

Exhibition places work by Elaine Sturtevant among examples of nineteenth-century Salon caricature



Text by WILLY [Henry Gauthier-Villars], drawings by Christophe [Marie-Louis-Georges Colomb] COMIC-SALON Paris: Vanier, 1892 16.5 x 11.5 cm / 6 1/2 x inches (recto); 16.5 x 22 cm / 6 1/2 x 8 5/8 inches (interior) SAL201715 [view 1, recto, above; view 2, interior, right].

LONDON.- Sturtevant & The Salon Pour Rire places work by Elaine Sturtevant (1924-2014) among examples of nineteenth-century Salon caricature, a genre of caricature that comically reproduced paintings in the booming Parisian illustrated press from the 1840s until the end of the century. The Salon, then France's and arguably Europe's central exhibition of contemporary art, opened its doors annually or biennially to the public in the spring; not long after, the pages of the press filled with comic miniature versions of the paintings concurrently on display. Salon caricature was often titled le Salon pour rire—"the Salon to laugh at."

Sturtevant, who worked between Paris and New York and relocated to Paris definitively in the 1990s, developed practices of remaking (or "replicating") the art of her contemporaries, including Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns and Claes Oldenburg, beginning in the 1960s. To do so, she mastered painting, printmaking, sculpture and photography, but her meticulous approach developed in drawings. The intention here in sowing Sturtevant among historical satire is not to create a genealogy for her work. Instead, pairing Sturtevant and the Salon caricaturists emphasizes their common grounding in technical expertise and careful study, their play with forms of criticism that inhere in drawing, and their ability, through repetition, to subtly warp one's experience of the original model.

Exhibiting Sturtevant with Salon caricature recasts the former as more than a theorist, and the latter as more than a joke. Sturtevant's own remaking was never a comic enterprise, even if she deliberately activated the memory of Dada antics or redoubled Oldenburg's sculptural deadpan. Nineteenth-century caricaturists were often painters as well, or had been trained as painters before tumbling to the ranks of the press. Therefore, a great deal of Salon caricature exceeds the laugh it triggers—it paints too well, it sees too clearly the artist's tricks of shading or perspective, and it knows that behind the painting of a mythical Prometheus is a working-class Parisian model in studio-prop chains.