
Samantha Gaier

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2013

Committee:

Dr. Andrew Hershberger, Advisor

Dr. Katerina Ruedi Ray
ABSTRACT

Dr. Andrew Hershberger, Advisor

Rachel Feinstein, wife of figure painter John Currin and mother of three also works as a fine artist. Primarily a sculptor and installation artist, Feinstein combines fairytales with reality. Often her contributions to the art world are overlooked due to her active social life and vast network of friends. Feinstein’s connection to Currin and her collaboration with fashion designers taints her reputation as a serious artist. Such an approach diminishes her identity as a female artist and silences her creative voice. She challenges the notion of contemporary feminine sculpture by creating personal yet relatable three dimensional objects rooted deep within the canon of art history. Through the lens of feminist theory coupled with formal analysis, this paper will study the site specific installation entitled The Sorbet Room, 2001, through which Feinstein empowers female artists. She does this by blurring the boundaries of many disciplines combining both male and female as well as historical and modern approaches to her art. A woman working successfully in the male dominated field of sculpture is rare. Feinstein embodies the role of mother, wife, artist and socialite encouraging and inviting changes for the New York art scene and the world at large. By her work and life she empowers female working artists by raising craft especially interior decoration to the status of high art. This paper finds that Feinstein brings her work to the understanding of the gallery viewer, by clearly explaining her intentions and drawing inspirations from current events. In this way, Feinstein is given a separate identity from her husband, in order to add important new scholarship on the work of female artists.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Hershberger and my reader Dr. Ruedi Ray for their encouragement, insightful comments and dedicated reading. I would also like to thank my fellow art historians Jennifer Fechik and Caitlin Gorman for their hours of inspiration, suggestions and proof reading. Finally I would like to thank my family for their love and support.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. DESCRIPTION</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. BIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood &amp; Educational Background:</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of Wife:</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion:</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artistic Style and Previous Scholarship:</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. METHODOLOGIES</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. CONTEXT</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. INTERPRETING THE SORBET ROOM</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rachel Feinstein, <em>The Sorbet Room</em>, 2001.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Rachel Feinstein, <em>Crucifixion</em>, 2003.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Francois Cuvillies the Elder, Amalienburg Pavilion, 1739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Francois Cuvillies the Elder, Interior of the Amalienburg Pavilion, 1739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Aulicsek Dominkus, Table Fountain, 1764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Rachel Feinstein, <em>The Sorbet Room</em>, 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Rachel Feinstein, <em>The Sorbet Room</em>, 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Rachel Feinstein, The Sorbet Room, 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Rachel Feinstein, <em>The Sorbet Room</em>, 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Rachel Feinstein, <em>The Sorbet Room</em>, 2001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION:

Rachel Feinstein single-handedly redefines the role of the contemporary working artist by serving as a fashion-conscious fine artist and as a mother of three children. Primarily known as a sculptor, she also produces paintings and other two-dimensional works. In regards to sculpture, she primarily works as a site-specific installation artist. Created for specific but temporary spaces, her compositions nevertheless move to new and often permanent locations at the end of each exhibition. By studying in-depth one such installation, entitled *The Sorbet Room*, I will argue that Feinstein empowers women, and especially women artists, by working very successfully in the male-dominated field of sculpture, by utilizing materials and power tools like those found in the traditionally, masculine space of a woodshop. She likewise questions the boundary attributes between the interior and exterior setting.

Furthermore, Feinstein has fashioned a new approach to historically feminine interior settings by combining both external (male) and internal (female) elements. According to Steven Parissien’s book on *Interiors: The Home Since 1700*, “Industrial advances also helped to liberate women, providing them with a specific arena—the home environment—that they could control and dispose.”¹ Feinstein explored that intimate and private space when she crafted *The Sorbet Room*, and when she placed it in a public contemporary art gallery. This work also draws attention back to the three-dimensional field, another great strength of this artist. In short, I propose that Feinstein creates a well-balanced marriage between sculpture and craft, between male and female, between function and form in her art works. Scholarship on Feinstein is essential for the development of study on contemporary feminine sculpture. Feinstein likewise successfully balances many different roles; including woman, mother, sculptor, critic and fine

artist, while contributing to the field of contemporary sculpture. She continues to change the function of the external elements of architecture into the more traditionally domestic realms of womanhood as illustrated in her installation *The Sorbet Room*, thereby blurring the distinctions between them. Feinstein elevates interior decoration to the status of high art.

In a profound way, Feinstein acts as a human bridge, taking historical issues such as the forms and functions of architecture and bringing them into a contemporary understanding, reintroducing classical art elements to the gallery visitors through her exhibitions. Current trends in the art world have lost sight of the past and the rich artistic tradition from which it stems. This makes Feinstein all the more relevant to scholarly research today because she offers a blended view of both the past and the present in art history. She lowers high art from its pedestal and presents it to the sensibilities of an everyday person by being open and honest about her intentions and her expectations for the reception of her work.

A detailed investigation of *The Sorbet Room* installation will further illustrate the new and distinctive direction Feinstein follows through her art. Previous scholarship on this artist and her creative process will be discussed as well as her personal and professional background to set the proper framework in which to view her work. I will utilize the methodologies of comparative visual formalism, feminist theory, and textual analysis, and will investigate the roles and purposes of "function" within an artwork. Feinstein mainly practices in New York and London, but she exhibits her work worldwide. Although each piece remains deeply personal, all are intended to exude beauty. As Feinstein clearly states, “I’m interested in making things that are handmade and beautiful.”\(^2\) For this artist, art creates pleasure and provides a lasting testament to a particular moment in time. While hugely successful in the fine art world, Feinstein is also

---

greatly admired for her elegant fashion sense, for her network of powerful friends, and for the media attention she receives as the spouse of New York-based figure painter John Currin, one of the most celebrated contemporary artists of the twenty-first century.

Feinstein manages to balance the responsibilities of being a wife and mother with producing innovative work for a variety of group and solo shows, averaging six major pieces per year since 2000.\(^3\) Her shows and works can be easily identified as her own because she believes that “the texture and forms have to be relevant but they also have to be separate entities. I like to have different themes from different times come together.”\(^4\) Collaboration with her husband and other successful artists keeps her inspired, and in that way, collaboration remains essential to this sculptor. Through these collaborations, Feinstein infuses her works with her own lighthearted imagination while the meanings of her pieces remain rooted in the past through the inspiration from previous styles.

As an art historian, I am drawn to Feinstein’s work because of how freely she admits to being influenced by other artists and by art movements like Cubism and African art.\(^5\) Primarily the Baroque and Rococo movements influence her work, for both were influential in the exterior and interior setting. Some compelling characteristics of the Baroque movement include the “ambiguous relationship, between fiction and reality.”\(^6\) This especially rings true for Feinstein because her images have a foundation in fiction. In addition to those characteristics, Baroque art can be described as “noble, balanced, ideal, decorous and [it] relied heavily on disegno.”\(^7\) A constructed, yet noble, image based upon a purity of design acts as the stimulus behind her work.

For Baroque architecture, “plasticity of form was the dominant hallmark. The tendency was to

\(^7\) Ibid, 358.
produce dynamic, flowing surfaces.”8 In short, meaning combined with beauty creates the impression desired by Feinstein. A blend of reality and fantasy with touches from the Baroque help make her work monumental, assisting in the creation of her legacy in the art world.

Rococo design elements have become another sign indicative of Feinstein’s work. “Intertwining motifs in c and s shapes,” serve as a common motif of this movement.9 The majority of Feinstein’s work is intended for interior spaces, similar to the Rococo sensibility. “The Rococo style,” it has been argued, “is most evident in interiors, where the decorative elements seem to spread over the walls like a form of dazzling incrustation.”10 Ornamentation functions as a key element that Feinstein has embraced from this Rococo movement.

Architecture also serves as an inspiration for her. “In Rococo architecture, structural features (real or decorative), including orders, columns, and pillars, are brought closer to the surfaces of the walls themselves, which become the canvas, so to speak, for an explosion of florid decoration.”11 For instance, columns and pilasters serve a decoratively organizational purpose and repeat in The Sorbet Room, helping to connect each panel together, guiding the eye throughout the space.

Feinstein enjoys the Rococo because she believes it captured the fleeting opulence of the time, and she particularly enjoys Baroque sculpture because it is like an explosion of drama.12 These ideas of opulence and drama have been clearly exemplified in The Sorbet Room. Throughout her travels abroad, Feinstein finds stimulation in the different examples of both Rococo and Baroque art and architecture. Art historians can then identify clear parallels between actual, historical buildings and corresponding works within her oeuvre. For example, the

11 Ibid.
Amalienburg Pavilion in the garden of the Nymphenburg Palace on the outskirts of Munich, Germany, serves as a structural model for The Sorbet Room, and will work as a primary foundation for this analysis.13

Feinstein states that part of the joy and struggle of being an artist includes the cultivation of unique ideas in one’s head and then having the ability to translate them into the physical world.14 The attraction of her art comes from its physicality and the reworking of older art historical styles, often in conjunction with fantasies and fairytales. In her entire portfolio of work, common themes emerge including: gender, morality, sexuality, beauty, aging, class struggle, and stereotyping.

Gender in particular lends itself well to Feinstein’s style. The body is an important element to study due to its function as a tool and vessel for human experience. Gender is the way society recognizes your sex, whether male or female and therefore, where within the social structure you belong.15 This alone does not make up a person’s identity, it merely acts as a classification system, nor should it be the primary influence on the perception of the body by either society or the individual person.16 Gender is a powerful tool translated by the body.

While her motifs do relate to earlier works in art history, Feinstein has approached them from a freshly contemporary perspective. This artist continues to be important to the advancement of the contemporary art world because she breathes new life into older styles while incorporating fantasy and imagination into her large-scale sculptures and installations. Feinstein continues to be worthy of study because she seeks to create something aesthetically pleasing, yet

16 Ibid, 189.
infused with deeper meanings, often expressing her opinions on contemporary issues like the status of women within society. She openly embraces the use and value of art history as a tool in the world of fine art. Feinstein’s work incorporates more than beauty; it has depth, meaning, and a history. In that way she furthers the purpose of both studio art and art history through her works.
I. DESCRIPTION OF THE SORBET ROOM:

In this section I will focus upon Feinstein's artwork entitled *The Sorbet Room*, 2001 (Fig. 1). It is a large-scale installation filled with sculptural relief wall decorations. This work is a beautifully rendered and even dreamlike, a white room full of extraordinarily exaggerated images that transport the viewer into a new and different realm. Here Feinstein combines both the practicality of sculpture/architecture and the glamour of interior design/decoration to create her imagined world. According to Feinstein, the story is based upon events that really happened; yet these events are rendered in such a way as to evoke visions of dreams and exotic places often associated with surrealism. Feinstein's style is bold, fantastical, large, and glitzy, and *The Sorbet Room* offers a perfect summary of those qualities. About her works as a whole, the artist claims the following:

I’ve always been interested in the relationship I have to my art, how it seems to be very fantasy-based. What I’ve been interested in since I was [in] college is fairytales and religion, and how, for example a sleeping beauty story could have a correlation to a biblical story, which could have a correlation to Greek myth. I’m interested in how these things can be morality lessons that have been with people since early, early civilization. Narcissus, Hansel and Gretel, Lot and his daughters. I’m interested in how all of these things from my work translate into my life, because they really don’t, in any way.17

The materials used to construct this particular installation were white enamel and wood with overall dimensions of 144 x 276 x 188 inches, or 12 x 23 x 15½ feet. In regards to scale, Feinstein states, “I think the reason I make things big is that I’m incredibly unrealistic.”18 While presented in an "unrealistic" fashion, the inspiration behind this piece is very real; and the scale adds to the work's spectacle, forcing the viewer to consider each panel as well as the installation as a whole.

---

18 Colman, "Rachel Feinstein and John Currin, Their Own Best Creations," 4.
Consisting of five large panels working together to create one specific overall illustration, Feinstein asserts that this artwork tells a personal narrative about her relationship with her husband through visual clues and placements. For example, Feinstein carved her own initials and those of her husband above the doorway, indicating her dedication to their story. By using both her maiden name and her husband’s she further empowers women by showcasing an identity separate from man. However, each viewer can have their own unique understanding by walking through the space.
II. BIOGRAPHY:

In order to properly understand the work of this artist, understanding her background is essential, starting with her upbringing and formal education.

Childhood & Educational Background:

Born on May 25, 1971, in Fort Defiance, Arizona, Feinstein seems to have lived a charmed life ever since. Her upbringing left an irreplaceable impression and provided a lasting influence upon her artistic style. Coming from a small family consisting of one sister and her parents, Feinstein credits her youth as a rich source of inspiration. “Basically I think you get all of your ideas when you’re young, as a child, and then later you start to get a sense of how to make those ideas happen, and as you get older you learn to make those ideas happen with more clarity and better execution.”  

She has spent her adult life translating her childhood experiences into physical art forms.

Her parents worked in the health care field, her mother as a registered nurse and her father as a dermatologist. Religion, a common thread in Feinstein's work, can be traced back to her parents; her mother is Catholic and her father Jewish. She was very much exposed to issues and ideas in religion and philosophy, and she has always had an interest in both fields. On the other hand, her home life was quite relaxed but unpredictable. Her parents moved to Miami, Florida, when she was only two months old. Growing up in Florida she and her sister had several pets, and they apparently spent many nights during their teen years at a local dance club, and experienced an iconic time in Miami’s history.

---

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
Living in Coral Gables, Miami, from 1971 to 1989, Feinstein developed a fascination for decaying architecture, especially because of the historical Art Deco elements seen in the Miami cityscape. According to her recollections of this time, “I think that a lot of what I see visually is based on the experience of that part of Miami because there’s nothing older than 1920-1930.” Her style has often been referred to as something out of a “Baroque-Kitsch fantasy-land.” While Feinstein moved away from Miami in 1989, she has noted “a big part of Miami, for me, is its decaying opulence—the combination of McMansions, fancy cars, and bourgeois quality with decaying, creeping nature. You can’t control ants, flying cockroaches, and your surroundings.” I believe that her exposure to the city of Miami, with its combination of an extraordinary atmosphere, people, and culture, molded Feinstein into the bold and successful artist that she remains today.

Her creative resources were shaped by her upbringing, but the drive to become an artist was inspired by a very special person in her life. The desire to pursue art came from Feinstein’s grandmother, a skilled painter in her own right. She took her granddaughter to local art museums starting at age 13. This exposure to art remains a priority for Feinstein still today. Feinstein described her grandmother as “Actually, a really good painter, and she would take me to professional art lessons in Coconut Grove with her when I was young.” Thus, not only did her family play a central role in her artistic development, but also the decaying architectural surroundings in Miami. All of this together created the subconscious backdrop or inspiration for so many of her pieces, including The Sorbet Room.

---

25 Ibid.
26 Ibid, 171.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid, 171.
Feinstein left Miami for college on the East Coast. At Columbia University she studied religion while taking courses in studio art and art history.\(^{31}\) Her father did not believe art was an acceptable way to make a living; therefore, she majored in religion instead, although she yearned for self-expression through art.\(^{32}\) Several of her professors became mentors and they encouraged and supported her artistic pursuits. Judy Pfaff, Kiki Smith, Elizabeth Murray and Ursula von Rydingsvand guided Feinstein during her years at Columbia.\(^{33}\) During the summer after graduation, Feinstein had the opportunity to study at the Skowhegan residency program in Maine.\(^{34}\) She began making art seriously as soon as she graduated from college in 1993 saying, “I thought, I am not going to take a job so I can make a lot of money, this is what I want to do, and I’m going to do it no matter what.”\(^{35}\) She embodied the role of a starving artist for many years thereafter, working odd jobs like bar tending, and looking forward to her future as a full time studio artist.

Becoming a professional fine artist remained a challenge for Feinstein post-graduation. The seeds of doubt were planted, and she questioned her ability to live comfortably as a sculptor/painter:

The idea of making money from art was foreign to me. I started to understand that you could do it after college—after meeting Kiki Smith and my husband and a whole crew of other artists. They weren’t making tons of money. My parents both came from not very much, so the idea of not having anything—not knowing where your next paycheck was coming from—didn’t seem such a great choice. The fact that I can make art and be married and have kids comes from my parents—they raised me and my sister to think we could do anything.\(^{36}\)

\(^{31}\) Ibid.
\(^{33}\) Castro, "Humor, Sex and Philosophy," 50.
\(^{34}\) Kimberly Cutter, "Carving a name for herself," *Subarite sculptor*. 48.
\(^{35}\) Dodie Kazanjian, "Her Own Creation." *Vogue*, February 2011, 1.
\(^{36}\) Ibid.
In 1999, Feinstein had her first and second solo exhibitions at the Robert Prime Gallery in London, and at the White Columns Gallery in New York.\textsuperscript{37} Her big break happened in 2001 with the opening of her third solo show at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York.\textsuperscript{38} Feinstein served as a receptionist at the gallery and was "discovered" by Marianne Boesky herself. One day in the spring of 2001, Feinstein sketched out some ideas at work. Ms. Boesky noticed and decided to exhibit her in the gallery. Feinstein’s response was, “but I work here.”\textsuperscript{39} Her boss quickly said, “You’re fired.”\textsuperscript{40} Three solo shows later, Marianne Boesky became one of Feinstein’s dealers. In 2002, Feinstein got involved in a show for both Sotheby’s in New York and Corvi-Mora in London.\textsuperscript{41} Her fourth solo show (her second at the Boesky Gallery) was held in 2005.\textsuperscript{42}

Feinstein’s debut in France happened in 2006 at Le Consortium in Dijon. In 2007, she was back at the Corvi-Mora in London, and in 2008 she had her third solo show at the Boesky Gallery.\textsuperscript{43} In 2011, she had an installation piece placed within the famed Lever House in New York.\textsuperscript{44} Between the years of 1994 and 2011, Feinstein has been in over forty group exhibitions both in the United States and abroad, establishing her presence in the contemporary art scene.

Role of Wife:

Feinstein freely talks about the various roles she plays: “There are people that are full-time moms, people that are full-time artists, and people that are full-time socialites. I feel like I’m always trying to juggle all three. For me to have three kids is kind of suicidal in this business. Then on top of that to be married to one of the most important, well-paid artists is

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{38} Kazanjian, "Her Own Creation," 1.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} Coppola and Powers, \textit{Rachel Feinstein}, 4.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid, 5.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
another totally suicidal thing.” Her husband is the contemporary painter, John Currin (b. 1962). *New York Times* writer David Colman has argued that Currin is the “most provocative and successful painter of his generation.” His paintings have been described “as sensual mash-ups of Old Master figure painting and 1970’s porn.” Many of his canvases feature his wife in various poses. Feinstein has this to say about modeling for her husband: “People tell me I shouldn’t pose for him because it takes away my identity as an artist but I absolutely love it when John uses me in his paintings.” She is one of his most repeated and well-known motifs. Currin has been extremely well received by collectors in today’s markets, with one painting selling for $5.5 million at Sotheby’s in 2008.

Currin established himself within the fine art community prior to meeting Feinstein. Through a friend, Currin met Feinstein at an art exhibition in 1994 called *Exit Art*. She had created an eight-by-eight feet gingerbread house inspired by the Hansel and Gretel story, in which she slept, like Sleeping Beauty, every night for six weeks. The audience had to look through a frosted-glass window to see Feinstein sleeping on a pink canopy princess bed. The story began when he went to see her piece; she asked him out, and one week later at his show in Paris he proposed. Three years later, on February 14, 1997, they were married.

Together Feinstein and Currin are extremely successful both artistically and financially. Feinstein decided to retain her maiden name because Currin also has a sister named Rachel, and

---

47 Ibid.
49 Colman, "Rachel Feinstein and John Currin, Their Own Best Creations," 1.
50 Kazanjian, "Her Own Creation," 2.
51 Colman, "Rachel Feinstein and John Currin, Their Own Best Creations," 2.
53 Colman, "Rachel Feinstein and John Currin, Their Own Best Creations," 3.
54 Ibid.
she believed that it would have been “too weird to have two women named Rachel Currin in the same family.”

Instead of dwelling on the increase in attention and pressure from the media because of her husband, she focuses on enjoying her demanding yet rewarding lifestyle.

Starting from the ground up, Feinstein has made a name for herself as an artist, independent of her famous husband. Nevertheless, they often collaborate on ideas and critique each other’s works, serving as a built-in support system. Feinstein comments on her husband’s art philosophy: “[He has] a very conservative viewpoint of making art, that sculptures should be a beautiful thing on a plinth, not some big installation thing.” Feinstein adds how she has since adapted both her philosophy and Currin’s into her body of work. From ideas to the physical process of creating the work, she collaborates with others asking for opinions and adapting to new ideas. Currin and Feinstein remain two separate artists, yet they form a contemporary team through their marriage, which ultimately informs both of their artistic processes. Like her husband, who is often criticized for his provocative subject matter, Feinstein pushes the envelope on imagination with her scale and expression in her sculptures and installations.

*New York Times* writer Colman has made the following claim: “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.”

I agree with Colman that this is one of the most well-known and popular couples in the American art scene right now. Currin is extremely popular, but criticized by many, much like Pollock. Feinstein, an artist in her own right, has gained much attention from being married to her husband. Living and working in the small and elite New York art scene proves to be a social challenge as well. At times, it can be an extremely frustrating one for this prolific art couple. Currin’s painting as two dimensional

---

57 Colman, "Rachel Feinstein and John Currin, Their Own Best Creations," 3.
works are more traditional and accepted than the monumental abstracted sculptures and installations Feinstein prefers. But if their subject matters were switched, would they potentially be less successful. Although she is doing new and controversial works in three dimensions, the art world has and is warming up to her, by her increased number of shows both domestic and abroad.

Feinstein is not afraid of the criticism of the art world. Instead, she seems to focus on what she wants and what will ultimately make her happy. Contrary to the stereotype of the artist being subservient to the well-established art critics, Feinstein deliberately goes against the grain. By doing so, she creates a spotlight highlighting this "dark side" of the art world, and maybe this will help to inspire a change of standards. The differences between successful and acclaimed female and male artists, seems clearly illustrated by the differences in reception, market value, and criticism between Currin and Feinstein’s works. Feinstein herself supplies two examples from art history of a female artist being treated differently than another famous male artist.

“Alice Neel was a painter, and she was very good. She had kids and there’s this documentary about how she chose her painting over them, and how messed up they are because of it. But her art was amazing. Picasso chose his art over his kids too, but he was never made to feel terrible about it. His offspring never talked about what a terrible person he was. They’re all pretty psyched to be Picasso’s offspring you know.”

This one example illustrates how mothers have a divided role between their personal and professional lives and the impact one has upon the other. Feinstein strives to balance her many roles, especially those of artist, mother, and wife, to maintain her lavish lifestyle.

\[58\] Ibid.
Feinstein and Currin greatly influence each other’s works. From Currin, Feinstein has gained a new respect for the Old Masters. Feinstein once recalled a comment made by Currin about her work: “He feels it’s about my fears of what’s happening in the world, of war, and children, and the strange combination of the two.” Although helpful to each other, each artist retains their own recognizable style. Perhaps most intriguing is the way Currin describes his work: “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.”

His wife is principally known for her decorative finishes and glossy surfaces, qualities often associated with feminine characteristics. However, her husband often features females in his paintings, and openly admits to being a feminine artist.

Feinstein stands apart from Currin because of the juxtaposition in her work of the male-dominated medium of sculpture, and the embellished feminine texture that she leaves on the majority of her pieces. She desires beauty in her art too, which transcends art categories by being both historical and contemporary. She works to celebrate beauty while simultaneously highlighting its morality, creating a life lesson for both herself and her audience.

Fashion:

From the art world to the fashion runway, Feinstein is a celebrity in both realms. However, her connection to the fashion industry has tarnished her reputation as a serious artist by some of the New York art scene. Critic Kimberly Cutter commented on this by giving reasons for such assumptions: “She was the red-lipped star of the Marc Jacobs autumn 2004 advertising campaign; she turns up regularly in the party pages of American Vogue, decked in YSL and

---

60 Kazanjian, "Her Own Creation," 3.
61 Colman, "Rachel Feinstein and John Currin, Their Own Best Creations," 3.
62 Ibid.
Chanel and palling around with her fellow glamourpusses, she has three children at home in nappies, she happens to be the wife and muse of John Currin, who is currently one of the most critically acclaimed painters in America. These points demonstrate exactly where the misconceptions begin. Cutter goes on to pose this question, “Or is she, perhaps, a brave new breed of female artist on the verge of proving that motherhood and marriage and creativity can co-exist?” Yes, Feinstein provides a great example of the changes occurring and possible in the art world, or at least within the art sphere in New York, from a female artist’s point of view.

Yet, a stigma still exists in New York art circles, according to the artist, where it is believed that an artist should focus solely on art and nothing else. Though involved in both art and fashion circles, Feinstein devotes most of her time to art and only attends two fashion shows per season. She classifies fashion as an art form, but distinguishes it from the category of "fine art" because of longevity, believing that fashion is comparatively evanescent. Since clothing is meant to be worn, it has no chance to last and therefore cannot serve as a reminder of the artist and their vision. Creating a lasting and eternal testament remains the ultimate goal for this artist, making fashion the wrong medium for her work.

Iconic fashion designer Marc Jacobs, who has collaborated with Feinstein on a variety of projects, recently described her show *Snow Queen* as follows: “Like Rachel, the work is graceful, exuberant, fascinating, and larger than life. She is the stuff that dreams are made of.” He not only respects her skill as an artist, but also as a fashion model, using her as muse for his 2004 ad campaign. In addition to Jacobs, Tom Ford has also taken an interest in

---

64 Cutter, "Carving a name for herself," 48.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
69 Kazanjian, "Her Own Creation," 4.
Feinstein. Ford asked Feinstein to model for his first women’s line under his own label.\textsuperscript{70} Although secondary to her artistic endeavors, Feinstein engages with fashion projects for a select few established designers as mentioned above, as side projects.

\textbf{Artistic Style and Previous Scholarship:}

Despite all these various roles summarize above, Feinstein describes herself as a sculptor. However, she also produces paintings on a variety of surfaces such as mirrors. She prefers to work in her favorite medium of wood, but when painting she uses a palette knife to create her extremely meticulous images.\textsuperscript{71} Her artistic process starts with a drawing or small-scale paper model of her idea. She is of the mindset that in order to make large abstract works, an artist first has to prove her ability to produce more classical pieces such as drawings and paintings.\textsuperscript{72} Given the dominance of painting as a fine art medium in recent Western art history, I believe that this could be a motivating factor behind her need to produce paintings in order to legitimize herself (in her own mind) as a serious artist.

A press statement from the Boesky Gallery, from Feinstein’s first solo show, describes her work as “alluding to a myriad of diverse artistic influences and interests: from the sets of Hollywood classics such as \textit{Gone With the Wind} and \textit{My Fair Lady}, to the works of early Arte Povera artist Pino Pascali, and American figurative sculptor Elie Nadelman. Her materials and techniques (gold leafing, decorative mirrors, candelabras, intricate carving) harken to the artistic means of the gilded age. Feinstein filters these many sensibilities through her Miami upbringing, creating a truly exciting and cohesive synthesis of materials and ornamental complexity.”\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{71} Evangelista, "After Taste Celebrating the End of Elegance," 3.
\textsuperscript{72} Coppola and Powers, \textit{Rachel Feinstein}, 5.
again the importance of her upbringing in Miami is stressed for its impact upon how she translates her conceptual ideas into a physical form.

Eleanor Heartney takes a more critical approach when evaluating Feinstein’s work. “Feinstein,” she argues, “deforms styles that are already deformed. In the process, she flirts with the grotesque without really delving into its more unsettling implications. Ultimately, her works exude a blank irony that ruffles the surface without really disturbing the psyche.”74 I disagree; Feinstein’s work engages the audience's psyche by placing them in an alternate reality. Her preoccupation with pleasure and beauty sugar coats the surface of her pieces, yet a deeper meaning can be gleaned by further study and evaluation of the image/work and its title.

James Hall, a writer for the Corvi-Mora gallery in London, shares this notion. He believes there exists “something diabolical about Rachel Feinstein’s imaginary universe.”75 He too reads deeper into the works, into the questions Feinstein raises about morality and the fleeting moments of time. Hall adds, “The American sculptor is fixated on the most hedonistic and decorative manifestations of eighteenth-and-early-nineteenth-century European court culture, whose visual codes she seems to enjoy re-creating in her own cultural backyard, but in an increasingly poisoned and desiccated way. This artist sets dreams afloat, only to slay them.”76 Self-indulgent tendencies carry over in Feinstein’s works. She seems both realistic and fantasy-based.

Similarly, art critic Sally O’Reilly has described Feinstein's work as being “visually indulgent and historically irreverent.”77 The layers of pliable textures and the attention to detail with subtle embellishments like high gloss surfaces make her work visually captivating. Instead

75 James Hall, "Rachel Feinstein." Corvi-Mora.
76 Ibid.
of historically irreverent, I would suggest that Feinstein generally pays homage to historical styles by reinterpreting them. She brings attention to art history by using similar characteristics from historical styles. Yet, by doing so in such a whimsical way, those revived styles seem to become a new contemporary art movement appropriate for today’s ever-evolving diverse society and art world. Feinstein does this through her attention to perspective and presentation. She states about sculpture, “And the wonderful thing for me—the truest idea of what I love in sculpture—is that from every angle it breathes life. It has a positive and a negative feeling, you think about your own body in relationship to it, and it’s totally different. There are no dead areas. That’s what I think about with someone like Bernini—you can look at one of his sculptures, and every aspect has a new exciting thing.”78 Constructing sculptures in the round gives the viewer a different experience from every angle, heightening the drama and adding to the experience.

Even though her work remains deeply personal, viewers can still have a unique experience and/or reaction to them since all such pieces can be read in multiple ways. Taken purely as decorative pieces or by reading between the lines, these works challenge our preconceived notions of art, such as Feinstein’s obsession with beauty. Although appearing shallow on the surface, this artist is aware of the quick passage of time. Feinstein's incorporation of reflective surfaces, such as mirrors boldly confronts viewers so that they must reanalyze their own involvement with the artwork.79 The "beauty" of her work provides the obvious homage to the glories of art history’s past, yet her contemporary critique can become clouded by her need to create something that appears similarly beautiful at first glance. From the use of bright, warm colors to the adoption of metallic varnishes and whimsical shapes, her work can easily be

78 Castro, "Humor, Sex and Philosophy,"50.
79 Ibid.
misread as her imagination transformed into real space without the deeper cultural and societal commentary coexisting alongside it.

Artists like Feinstein help to shape the ever-changing classification of what constitutes "contemporary art," especially what "sculpture" should be defined as in today’s generation. While this query is not her focus, Feinstein does raise questions about sculpture and how it fits within the contemporary art scene. For example, by combining materials and structures like those of/in an installation room, she merges painting or two-dimensional techniques with three-dimensional sculpture and structures. Here I agree with O’Reilly’s comment that “It is as though Feinstein is attempting to articulate a position for sculpture now, in the way that painters have for some decades, reaching innumerable end-games that have been surmounted by new gambits or a reappraisal of vocabulary both in practice and commentary.”

However, Feinstein does not attempt to create a revolution. Instead, she merely suggests by her work that a need exists for a revaluation of sculpture for art’s sake. For instance, she is concerned about the process of making art as much as the finished product itself. “The hard thing about sculpture is you have to think about dismantling it, shifting and storing it, and the bigger you make it the more delicate it becomes and the more can go wrong. That’s what takes so long nowadays, devising the mechanics of the whole thing.” Partly because of contemporary sculptors like Feinstein, I believe three-dimensional works may now be considered equals to painting in the contemporary art world.

The presence of a third dimension provides the fundamental difference between sculpture and painting. Feinstein claims, “I really am obsessed with form, that classic sculptor thing. I want to get back to the original obsession with a three-dimensional form that’s just

80 “Frieze.”
81 Dannatt, "Rachel Feinstein When Arte Povera Meets Rococo,” 106.
beautiful in all different aspects; the more you walk around it, the more you see different things you didn’t notice before. That’s the one strength sculpture has over painting so why not take advantage of it?”82 She further explains the value of sculpture in the round: “There’s also that whole physical relationship of your body to sculpture, imagining could you crawl in that space, could you embrace that sculpture, is it smaller, bigger than you? It’s all about spaces, for me. I have a big obsession with negative space,” a quality most definitely on display in [The Sorbet Room].”83 Form and space experienced in three dimensions, provide the design elements unique to sculpture that Feinstein purposely exploits in order for her works to stand apart from painting by her husband and other contemporary artists.

Additional considerations need to be taken into account too. For example, Feinstein admits to being impacted by current events and issues of the day, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. “September 11 happened when I was in the final stages of finishing my big rococo debut at Marianne Boesky’s gallery in New York. To go back to work two days later and finish all those happy coloured prancing pieces seems almost pointless. I watched that hole smolder so close to home for many weeks to come. The experience created so many mixed emotions, and one of those was, weirdly, the need to have children.”84 Living in New York at the time, 9-11 and its aftermath directly affected Feinstein and, indeed, it forever changed her like so many others. Allowing her emotions to guide her work, she created her crucifixion piece in response to the event (Fig. 2).85 This piece represented her fears and hopes for the future, her desire to become a mother, and her fascination with mortality. In that sense, very little distance

82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
exists in this artist’s work. By becoming familiar with her pieces, you begin to understand and to know the artist herself.

Feinstein addresses many stereotypes often applied to women artists. As a mother of two boys and one girl, she demonstrates to the world that women can be both parent and artist, although such a path is not without its challenges and doubts. Often Feinstein works on a huge scale, making larger-than-life sculptures with power tools, with no media or tool restricted from her repertoire. She, like other fine artists, wants to make her mark upon the art world and to leave behind a memorable and lasting body of work. Working in such a scale lends itself to being memorable, something she uses to her advantage. However, the scale also discourages collectors with limited space restrictions. Her work generally addresses pleasure and the passion of her inspirations that she willingly shares. Feinstein sums up her position within the art world perfectly in this quotation:

I want to make sculpture, big sculpture, but I’m in a funny conflict all the time. My conflict is that I’m a sculptor, and I’m a woman, and I’m a mother. As a mother, you’re supposed to be 100 percent there for your children, and you’re never supposed to be selfish. But if you’re an artist, it’s all about being selfish. It’s what I want to see and who I am. All very complicated. I don’t think you can be a great mother and a great artist and run a great house and be a great woman at parties and be great to your friends and great to your family.86

Her sincerity may be one reason Feinstein’s work has been so well received today. Being an artist is not always a glorified profession, but one that requires balance and hard work. Feinstein appears straightforward and honest about her intentions and motivations, freely admitting to being inspired by other artists and/ or previous works of art. By studying her unique position in the art world, and her body of work, one can educate oneself about the current conditions of contemporary American culture, history, and of social issues such as gender roles.

86 Kazanjian, "Her Own Creation," 2.
III. METHODOLOGIES:

When analyzing Feinstein's *The Sorbet Room*, 2001, in the pages that follow, I will utilize a variety of methods and theories to gain a better understanding of the piece as a whole. The methods I will use throughout this analysis are twofold. First, by applying a narrative analysis I will argue that the work was created as a physical personification of Feinstein's romantic feelings for her husband, and that it contains a story about their relationship, indeed, the installation serves no practical purpose within each new setting, unless a new private collector or owner of it sees fit to "use" it in some new way, which would then further add to the history and to the story of the work. Second, I will use formal analysis in order to discuss the architectural and compositional characteristics of *The Sorbet Room*, detailing her choices of materials, colors, and principles of design. The characteristics of this artist’s distinctive style and her focus on collaborations between a variety of historical styles will be covered in full. Not only is there a combination of styles, but a combination of techniques as well. As Francesca Hughes has noted, “Throughout its history architecture has imported languages from other disciplines, from philosophy, art history, literary criticism, and psychoanalysis.”87 Created as a room composed of flat panels, each wall has three-dimensional subjects protruding from the wall making this installation a testament to the artist’s skills working in both two-dimensional and three-dimensional fields.

Third, I will discuss the differences between the structure and the purpose of this space, whether the intended goal is for its function, or for its decorative, visual, and aesthetic qualities. Karen Burns believes that “built space is inseparable from its use and uses.”88 I will place my

---

focus on the interior of this room; however, its decoration evokes qualities peculiar to the exterior of an historical structure known as the Amalienburg Pavillon (1739), thereby confusing the function of this "room." For this section, space will be defined according to Burns “by genre and genre’s probable spatial uses, conventions, practices and possibilities.” For the purpose of this paper, the interior will be defined as the “domestic space both as a place occupied and lived in, and also as opportunities for representation by artists.” In that sense, *The Sorbet Room* embodies a domestic space that represents the personality of its artist through a combination of both sculpture and painting. Given Feinstein’s previously noted inspiration from extant historical Rococo buildings, the “Painting of interiors, therefore, do not so much imitate rooms and the people and objects in them as they participate in and help create, a system of visual codes that have to be interpreted in terms of class, gender, location and social structures.” In addition to my own interpretation of *The Sorbet Room* as based upon the artist’s own writings about the work, all the visual codes or cues are provided for each viewer to piece together a new narrative or meaning in whatever manner they see fit.

This installation functions as an example of both two-and three-dimensional works done with traditionally-masculine tools, and Feinstein finished it in such a way that it exudes a feminine touch and a Rococo quality. Due to this overall method of display, I will examine the installation’s height, width, and depth in order to narrate Feinstein’s particular story throughout the room. The power of light and shadow to create the piece’s mood will be discussed. The ideas of actual and illusionistic depth will be covered in detail as I investigate the composition of each side of the room’s structure.

---

89 Ibid.
90 Marco and Reiche, *Baroque & Rococo*, 337.
91 Ibid.
In addition to the formal and narrative aspects, I will also study the appropriation used throughout the piece, including Feinstein's citation of German fairytales, and how the artist has reinterpreted those tales to fit her own desires. I will utilize the fairytales told in *The Sorbet Room* from the German perspective by the Brothers Grimm in order to compare what characteristics have remained the same throughout Feinstein's contemporary re-interpretation of that famous tale. In addition to German literary sources, historical German architecture will also be included in order to offer more informed insights into the compositional elements of the castle motifs. After visiting the aforementioned Nymphenburg Palace, Feinstein discovered the Amalienburg Pavilion and become captivated by a charming room done in an intricately adorned Rococo style because of the combination of both opulence and decadence.
IV. CONTENT:

The entrance or doorway into *The Sorbet Room* greets the visitor with a large opening evoking the power and stateliness of a Rococo castle.\(^93\) Once inside, the viewer perceives a solid white, larger-than-life room structure, with three-dimensional motifs protruding from every wall, all of which were hand cut on a jigsaw and assembled by the artist. Each wall decoration has been refined and re-appropriation to fit into Feinstein's imaginary world. Many of the motifs were taken from popular fairy tales like Cinderella with the glass slipper, and from the actual historical context of the Amalienburg Pavilion in the garden of the Nymphenburg Palace on the outskirts of Munich, Germany (Fig. 3).\(^94\)

Elector Karl Albrecht, a Bavarian ruler, had this pavilion built from 1734 to 1739.\(^95\) It served as the private hunting lodge for himself and his wife, the Austrian Archduchess Maria Amalia, and he consequently named it after her.\(^96\) Dedicated to the goddess Flora, the structure was built “as a place of recreation and pastoral pleasure.”\(^97\) Both husband and wife participated in various recreational activities. “Intended as a hunting box, it was named after the Elector’s wife who, surrounded by the ladies of her court, would stand behind the gilt-iron grille on the roof, and shoot at driven deer leaping out of the woods.”\(^98\) Both function and pleasure were incorporated into the design and purpose of this space, as borrowed by Feinstein in her recreation. Such a room was meant to inspire awe and pleasure, giving glory to both the couple and the goddess. Here is a detailed description of the sophisticated ornamentation of this space that left such an impact upon Feinstein:

95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
The Amalienburg is a long, low, white building of one storey. Its principal façade has nine tall windows separated by Ionic pilasters and bulges upwards and outwards in the centre. The walls are decorated with delicate rococo scrolls, busts in circular niches, and above the central doors, a relief of Diana by J.B. Zimmermann. Inside there are but seven rooms, three of which take up the whole front of the building. Today the visitor goes in through a blue and white painted gun room, with imitation Delft kennels for the spaniels beneath the gum cupboards, which leads into a closet concealing the Electoral brocade hung chaise perceee. These rooms are balanced on the other side by a blue and white tiled kitchen and a closet decorated with exotic pheasants. The bed-room and dining-room which flank the central ball-room have lemon-yellow walls encrusted with silver plasterwork-trophies of game hung from ribbons, trees curtseying to the breeze, putti swinging on garlands of flowers and rococo scrolls which eddy round the inset portraits of Electors, the still-life pictures and the dull grey looking-glasses.99

The repetition of pilasters that create movement throughout The Sorbet Room, is an element incorporated by Feinstein into her reinterpretation of the Amalienburg, by doing so she brings the external inside. Furthermore both Italian and French late-Baroque characteristics can be seen on the façade of the pavilion.100 Curves dominate the interior of this small space and create a light, decorative quality that gives it an air of relaxation, comfort, and luxury—all themes expressed in Feinstein's piece too (Fig. 4). Designed by architect Francois Cuvillies the Elder, the Amalienburg Pavilion is just one of four pavilions on the property.101 The Germanic Rococo style flourished during Cuvillies's career, “liberating form, lightening volume and creating a scintillating combination of audacity, elegance and verve,” making this a fitting site for Feinstein to reinterpret.102

In addition to this room in Bavaria, the Nymphenburg porcelain factory's traditional shapes and styles also inspired Feinstein (Fig. 5).103 Elements in her work inspired by the porcelain factory include: swans, lions, angels, lovers, and waterfalls.104 The manufacturing of

100 Hager and Petzet, Nymphenburg Palace, Park, Pavilions, 33.
102 Ibid.
104 Marianne Boesky Gallery. "Rachel Feinstein."
porcelain in this suburb began in 1729 and it has continued since. In 1761, the factory moved to its current home at the Nymphenburg Palace in Munich. Every object is handmade, and most have been regarded as Bavarian status symbols. In addition to that, the factory still belongs to the Bavarian royal family, and inhabits the Cavalier’s Lodge on the grounds of the palace. Three aspects make this facility unique. First, the porcelain process is still executed by hand; second, unlike many others, the factory survived the Industrial Revolution; and finally, it has managed to adapt to mass-market globalization. The combinations of this Rococo period’s style, plus the porcelain factory, in addition to the Nymphenburg Palace itself, generated the foundation for Feinstein's artwork and illustrated her respect for craft.

There at Amalienburg, Feinstein found herself inside an all-white Rococo room that inspired her to reinterpret it in the Boesky Gallery in New York. Feinstein once stated about the Rococo art movement: “I’ve been very interested in rococo, for example, in extremely ornate images and porcelain figurines, because they’re so much about the fleeting opulence of the time.” In *The Sorbet Room*, we see a reinterpretation of an historical Rococo chamber as a contemporary, romantic narrative adopting the physical form of a room. The composition she used for this piece recalls this earlier period, when “Ornamental motifs were commonly used for door and window surrounds and to enclose the decorative schemes of walls and ceilings, usually made of wood or stucco.” Feinstein surrounded both the openings and windows of this piece with decorations all rendered out of wood. *The Sorbet Room* was featured in Feinstein’s first solo show at the Boesky Gallery from November 10th to December 15th, 2001. It showcased her

---

107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
109 Ibid.
love for the dramatic, for the emotional and whimsical feelings of the Rococo movement. This show featured “five large freestanding sculptures in the main gallery, with the rear gallery transformed into a faux Rococo salon, The Sorbet Room.” The press release for this show said the following:

This new body of work is inspired by Feinstein’s recent trip to the imperial palaces of Munich and Vienna. At the Amalienburg Palace (outside Munich), she discovered an all-white Rococo room that she reinterpreted in the gallery space. Additionally, many of the figures and shapes of her sculptures—lions, swans, lovers, angels, waterfalls—are reminiscent of the works produced at the Nymphenburg porcelain factory. One of the show’s largest works, a brightly colored procession of life-sized painted wooden horses, comes from an image she found of an 18th century Spanish cavalcade. While clearly delighting in the enormous beauty and refinement of Rococo achievement, the underlying contradictions of that time are openly implied and contemplated in Feinstein’s work: decadence, debauchery, and aristocratic decline.

While isolated within this formal analysis, The Sorbet Room was originally one part of six pieces from Feinstein's first solo show at the Boesky Gallery, and all together the works represented the physical and historic building complex in Germany. This room or installation became the show's crowning jewel and the physical manifestation of the German Rococo period, guiding the style of the entire exhibition from the carriage house, to the attire of the horses and the use of flourishes on the walls. Although created specifically for the Boesky Gallery—a site-specific work in that sense—additional adjustments had to be made for the overall function of the commercial space. For example, because of the positioning of this piece within the gallery, a door had to be cut out on one side in order for the staff to reach a storage closet (Fig. 6). Thus, a new meaning was added to this artwork because of this practical alteration. I believe the door adds another element to the work’s overall character, while reminding viewers that contemporary art is about both beauty and function.

112 Marianne Boesky Gallery. "Rachel Feinstein."
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
This manipulation also raises questions like this one: is adapting to the space for the needs of the gallery staff more important than the work remaining perfectly intact as originally intended by the artist? In this, I believe that the artist should have the final say. By accepting to show in the space provided, the artist acknowledges that certain conditions must be met (like an architect). In this case, this site specific installation derives much of its meaning from its setting. The cut out door is proof of this piece’s original context and location. This characteristic adds to the provenance of the work. Now, the new private owner is the third to add to the story and history of *The Sorbet* Room, which started first with the artist, then moved and changed within the gallery space, and then lastly moved and presumably changed within the work’s new permanent home. This detail and the full versatility of the piece, decidedly marks it as a contemporary work of art, and as an object of its time and space.

A blatant appropriation of images or techniques from other artistic styles is sometimes expected in the contemporary art world. With *The Sorbet Room*, Feinstein managed to seamlessly incorporate appropriated Rococo exterior architectural details into a pure white interior setting. Viewers can clearly identify elements related to Baroque and Rococo castle architecture, details that work together to create the internal structure and visual cohesiveness of the room. Once again the artist provides a bridge to the past: Baroque castle architecture becomes a contemporary interior, a solid white decorative room whose principle use is for transmitting visual pleasure. The motifs on the panels may be different but the architectural elements provide the unifying theme that connects each side together. Furthermore, outdoor subject matter like plants and trees are seen on the inside of the room, in conjunction with columns and structural supports which traditionally appear on the exterior. Typically, such images are used to create the setting of a piece; however, with the switching and merging of roles
in Feinstein’s life and work she successfully pushes the idea of imagination and fiction together with “real” things placed in a new context. White is the only color used, allowing the viewer to paint the scene with color in their own minds. Instead of developing color as the main tool to create an illusion of mystery, the artist here depends on form and the interplay of two and three-dimensional shapes with their shadows. She relies mostly on her own imagination to create her dreamscape. Her lively reinvention of a room from the past into a contemporary space breathes new life into the historical Rococo period and into our own time.
V. INTERPRETING THE SORBET ROOM

*The Sorbet Room* is certainly one of Feinstein’s strongest pieces, mainly because of her mastery of composition and space within it. Though very different in construction and finish, all six pieces for her first solo show at the Boesky Gallery were developed from her travels to Austria and Germany. The titles of all of them are very powerful tools of persuasion for the viewers of her works. Sorbet, for instance is a common but nevertheless quite special dessert and that quality may serve as an implication that the story being told is of a similarly special and sweet nature, or at least one that produces pleasure in the eye of the beholder. In addition to the taste, sorbet is a lighter or less filling dessert than ice cream, which could connect to the weightlessness of form and color preferred by Feinstein and, arguably, by the Rococo movement which she revived in this work.

Feinstein prefers working on large-scale projects where she can be both creative and suggestive. The larger the scale the more monumental the work and the meaning may seem. The size of *The Sorbet Room* alone (144 x 276 x 188 inches, or 12 x 23 x 15½ feet) has a great impact upon the reception of the piece. At that scale, audience participation becomes required to completely experience this installation. Of course, Feinstein created the room to be walked into and admired. In addition, this piece would classify as both a sculpture and an installation, or an installation consisting of several smaller sculptures attached to the walls. Once again, Feinstein blurs the boundaries between the divisions of media and makes art historians question the evolving expression of contemporary sculpture. Made entirely out of wood and white paint, the room is static in nature and needs to be experienced in the round, inviting and requiring the audience to walk around and inside of it in order to view every angle and to follow the sequence
of the story. Unlike a painting, this artwork cannot simply be looked at; it must be experienced and interacted with to be understood.

Each wall is an individual, and each wall tells a component of the entire story. Each section could be viewed as a chapter in a book, important individually for a detailed development of the plot and characters but lost in context without the entire novel surrounding it. The use of symbols like birds, cars and shoes gives the audience some perspective; however, the art is still a personal story with references only understood by those intimate to the artist and her husband. Through this piece, Feinstein encourages and embraces a new form of self-portraiture or narrative art, although no direct references exist besides her initials above the doorway to indicate her own presence in the installation.

An interesting dichotomy takes place when a viewer interacts with the piece. An exchange of power occurs for the viewer who must step inside the room. Yet, this is the only way to truly experience the power of the imagery and its ability to transport the viewer through an imagined world of time and space. A new atmosphere is experienced within the walls because it acts like a box, enclosing the viewer but open at the top and bottom. The artist allows viewers to enter her world while still giving them a foundation in their own outside reality through the lack of a particular ground or sky. I believe the imagery on the walls connects to the surrounding panels truly telling the story, and therefore this relationship controls the viewer's gaze.

Albeit inspired by her own vision, the use of iconic symbols such as Cinderella’s glass slipper is not lost upon the audience, and it brings to life their own imaginings. With only one way into The Sorbet Room, the major choice thereafter is which direction to turn first. No clear indication of an order to the interior exists, whether chronologically or to the left or right. The physicality of each wall’s surface is vital in expressing the mood of make-believe and
otherworldliness. Wood remains Feinstein’s favorite material; and the relationship between the flat planes of wood in relation to its raised surface adds interesting shadows to this all white piece, helping to further emphasize the celebration of the love that Feinstein's feels for her husband, and for the inspiration that springs from their relationship.

This artwork presents an interesting challenge because it presents both an architectural exterior and domestic interior setting, or, as I claim, both male and female elements. Divided by boundaries, both exterior and interior spaces imply relationships with concepts such as public vs. private spaces. Though personal in nature, Feinstein presented her narrative in a public place and therefore transformed it into a communal experience. In that sense, The Sorbet Room serves as a liminal space where the viewers are both insiders due to physically standing in the space, while at the same time being outsiders because of the personal nature of the love story. At least ninety percent of the visual stimulation occurs inside The Sorbet Room.

Once inside it, a reversal of roles takes place: outdoor elements, like columns, fountains, and arches outline the walls, creating the façade of a castle on the inside of the room. But again this “exterior” scene, consisting of plain white walls, except for a figural motif above the door, acts much like an interior. Moreover, both for the original Boesky Gallery exhibition and for its current status inside a private collector’s home, The Sorbet Room was and is housed within another building, creating a tension between its assumed role and its actual role. Typically rooms serve a utilitarian purpose; however, decoration and admiration is the core of this artwork. This room or large-scale installation has one entrance, which appears reminiscent of a castle or mansion. The lack of other ornamentation draws your eye directly into the opening. The only embellishment lies on top of the wide doorway, spanning several feet across the entranceway. A small border resembling a row of arches projects out, delineating the doorway and a collection of
decorative motifs positioned directly above the opening. No actual doors exist; however, there seems to be an implied open door on the two sides of the entrance. Feinstein hides nothing; instead she invites spectators in to experience her art. Branches from a large leafy tree intersect the doorway moving the eye to the internal setting. A voluptuous nude woman appears seated on a mound of earth with a small bird resting upon one of her outstretched hands. In the middle of the display a round mound with the letters R and J intertwined with an F below them, symbolize the initials of Rachel and John.

From the beginning this space has thus been marked by the artist as her homage to her marriage. In addition to the mound, a tropical tree sways in the wind behind what appears to be a dog-like creature. A leash connects the dog to the woman, perhaps symbolizing loyalty, if the woman represents the artist. Or, the dog could be a representation of her husband. Whomever they represent, a clear connection between the two figures occurs. Everything is made of wood and painted white. White most likely refers back to the Rococo style because of the emphasis on light, soft colors and embellishment. The contours of the objects shown exclude details. Such a combination might give the illusion of being incomplete or a "rough draft." Instead, I believe it works in harmony with Feinstein’s fanciful nature and her attempts to express her vision of their married life together.

Once inside the space, it is evident that there is no ceiling, or floor covering to accompany the piece. Instead the room where this installation is placed becomes a part of The Sorbet Room by supplying both the ceiling and floor, creating a codependence, much like the couple, as depicted above the entrance and on the walls. Above the doorway two birds appear grouped together (Fig. 7). A large evergreen tree transforms into the dominant feature on the right-hand side of the panel. The left-hand side shows another outdoor scene. Three buds bloom
from one large tulip-shaped flower, with yet another bird flying above it, right next to the
doorway. In the corner closest to the door a skull faces the outside. Further along the wall a lone
wheel rests covered with a large leaf. A simple cornice once again borders the doorway and
traces the contours of the remainder of the room. The two ends of the wall end in a boxed out
column. Feinstein reinterprets the space in this work by alternating objects. The foreground
provides the only information available in this scene. Both the evergreen tree and the rabbit
coexist on the same plane with no background, as well as the tulip and wheel on the opposite
side. The wall is further divided into sections. Every three feet composes a part of the wall that is
further broken down into two parts, for easy installation and movability. Feinstein learned from
her past and has since carefully planned out the mechanics of her larger pieces for both durability
and practicality.

Feinstein directs the center of attention towards the luxurious looking car positioned in
the right corner of this wall, a convertible, used for a joy ride during a fine spring day (Fig. 8).
Angled to the left, only the front portion of the vehicle can be seen with the rear disappearing
into the background. There appears to be no ground floor and that in turn creates the impression
of a floating car. Also the supports of the background fade into the sides of the car, creating a
feeling of open space. Two large tropical trees provide shade for the empty car, while birds fly
across the sky. Columns flank each side, but they are not placed directly in the corner; instead,
they reside a foot inside on each corner. Directly in the center of the image is an archway,
interrupted by the grill of the car. In the distance, a balcony or set of stairs spans across the
horizon, with large sculptural forms evenly spaced across. This could be a reference to a
collection of statues, or to another architectural form related to the outdoor courtyard scene.
The wall across from the opening has a rather simple design. Three windows dominate the space due to the physical restraints of the Boesky Gallery space (Fig. 9). Light streams in illuminating the already pristine white walls. Shadows increase the depth of the boxed-in windows, providing another layer to this highly delineated piece. Similar to the implied doors, square cut outs located on either side of the window wells imply the idea of shutters or window coverings. Unique to this central set of panels is a symmetrical composition; the most ordered of the walls, the center wall stands apart from the others because of its repeating features.

Another grouping of symbols located above the middle window, mirror the entrance to The Sorbet Room and draw the attention of the visitor. Two bird-like shapes appear connected to a crown above the middle window; perhaps this refers to a beloved fairytale or a personal symbol of the artist and her husband expressing a shared emotion or story from their relationship. Once again, each panel divides into sections and because of the interruption of the window three pieces are needed to complete each section. Conceptually, the individual pieces must work together in order to form a complete view or structure, just like small moments or memories work in harmony to create a narrative or to recall an event. Feinstein utilizes the limits of her material to her advantage. Instead of creating one large piece that would be difficult to assemble and move she eased the process of installation while adding more character to the piece. The panels act as building blocks, or moments in time from her life shared with Currin. When put all together, these moments create a highlight of their relationship. The balance of order and chaos (asymmetrical and symmetrical) could also be a direct reflection of the busy lives both artists lead, and how they are independent of each other artistically, yet very codependent personally for support and encouragement.
In addition to the bird motifs, two large candelabras spanning several feet frame the central window directly beneath the bird assemblage. Given Feinstein’s preoccupation with fairytales, this could be a reference to the story of *Beauty and the Beast*, especially of the dinner scene Belle experiences within the castle. Feinstein could be reinterpreting that setting as well as the Amalienburg Pavilion. Candelabras serve as a source of light; therefore, Feinstein could have manipulated her design by placing the flat wooden cutouts of the candles by the windows to have both an implied and a natural light source. Feinstein provides very little context to position the viewer when examining at this wall. It is unclear whether the candelabras emerge from the wall or instead rest on a table as could be implied by the square cutouts. Flanking the left and right windows is a single vine twisting and growing upon the structure itself. Here we see the incorporation of outdoor elements (plant life) in an interior setting like a dining room. The nearby standard column with the arched border serves as a bookend for both corners, framing the scene as the viewer first enters.

The far right wall again returns to a more descriptive outdoor scene. By far the most congested of the four partitions, this scene showcases several symbols and has a variety of references (Fig. 10). Working left to right, a column appears in the corner and it instead seems to have fully merged into the outdoor garden depicted. Although easily identified as a column, the other natural elements overwhelm the bottom portion and are incorporated on the top of it as well as if to stimulate how nature grows over manmade objects within its domain. A large flowering bush dominates the left side covering the column and part of the arched doorway. Similar to the entrance, a nude woman reclines on the upper portion of the doorway, holding a large leaf that extends downward emphasizing the arch. In the distance, rolling hills or mountains imply a layer
over the upper portion of the column, a hint as to the setting, whether fictional or real, of a place with exotic plant life, birdlife, and impressive buildings.

Working across the image, the focal point of an arched doorway with a staircase leads to the upper right hand corner of the scene. Placed upon the stairs half way up, a shoe, or what could be Cinderella’s slipper, appears possibly implying that the artist is Cinderella and her husband her prince. Another shoe is placed upon a ledge near the bottom of the stairs. Following the stairs upward, they are interrupted by a large three-tiered fountain, typical of an outdoor garden. The stairs appear three-dimensional because of a profile view of the railing leading up to the upper right portion of the wall. There they continue onward to a fountain and then end in another section of a courtyard. The railing starts in a spiral at the base of the doorway and is marked with a potted plant, before continuing upward as well.

The most striking characteristic of the right wall is the door located in the right hand corner. As previously mentioned, this door was not originally apart of the overall configuration. It was necessary for the gallery staff to reach a closet. Much like the columns, the garden foliage layered on top of the door incorporates it into the setting. The backside of the stairs as well as a tree occupies the majority of the cutout.

Again, an implication of opulent wealth emerges within this lavish outdoor garden complete with stairs and a fountain, positioned directly across from the expensive car. Such symbols could be representations of real objects in the artist’s life, or her re-creation of her own fairytale using well-known emblems from other stories. The rounded and arched border continues around the upper portion of the entire piece, tying it all together. Overall, I believe that Feinstein focuses more upon form than content in The Sorbet Room. The use of layering as seen by the overlay of foliage on the door would indicate that she was more concerned about the
image and not as much the narrative. Content comes second to form, for without form the narrative would not be fully realized if at all.
CONCLUSION:

Feinstein explores and inhabits many different and seemingly divergent roles as a contemporary artist, including mother, sculptor, fashion icon, and spouse of one of the most successful contemporary painters, John Currin. Her connection to Currin has had a great impact upon her art. They work as a team, encouraging and supporting each other, in her case especially by serving as his primary model. Feinstein is both a serious working artist and a socialite; much to the dismay of the New York art world, because she believes in living her life instead of only producing art in order to satisfy her many critics. She stands, therefore, as an example of a working contemporary female artist, one who is very successful, something still greatly lacking in today’s art world. In addition to her professional life, she is also a mother of three children, an aspect that is also undervalued in the art world today.

She embraces the traditional role of the studio artist, yet she also raises important questions about the future advancement of her field because of her subject matter and creative process. Her techniques rely upon more masculine and traditional practices like woodshops in order to yield her contemporary site-specific installations. Yet, her inspirations come directly from the canon of art history, including the Baroque and Rocco movements, as well as her contemporaries, whom she admires and with whom she collaborates. She also is a lover of travel, employing the scenery and architectural history of area to arouse her artistic fancies.

Feinstein lets her peers and her surroundings influence her imagery, in conjunction with her own past like her time spent in Miami, and her travels to Europe, especially Germany. Typically self-portraits come in the form of paintings or more realistic renditions of the artist. However, I would maintain that each work produced by Feinstein, like The Sorbet Room, becomes one piece of her story, whether of her fascination with fairytales or, history or her
thoughts about aging and motherhood. Her art furthers the scope of self-expression by moving away from a literal representation to a more conceptual one. Three main themes explored in her artworks are pleasure, indulgence and power. She had added a substantial new voice to the world of contemporary sculpture in the manner of self-expression and in her reflections upon earlier art historical periods. As a young artist, she has many more years to contribute to the future canon of contemporary art history.

Merging traditional two-dimensional elements like painting and drawing with three-dimensional forms in the round has become Feinstein’s dominant style. Within that, her emphasis on texture and surface finish is unique and refreshing whether in her two dimensional or three dimensional works. Her multimedia sculptures lend themselves to the exploration of how form interacts within space. The ideas of both actual and illusionistic depth, in relationship to atmospheric perspective are an engaging quality of The Sorbet Room in particular. Feinstein infuses the discipline with new energy, and imagination by drawing attention back to the past, in many ways, she has created a revival of the Baroque and Rocco movements in our contemporary art world. She reinterprets the formal design elements into contemporary settings, using modern tools in order to express her opinions on current ideas and events. Subtracting a fabricated floor and ceiling is a new development she adds to site specific installations, as well as sculpture. Not only does Feinstein collaborate with her peers, she embraces each gallery setting by highlighting its construction and surface textures. Through the mixing of various textures, Feinstein creates a sensual experience for viewers.

One aspect I focused on throughout this paper is the deliberate mixing of media, a popular trend in today’s art market and quite prominent in Feinstein’s work. The Sorbet Room, embodies her interests in incorporating architectural elements into the domestic, private realm of

---

womanhood. Historically and figuratively, external elements in architecture have become closely linked to masculinity, because they represent a physical substance and or permanence. An interior room, often seen as feminine in comparison, operates as an organized space created for a definite purpose. As we have seen in this thesis, in *The Sorbet Room*, Feinstein takes those concepts and turns them inside out. She brings external features inside and incorporates them into the decorative surface of the interior, removing them from their original utilitarian purposes.116 At the same time, she combines cut outs of trees and flowers in the interior portion of her piece, further complicating the narrative for the reader, who must questions the inside and the outside confines of the piece. Furthermore, her piece serves as a stage for viewers to interact and perform their own unique identity while within this narrative space. Each viewer becomes a character interacting with the piece, learning more about the artist and themselves in the process.

Feinstein is bold and flashy and not intimidated by the standards of the contemporary art world, so much so that she often infuses her works with fairytales and directly relates her images back to events from her own life. She shares her personal thoughts and feelings in a relatable way that entices spectators to learn more. Feinstein invites viewer participation, and encourages her audience to create their own meaning and stories when experiencing her art. Her work incorporates symbols for context; just enough to leave questions in the minds of her viewers and that allows them to fill in the blanks, creating their own experience of her world. Finally, Feinstein’s ability to juggling all of her various roles successfully makes her an icon for other working women artists. Art and motherhood can work together cohesively as illustrated by Rachel Feinstein’s life and work. She empowers women by following her own imagination, by working in her whimsical, larger-than-life scale, and by relating the present back to the past. *The

116 Ibid.
*Sorbet Room* in particular provides a personal testimony of her love for her husband, a creation to further her reputation, and a space and to leave behind as a lasting legacy of form and beauty.


"Rachel Feinstein Talks Posing for Marc Jacobs, Politics." Huff Post Style, March 14, 2011.


Figure. 1: Rachel Feinstein, *The Sorbet Room*, 2001. Wood and Enamel Paint. 144" x 276" x 188." Private collection.
Figure. 2: Rachel Feinstein, *Crucifixion*, 2003. Wood and Plaster of Paris. 108 x 83 x 32 inches.
Figure. 3: Francois Cuvillies the Elder, Amalienburg Pavilion, 1739.
Figure. 4: Francois Cuvillies the Elder, Interior of the Amalienburg Pavilion, 1739.
Figure. 5: Aulicsek Dominkus, *Table Fountain: “Die Welt”* (Allegory of the Continents), 1764. Porcelain. 26” x 19 11/16” x 20 ½ “.
Figure 6: Rachel Feinstein, *The Sorbet Room*, 2001. Wood and Enamel Paint. 144" x 276" x 188." Private collection.
Figure. 7: Rachel Feinstein, *The Sorbet Room*, 2001. Wood and Enamel Paint. 144" x 276" x 188." Private collection.
Figure. 8: Rachel Feinstein, *The Sorbet Room*, 2001. Wood and Enamel Paint. 144" x 276" x 188." Private collection.
Figure. 9: Rachel Feinstein, *The Sorbet Room*, 2001. Wood and Enamel Paint. 144" x 276" x 188." Private collection.
Figure. 10: Rachel Feinstein, *The Sorbet Room*, 2001. Wood and Enamel Paint. 144" x 276" x 188." Private collection.