

GAVLAK

Betty Tompkins

Sex Works / WOMEN Words, Phrases, and Stories

July 16 – September 3, 2016

Gavlak Los Angeles is pleased to present *Sex Works / WOMEN Words, Phrases, and Stories*, Betty Tompkins' second solo exhibition with the gallery and her first in Los Angeles. This exhibition includes Betty's recent series of *WOMEN Words* paintings, along with a survey of her early works on paper, and large-scale *Cunt*, *Fuck*, and *Pussy* paintings. *Sex Works / WOMEN Words Phrases and Stories* put pieces from the beginning of Tompkins' career in conversation with her most recent paintings, showcasing the artist's trajectory from subtly political works to more overt statements.

Tompkins is a groundbreaking, feminist artist who has, over the course of her career, repeatedly bucked conventional norms, eschewing 'safe' art in favor of creating difficult and impactful paintings, drawings, photographs, and videos. Taking as her starting point heterosexual pornography, Tompkins reclaims the medium, taking a genre typically conceived as a vehicle for subverting women, and uses it to create direct, powerful, and empowering works that are distinctly feminist. Appropriating pornographic imagery, Tompkins recasts it through an artistic lens and creates masterfully crafted paintings that assume control of and reframe the subject matter.

The centerpiece of the exhibition at Gavlak will be *WOMEN Words, Phrases, and Stories* an installation of 1,000 paintings of words that Tompkins received in response to an email request for words that describe women. The works are traveling from the FLAG Art Foundation in New York City, though this marks the first time the paintings will be shown alongside her earlier work. Tompkins received more than 3,500 responses to her initial query, with the most common words sent in response being cunt, bitch, slut and mother. Beginning in 2013, Tompkins selected 1,000 of the words and began to paint them on canvas, depicting some simply as text, while incorporating imagery from her earlier works into the background, or gestural references to what Tompkins describes as "old-boy painters," like de Kooning and Rothko, into others. Tompkins then installed the paintings in a confined yet fluid network, creating conversations between them, some humorous, some disturbing. In one arrangement, Tompkins placed the phrase "Liberated women," and underneath hung "Talking, talking, talking," followed by "Will she ever shut up?" a trajectory that Tompkins feels mirrors a common experience women have, with people first approving of you, and then slowly become more and more critical. In other less lighthearted areas of the installation, more overtly misogynistic words form groupings: "The only thing that could make her more beautiful is my dick in her mouth," "Three hole wonder," or "Prick pit."

In addition to the *WOMEN Words* series, Tompkins will install a series of her *Cunt Paintings*, a selection of *Fuck Paintings*, and early works on paper. The works span from the early 1970s to 2015, highlighting the way in which she has continued to approach similar subject matter anew, though with an ever-evolving formal approach. Taken together the works offer a bold look at the state of feminism today, a reminder that while women's rights have advanced, there is still a long road ahead towards equality.

Born in 1945 in Washington, D.C., Tompkins now lives and works in New York City and Pleasant Mount, Pennsylvania. Her work was the subject of the solo exhibition *WOMEN Words, Phrases, and Stories* at the FLAG Art Foundation, New York (2016), and *Real Ersatz* at the Bruce High Quality Foundation University, New York (2015). Her work was recently included in *Black Sheep Feminism: The Art of Sexual Politics*, a four-artist exhibition curated by Alison Gingeras at the Dallas Contemporary, Texas (2016), and *The Female Gaze, Part Two: Women Look at Men* at Cheim & Read, New York (2016). Tompkins' work is included in the permanent collection at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, France.

An opening reception for the artist will be held on Saturday, July 16, from 6:00 - 8:00pm.

For more information concerning the exhibition, please contact Tabor Story at tabor@gavlagallery.com, or (323) 467-5700.