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Rachel Feinstein and John Currin, Their Own Best Creations

By DAVID COLMAN

OUTSIDE, there were snowdrifts and icy sidewalks that made getting into Lever House a tricky navigational challenge for the fashionably dressed crowd on this freezing January evening. But once inside the lobby of Lever House, the modernist Park Avenue landmark, the grim reality of a seemingly never-ending New York winter was replaced by a fairy tale world of giant toy soldiers, a garden of red roses and a gaslit golden coach — and a hothouse gathering of some of the city's more notable figures from art, fashion and publishing.

The real estate magnate and art collector Aby Rosen, one of the owners of Lever House, was in his element (and a pair of jeans), maneuvering around the room in his dressed-down low-key way, pausing to chat with his fellow art collectors Peter Brant and Alberto Mugrabi. Sprucely dressed waiters tangoed through the crowded space offering Champagne to the artists Brice and Helen Marden; the New Museum director Lisa Phillips; Cynthia Rowley and her husband, the art dealer Bill Powers; Amanda Brooks, the new fashion director of Barneys, and her husband, the artist Christopher Brooks; the painter Francesco Clemente and his wife Alba; Salman Rushdie; and the director Sofia Coppola. Off in a corner, Marc Jacobs and his ex-boyfriend Lorenzo Martone (the latter dressed in knee-high wooly boots) appraised a room of mirrors hand-painted with ghostly landscapes.

But one person in particular stood out on this evening: a tall ginger-haired beauty dressed in a figure-flattering ivory velvet Marc Jacobs dress, chatting with Ms. Coppola, hugging Mr. Martone, keeping an eye on three frisky young children who hovered nearby, and occasionally joking with a blue-suited bespectacled man who cast an amused eye over the gathering.

Even if you hadn't known it was Rachel Feinstein, the sculptor who had created this [fantastical art installation](#), you probably would have figured out rather quickly — from the way people gravitated toward her and the way she glided confidently around the room — that she was the star of the evening. And the dark-suited man at her side, the one chatting with [James Frey](#)? That was [John Currin](#), the husband of Ms. Feinstein and the father of their three children — and arguably the most provocative and successful painter of his generation.

Individually, each is a force to be reckoned with. Mr. Currin's canvases, sensual mash-ups of Old Master figure painting and 1970s porn (which sometimes feature his wife) became certifiably blue-chip when one sold for \$5.5 million at Sotheby's in 2008. She is a sculptor whose works have collected some notable collectors — Mr. Rosen and Mr. Mugrabi among them — and a warm, rosy-cheeked beauty, whose flair inspired a fashion collection by Mr. Jacobs and prompted [Tom Ford](#) to include her in the debut runway show of his new women's wear line last fall.

Together, Mr. Currin and Ms. Feinstein have become the ruling power couple in today's art world — perhaps the most potent marital pair since [Jackson Pollock](#) and [Lee Krasner](#) in the 1950s.

Both stylish dressers, sharing an irreverent humor, the two are known for a colorful life that may have more precedents in Hollywood (see Taylor-Burton, Dick and Liz) or the literary scene (see Fitzgerald, F. Scott & Zelda) than the more insular New York art world. (Fittingly, they are close friends with another high-profile couple — [Mick Jagger](#) and the model-turned-fashion designer L'Wren Scott.) As the first award presenters at the Rob Pruitt Art Awards last December, they were camera-ready, hitting their lines like [George Burns](#) and [Gracie Allen](#).

Flouting the long-held, politically correct prohibitions against artists living amid the kind of ritzy indulgence their collectors do, Mr. Currin and Ms. Feinstein have not only mapped out a new place for the artist in society, they also hired a decorator to make it look fabulous.

And they're not ashamed to admit it.

"Visual artists like to think of themselves as more serious — you can't show off that you have good taste," said Ms. Feinstein with an exasperated shake of her head, sitting at home in the couple's SoHo loft. "We're always getting insulted. We were at a party at [Anna Wintour](#)'s house, and all these people are giving John grief, telling him, 'You're not dressed like an artist, you're dressed like a banker.' And he's like: 'Give me a break, how is an artist supposed to dress, like Jackson Pollock? That was the '50s!'"

YET to see them at home on a recent Saturday morning, with Ms. Feinstein making waffles for her husband and their three children, suggests a something sort of 1950s about them. With the perfume of frying bacon drifting through the air, their two young sons, Francis and Hollis, running in and out of the kitchen, and their daughter, Flora, a toddler, proudly intoning her new

word (“No!”), the parents were happy to drink coffee and bat around any topic that came to mind — the barbershop revival, the Davos summit, the television series “To Catch a Predator,” symbolism of the cephalic vein, “tattoo fail” Web sites.

Homey as it sounds, the place is a loft that has been transformed into what may be the most stylish apartment south of Houston Street. Just featured in the December issue of *The World of Interiors* (a decision made after [S. I. Newhouse](#), the chairman of [Condé Nast](#), came to dinner), the apartment’s many charms include a Boffi kitchen, a 14-foot-long dining table, an enormous tufted aubergine sofa (once the [Duchess of Windsor’s](#)), a wealth of midcentury Italian furniture by Gio Ponti, Piero Fornasetti and Carlo Mollino, and a swath of leopard-print carpeting in the foyer.

The couple’s bedroom features a massive hand-carved, custom-made gilded bed from England, extra long to accommodate Mr. Currin’s 6-foot-3 frame. In their sons’ bedroom is a mural done in the style of Gio Ponti; off to the side is a little barroom with malachite wallpaper, the whole thing done up with the help of the art-world decorator Ricky Clifton.

Recently, they bought a virtually unrestored town house near Gramercy Park, filled with turn-of-the-century details like a top-floor artist’s studio, and are just starting to shop around for an architect.

“We’re going to spend a lot of money to make it look very old-fashioned.” Mr. Currin said dryly.

As acceptable as such behavior is in other worlds, it’s a risky move in art. Other artists who have tried to live a more glamorous existence have had their hands rapped for it. In the 1990s, [Julian Schnabel](#) saw his reputation as a serious painter get swamped by his more popular interior designs and films. Back in 1960s, when photos of Cy and Tatiana Twombly’s grand apartment in Rome were published in *Vogue*, his standing fell, too. In the 1930s, [Salvador Dalí](#), who had dressed as a dandy even before his fame as an artist, was shunned by the core Surrealists for declining to champion the group’s leftist politics.

“A lot of artists don’t want to indulge that side of themselves in the fears that they would look less driven as artists,” said Eric Boman, the photographer who shot their apartment for the magazine. “You have one life, and you should live it according to what you think a good life should be.”

Even their early romance had an over-the-top, fairy tale quality. Jessica Craig-Martin, the photographer who has known them since they started dating, said she vividly remembered the two of them coming to a dinner party and towering over everyone else — Ms. Feinstein in a pink latex dress. Their flamboyance, she said, “caught everyone’s attention.”

Back then, Mr. Currin, the son of a physics professor and a piano teacher who grew up in Connecticut and California, had graduated from Carnegie-Mellon and Yale’s M.F.A. program and was just beginning to make a name for himself as a New York artist. He had been painting women who looked a lot like Ms. Feinstein.

Though they hadn’t met, Mr. Currin theorizes that he had seen her around, and one way or another, her creamy-skinned beauty stuck in his subconscious. Then, an acquaintance told him that a girl who looked just like the girl in his paintings was living in a gallery for six weeks as part of an art exhibition — in a gingerbread house she’d made, no less. He went to see her. She asked him out. Two weeks later, he invited her to come to a show of his work in Paris, and asked her to marry him. And three years later, on [Valentine’s Day 1997](#), she did.

If his career seemed to take off after they met, Mr. Currin had already exhibited his natural flair for riling people up with his first exhibition featuring racy portraits of middle-aged women, in 1992 (a Village Voice review declaring “Boycott this show!” brought him instant infamy). Though his work continued to polarize critics, by 2003 most of them were on his side for his one-man show at the [Whitney Museum](#) (although one particularly vicious review by Jed Perl in The New Republic did label it “art pollution”).

Later that same year, Mr. Currin publicly and brashly left the Andrea Rosen Gallery, which had long represented him, for Gagosian. With escalating prices for his work mirroring the greater art boom, Mr. Currin came to epitomize a new attitude of artistic ambition — a characterization that has not dissipated as his prices have climbed into the millions. With a sardonic, dark wit, Mr. Currin is alert to his reputation.

“I was giving a lecture in Dallas,” Mr. Currin recalled, “and during the question section, this guy gets up and says: ‘Hi, I am an art collector, and you’re one of the least liked people in the art world. what’s that like?’ It’s weird to have your paranoia confirmed like that.”

“I am not a very liked person,” he continued. His wife, he said, is “a tremendously liked person. So probably her batting average gets worse, and I am a lot more liked because of her. She’s helped my career tremendously, I would say.”

Where he can be aloof and curmudgeonly, friends uniformly describe Ms. Feinstein as warm, energetic and open. “Rachel is immediately disarming,” said Ms. Brooks, a longtime friend. “It’s impossible not to have an instant intimacy with her. She’s very affectionate and open-hearted, whereas John takes a little more investment.”

The artist Cecily Brown said, “the energy in the room changes when Rachel arrives.” She has known the couple socially for 10 years and said they recently became closer, as they both have toddlers. “I wish I had half of her brilliant social skills,” she said. “She never seem to suffer a moment of shyness. I am usually in a stage of dread if I have to go out. But if you know Rachel’s going to be there, it’s nicer. You know there’s going to be a warm presence.”

Similarly, the couple’s visibility owes much to Ms. Feinstein’s enthusiasm.

“Rachel believes in saying yes to everything, and not strategizing,” Mr. Currin said. “I believe in strategizing, but I’m terrible at it. So I generally go along with her thing of not strategizing, and it generally works out pretty well.”

Ms. Feinstein laughed at this.

“My big problem is that I want to say yes to everything,” she said. “I want to be everyone’s friend. When Marc Jacobs asked me to be in his campaign a couple years ago, I didn’t say yes right away. I was excited, but I knew it would come at some price, so I really thought about it. What people don’t understand is that there is no gain at all for an artist to do something like that in a public eye. As a movie star or fashion designer, the more publicity you get, the consensus is that it’s a good thing. But I make maybe six pieces of art a year — and the more the general public knows about me, the less it helps in the small sphere of the art world.”

Yet her own public persona is in many ways an accurate reflection of her art. Born and raised in Miami, the daughter of a dermatologist, she studied religion and studio art at [Columbia University](#). (Her chances to get into Yale's M.F.A. program were scotched, she said, after the head of the program took issue with the transparent plastic miniskirt she wore to the interview.)

In her work, she brings a perverse sensibility to the baroque kitsch fantasy-land where she grew up, along with an historian's fascination with various art forms. Her installation at Lever House, an homage to the dark, little-known [Hans Christian Andersen](#) fairy tale "The Snow Queen," is a good display of her flair for synthesizing myriad fascinations — in this case, folk narrative, Carpenter Gothic architecture and Baroque painting — in vignette form. Lacking the provocative sexual punch and catchy visual vocabulary of her husband's work, Ms. Feinstein's more abstract and fanciful work is seen by many to pale next to Mr. Currin's. But so does the work of dozens of highly regarded artists.

"You kind of want to go knee-jerk on them and say, 'Oh they've sold their souls to the devil,' " said the New York magazine art critic Jerry Saltz. "But he's probably a really good painter. And not many people know the arc of her career. There are these artists now doing this neo-ancient, primitivistic work with the figure, like Thomas Houseago or Huma Bhabha, that Rachel was doing a long time ago. But they've eclipsed her, because there are prices to pay to being that glamorous. She's paid the bigger price, because I think Currin never took his eye off the ball, and she might have."

ADDING another wrinkle to their already complicated semipublic life is one facet of which even their close friends are dubious: their politics are several notches to the right of art-world orthodoxy. Mr. Currin loves nothing better than skewering the political correctness and liberal attitudes so common in New York — just get either of them going on the environment, multiculturalism, government funding, feminism.

"We're famous for supposedly being crazy right-wing Republicans," Ms. Feinstein said. "I've had fights with people at art openings about it. I once had an art critic say to me, 'If you get your way, it will become like "The Road" ' — that [Cormac McCarthy](#) book! I just think that in no society should there be one ruling party. And in New York, there's way too much of the Democrats — we've got to have a little bit of something else."

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 being full-blown right-winger and 10 being full-tilt left-winger, they put themselves more or less in the middle, both of them espousing an essentially libertarian agenda. And both are quick to wonder why it's a given that an artist should have liberal leanings when, if making art is a consummately individual expression, a libertarian bent seems a natural choice.

"What we're talking about is this idea that artists are supposed to be critical of the capitalist art world and the free-market art world — that there is supposed to be some underlying shame in that. It used to be a lot worse, but these days, everyone is co-opted."

Because of their conservative stance, it's easy to think of the couple a bit old-fashioned. But Mr. Currin flatly rejected that suggestion, that his paintings were reviving a lost machismo, or similarly, that his conservative views were reactionary. Being a libertarian seems to him to be more progress than regress, he said, adding that some of his more progressive views would have him drummed out of Texas.

“I strive to be old-fashioned and fail,” he said. “I would love to know about roughing it, and be that guy that hates air-conditioning, but I am not a savage in any way. I got my macho painting out of my way in art school. It wasn’t me. I feel like I am one of the only feminine male artists, that I am the only one who cares about things being pretty, about elegance and other feminine qualities.”

Ms. Craig-Martin said that the blur of which one has the yin and which the yang was the key to their mystique. “John seems very macho and old-fashioned, and then Rachel is super-feminine,” she said. “I used to share a studio with the two of them, and my space was between them — I was the ham in the sandwich. And Rachel would be in her studio with her chainsaw going, ripping away at things with her goggles on and with this incredible macho sound. And then John on the other side, he’d be in there painting these tiny strokes with a brush with one hair. I loved that dichotomy.”