

ART

Nothing's Sacred: Two Exhibitions Clown Around With Convention

by [JENNIFER KRASINSKI](#)

FEBRUARY 9, 2016



Betty Tompkins, SLUT (2013–'15) COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SARAH GAVLAK

When it comes to Betty Tompkins, it's always more fun to begin at the beginning. For those unfamiliar with the artist's notorious oeuvre, two words might be introduction enough: "Fuck Paintings." Since 1969, Tompkins has created large-scale, photorealistic depictions of — yes — fucking. Sex, intercourse, copulation, making love: Call it what you like, these works present viewers with images of penetration painted in close-up, laying the act (extremely) bare for all to see.

But if sex sells, as they say, Tompkins's early career proved that formula isn't always foolproof. At first, she'd believed that hardcore imagery would be a surefire way to seduce viewers into looking more closely at her paintings — into recognizing and appreciating their formal achievements. After all, wouldn't a money shot necessarily hold someone's attention for longer than, say, a heady abstraction or Conceptualist thingamabob?

Alas, the opposite proved true. Although the irony of the pornographic has always been that it makes public what most of us are doing in private, the art world just wasn't turned on at the time. After 1975, the Fuck Paintings went largely unseen until 2002, when they were exhibited to critical acclaim at the Mitchell Alpus Gallery. Tompkins was finally anointed by audiences and critics alike as a ferocious force behind a paintbrush — a welcome sign that she, or more to the point *we*, had come a long way.

In her latest show, the compelling and comical "WOMEN Words, Phrases, and Stories" at the FLAG Art Foundation, dirty pictures have given way to dirty words. Tompkins began the project in 2000 then picked it up again in 2014. In those years, she circulated a request via email: "Please send me a list of words that describe women." She received more than 3,500 words in reply. Some of the bons mots sent to her were innocuous, sweet: *honey, beauty*. Others were empowering: *warrior, queen*. More often, though, the terms were pejorative: *castrating bitch, fuck toy, three hole wonder*[sic]. Still others could be interpreted in a number of ways, depending on who's using them: *babe, broad*.

Thus began the series of 1,000 paintings on view, each featuring one or more of the words Tompkins collected. That fact bears repeating — 1,000 paintings — because if these new works at first appear comparatively demure, or less in-your-face than their predecessors, they absolutely find their strength in numbers.

The canvases are of varying but modest size; the largest are twice as big as a breadbox, while others are smaller than postcards. Each features a word, or a couple of words — even, in a few cases, full sentences or short stories — stenciled or hand-drawn or pressed-on. Color palette and brushwork differ from painting to painting, giving a range of tones to Tompkins's chorus of "visual voices." WOMAN = LIFE SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR A CUNT sings in sunny yellow atop a warm orange monochrome; COCK SMOKER pops in white over solid black. TURN THEM UPSIDE DOWN THEY ALL LOOK THE SAME; GOOD GIRL; DELICIOUS; SEX SAINT — the epithets just keep on coming. Some words repeat throughout the show: *Cunt, mother, and pussy* seem to be

three of the most popular. Others are far more singular expressions: TARDIS TWAT (look it up), BITCH CUPCAKE (don't bother), SLUT SAUCE, CLODGE, ZEPS.

One of the delights of this exhibition is seeing Tompkins jab at some of the dusty old-boy art heroes whose signature styles start to sound like euphemisms in this context. On certain canvases, she imitates Morris Louis's stains, Lucio Fontana's slashes, and Barnett Newman's zips. On one in particular, she parrots the ejaculations of Jackson Pollock as the words VAGINA DENTATA take a sharp bite out of the spatters and drips. Not to be bested, of course, Tompkins includes a few small-scale Fuck Paintings among them. Over a classic close-up of a cock and ass, EASY LAY appears in bubblegum-pink — one way to join the canon while still having the last laugh.

If all the world's a stage, the art world may very well be its circus. On view at SculptureCenter is "The Eccentrics," a smart, screwball group exhibition and performance program that brings together eight artists who, each in their own way, indulge in a bit of clowning around. Gags, fake-outs, sleight of hand, spectacle — these are just some of the tricks the artists here have up their sleeve. Although the exhibition is tidier and more polished than its title suggests, it nicely dances the tightrope between humor and melancholy, the wacky and the wistful.

At first glance, some of the show's works may look incomplete (as opposed to unfinished), perhaps lacking the centripetal force that unifies an autonomous artwork. But this, of course, is by design. Ieva Miseviciute's *Tongue PhD (Hardcover)* (2016) is a totemic putty-pink tongue that lolls all slick and creepy over a wall and onto the floor, hanging out to serve as a stage for her future performance. In Tori Wrånes's *Double Vision* (2016), a pair of gymnastics rings perpetually swing from the ceiling without an acrobat, while its earthbound audience *Tennis Cat* (2015), a pair of legs topped with a brown gaucho hat and long, snaking braid, strikes an awkward pose on the floor.

The videos deal more straightforwardly in spectacle. Sanya Kantarovsky's *Happy Soul* (2015) is a flawlessly crafted installation that enlivens a loosey-goosey painting of a nude male figure with dazzlingly theatrical animation, while Jeanine Oleson's marvelous 3-D video *Figures of Speech* (2016) handily captures performances of the analog magic of metallurgy, sound, and speech. If there's such a thing as "tragic relief," Zhou Tao's *Blue and Red* (2014) is it — an unnerving single-channel work that deflates the lightness of leisure against the gravity of political protest. Also featuring works by Georgia Sagri, Eduardo Navarro, and Adriana Lara, this is one show that knows how to make a scene.

Betty Tompkins: 'WOMEN Words, Phrases, and Stories'

FLAG Art Foundation

545 West 25th Street, 9th floor

212-206-0220, flagartfoundation.org

Through May 14

'The Eccentrics'

SculptureCenter

44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City

718-361-1750, www.sculpture-center.org

Through April 4

<https://www.villagevoice.com/2016/02/09/nothings-sacred-two-exhibitions-clown-around-with-convention/>