—it goes way beyond the sexual aspect of it. The sexual is what we're focused on, and it is of course particularly horrific, because there's nothing more personal than your own body, and having that space invaded or harassed. But if we can ever get past it, there is another discussion to be had about this and about this abuse.

I'm very fortunate; of my three galleries, two of them have fifty percent or more women. The dealers themselves are women, and they're very supportive of their artists; it's not an issue.

Making a thousand paintings—and then some—is no small undertaking. How do you stay motivated?

It was very interesting, because when I first started, I had no idea. And by the time I'd done about six or seven, I told myself, "You need to have a goal." So I picked the number 1000 because it was ridiculous. Nobody does 1000 of anything! The whole idea is insane. But I thought having a goal would help me stay motivated. I assumed my interest would lag periodically, which it never did. I was just as interested when I did the last one as I was when I did the first one.

Part of what I did with them was that I decided to start riffing on the "big bad boys" in art. You know, the AbEx guys and Richter, Newman, de Kooning, Pollock. Then of course I did little airbrushed paintings (riffing off myself), and did little "cunt" images. I thought there was possibly no end to this. And I couldn't count, so I actually ended up doing far more than 1000. Well, I thought I was counting and I was off by a lot.

How long did each take you?

That's hard to tell. I sort of set them up in groups. There would be so much prep work—first of all, you have to put masking tape around the edge of each canvas to keep it more or less clean. So I would do a dozen at a time; I would have to put a base colour on, so I would just get out a lot of colours and do them all at once, and set them up to dry. I try to do things in rounds like that. I decided that I wouldn't do more than 100 of any particular kind. It was really hard to stop at the Richters and Pollocks at 100, because I loved doing them so much. I had to make myself stop.

I did them all in my country studio in Pennsylvania; I didn't want to bring the mess and carry it all here. I do them in the morning. My brain isn't altogether functional early. I could work on these for a couple hours, and in the winters, the sun would come in and hit me for about an hour and a half in the afternoon. So I had something I could do instead of waiting for the larger paintings to not have glare on them.

I didn't want the series to take over. I still don't, even with the new version of it, which consists of words painted onto images from photobooks and art history books. The ones on canvas—I did more than 1000. Then I started to not like doing them. I used to think "Can I see this hanging in a museum? No? Then it's going in the garbage." So after I threw out about ten, I said I'm done. I stayed away from it for about a year, until one day last summer, I said "You know, I never looked at the comment cards". I unwrapped them and thought "Oh my god, these are even worse than things that people sent me in the first batch! I have to do something with these." I can't let these be ignored.

In your more recent variations on the Women Words, you paint submissions onto images cut out from art history books. On Woman Words #51 (Da Vinci) (2017), across the figure of the Mona Lisa, you painted: "Poopsie" is a word used by my ex-boyfriend which I thought was sexist and demeaning. He might have treated me nicest I was his concubine, bound feet, dyslexic, Suzy Wong, or trophy wife. After a seven-year relationship, he got his 7-year itch. He got me arrested for domestic violence after I got laid off. I was homeless for 6 months. He encouraged me to collect disability benefits while he surfed the net for a wife. She just happened to be 29 years old. In addition, he keeps his 2 houses in Provincetown as was his rent-stabilized apartment. Of course there is no word for a man unless he is a casanova, a playboy, and other positive thing to prove his virility."

Did the text come from a comment card?

That was not a comment card. I got this email in the original batch in 2013, and my name for that one was *Poopsie Lament*. Because no matter how bad things were going, in the next sentence they got worst.

Do you think it was a true story?

Oh yeah. Absolutely. The other day I got an e-mail from somebody who gave me a word; I don't even know what language it was in. She went on about how an ex-boyfriend used to call her this, and what it meant, and about how he beat her up. It's a really painful story, and I'm going to use it. I believe every story that's ever sent to me immediately.

The imperative of believing women is in its early days.

Exactly. It makes me think that I've been so lucky in my life that I had someone to turn to at the right moment, or that I had good instincts of self-preservation. In college, what I heard more than any other comment was: "What, are you frigid?" "What, are you a lesbian?" That's what guys would say if they couldn't stick it in you on the first date.

I wish I could say that's changed.

I'm sure. I get stuff out of the news almost every single day. And I keep thinking, "Well this is really unusual, that what I'm interested in as an artist and what's actually happening in the world are happening at the same time." This has never happened before.

BETTY TOMPKINS: *Women Words*

WAAP

Exhibition: June 29 – July 28, 2018

Opening: June 28, 6 – 8pm

BETTY TOMPKINS (b. 1945) is an artist living and working in New York, NY, and Pleasant Mount, PA. For the last forty years, Betty Tompkins has based her paintings on the tension of intimacy and representation of sexuality, rendering explicit scenes in monochromatic tones. Her radicalism in the late 60s led to the unfortunate censoring of her work and later a spotlight on her role in the American and European art scene. Her large-scale, hyper realistic figure paintings are made from erotic photographs and built layer by layer, using two airbrush nozzles to apply black and white acrylic. Her work is not meant to arouse fantasy but to transpose light and shade, the effect of the process enveloping the scene in sfumato. Text and language play a large role in Tompkins work, often driving the subject matter and concept of the piece. Recent solo exhibitions include *WOMEN Words, Phrases, and Stories*, Flag Art Foundation, New York (2016); *Real Ersatz, FUG*, The Bruce High Quality Foundation, New York (2015); Art Basel Feature, Galerie Rodolphe Janssen, Basel, Switzerland (2014); *Paintings & Works on Paper 1972-2013*, Gavlak Gallery, Palm Beach, FL (2014); *Woman Words*, Dinter Fine Art, Project Room #63, New York (2013); *Fuck Paintings*, Galerie Rodolphe Janssen, Brussels, Belgium (2012); *New Work*, Mitchell Albus Gallery, New York (2009). Tompkins's work has also been featured in numerous group exhibitions, including *The Shell (LANDSCAPES, PORTRAITS & SHAPES)*, Almine Rech Gallery, Paris, France (2014); *A Drawing Show*, Matthew Marks Gallery, New York (2014); *CORPUS*, Zacheta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, Poland (2014); *A Chromatic Loss*, Bortolami Gallery, New York (2014); *Sunset and Pussy*, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York (2013); *Elles*, Centre Pompidou, Paris (2011).

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