Art in America

THE BIG PICTURE

Rochelle Feinstein: *Before and After*, 1999, twelve oil-on-canvas paintings. Courtesy Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Berlin. Photo Simone Gaensheimer.

by Faye Hirsch

"Funny is good as long as it bites back."
—Rochelle Feinstein

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ROCHELLE FEINSTEIN is tough on painting while remaining a true believer. Work by work, she seeks to reinvent it, honoring the familiar structures of high modernism—the grid, the monochrome, a critique of the frame—by taking them down a peg. Following a cross-Atlantic trajectory of artists, fom Duchamp to Rauschenberg and beyond, who engage the contingencies of daily existence, Feinstein brings to her painting a range of materials and content, no matter how incongruous or low, that amuse and move her. Language plays a centeral role and dark humor is one of her constants, as she forces abstraction to accommodate life's petty humiliations, fluctuating tastes, and mundane terrors. Her paintings feel personal, not only because we sense they matter so much to her, but because they insist upon our reaction. LOVE YOUR WORK six paintings exclaim in a cheerful

With a retrospective traveling through Europe, Rochelle Feinstein broadens the audience for her incisive, edgy paintings.

font invented by Feinstein; we can read the words as command or advice ("Love Vibe," 1999–2014). Or, since they are written backward in speech bubbles, as if emanating from us, the words can serve as an indictment of our own mindless blandishments. Think about what you see and say: this is the message she urges upon us.

A clutch of European curators and critics have recognized in Feinstein a spirit more akin to Continental iconoclasts like Martin Kippenberger and Albert Oehlen than to many of her US peers who started showing in the late '80s; her conceptual leanings seem to slot easily into the discourse of post-structuralist and political theory.[1] Indeed, Feinstein is having a European moment, with a sizable retrospective that originated at the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève in January 2016 and is currently installed at the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich. It travels to Hannover before coming to New York in June 2018.[2] She has shown recently in Zurich, at Galerie Francesca Pia, was brought to

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Rochelle Feinstein: I Made a Terrible Mistake," at the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich, through Sept. 18. The retrospective, with varying content and subtitles, then travels to the Kestnergesellschaft, Hannover, Dec. 3, 2016–Feb. 12, 2017, and the Bronx Museum of the Arts, June 27, 2017–Sept. 22, 2018.

Love Vibe (detail), 1999–2014, six oil-on-canvas paintings, each 74 inches square. Photo Adam Reich.

All images, unless otherwise noted, courtesy On Stellar Rays, New York.

Art Basel this summer by the London gallery Vilma Gold, and will have a solo at London's White Cube in fall 2017.

The contents of the retrospective vary slightly from venue to venue, depending on the size of the exhibition space (Geneva showed seventy-two works, Munich has forty-two), and each show carries a different subtitle, named for a painting or installation on view. Given the artist's mercurial practice, these variations feel apt. I saw the Lenbachhaus iteration, subtitled "I Made a Terrible Mistake," at its opening this summer. The museum's curator, Stephanie Weber, manages to convey the arc of Feinstein's career despite having room for only about half of the seventy-seven objects on tour. And more: Weber brings out an often unrecognized undercurrent of pathos in Feinstein's work, one that touches on the frustrations of a life in art and on the artist's race with mortality. It's always been there—the melancholy within Feinstein's edginess—but, focusing on a few groups of paintings and several discrete installations, Weber accords it precedence.

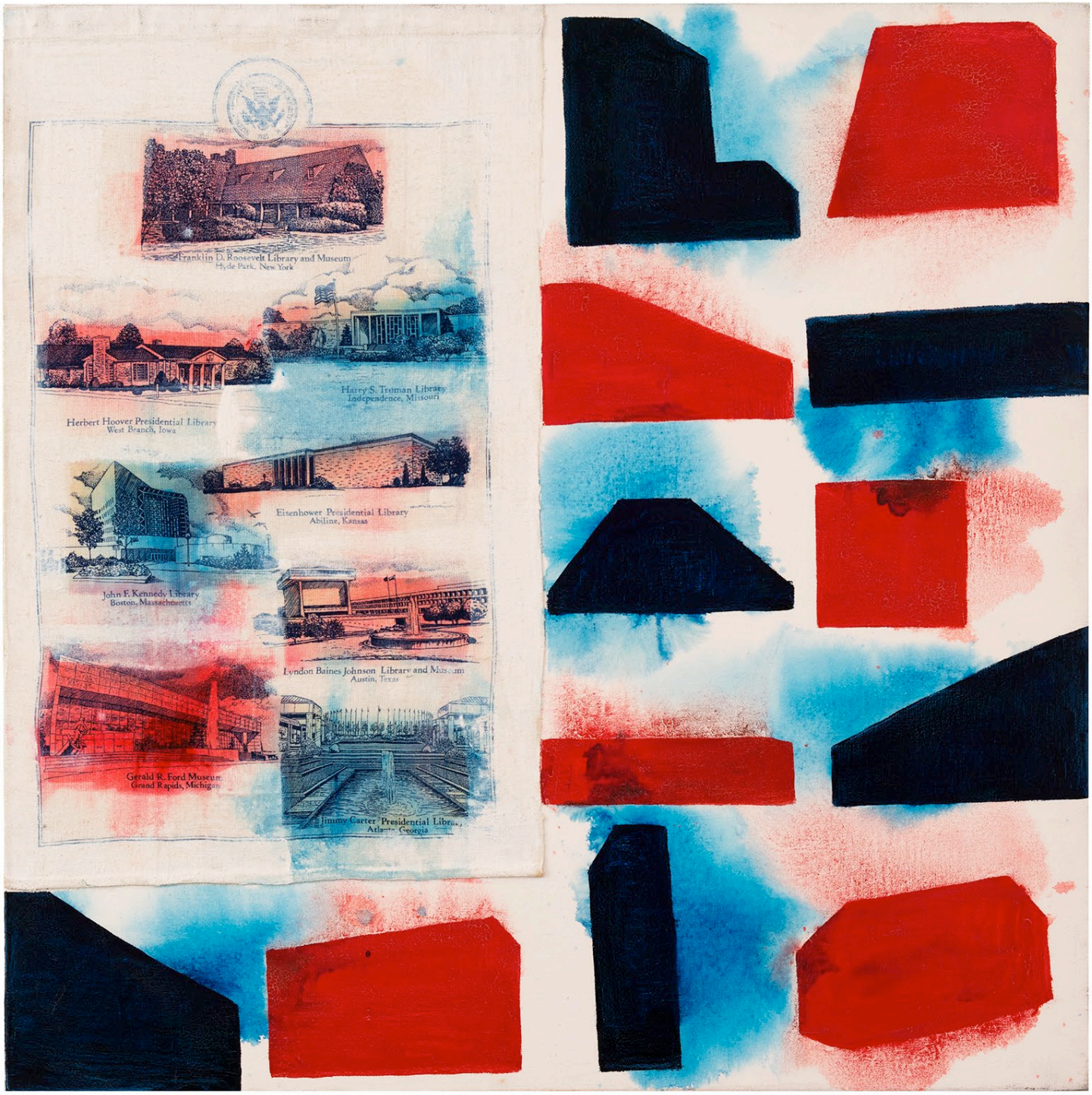
The show begins in the late 1980s, when Feinstein had already thrown out "nature, a suggestion of human forms, generalized architectures, saturated color," as she says, to start from scratch—turning to the grid as a point of departure:

> I had used a gridded format consistently since my student days without knowing precisely how to use it. I went back to the basics to find out how and why, step by step. Simultaneously, I had the ambition to record a present-time filled with eating, walking, sex; on the experience of being in the world—while remaining an abstract painter. As I dumped the idea of developing a signature style, the limits I set for each work upped the ante for the next piece: each painting had to be discrete; it had to have a subject that comes from normal, stupid life. No repeats, no refinements.[3]

Opposite, *Find Your Own Damn Voice*, 1994, oil and mixed mediums on linen, 42 inches square.

Over the next decade, Feinstein discovered a seemingly inexhaustible potential for revelatory content in her initial point of reference, the grid. At first her paintings were one-offs, like *Flag* (1993), its dirty red-and-white-checked dishtowel a "found" grid placed within a more wobbly hand-drawn net of blotchy orange strokes. As Weber writes in the catalogue, the painting alludes to Jasper Johns but also, in its abjection, to Mike Kelley's *Janitorial Banner* (1984); some observers at the time seized on it as a "feminist gesture."[4] Feinstein responded with *Find Your Own Damn Voice* (1994), in which she placed small reproductions of her own grid paintings in small square plastic sheaths and Velcroed them onto a canvas—in a grid.

The artist then began working in series. "The Wonderfuls" (1990–97), a group of fifteen paintings currently in the Munich exhibition, adduces the ironies of an overused adjective. She recycled leftover red and green paint in the last few days of 1990 for *It's a Wonderful Life*, creating an ugly holiday plaid as (in part) an indictment of Christmas (and the film). In *A Wonderful Place to Live* (1994) she repeatedly collaged ROCHELLE, ILLINOIS 61068 within the black bars of a grid enclosing bare linen squares, reinventing a banal midwestern town as though it were named for herself—an


Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and Museum
Hyde Park, New York
Harry S. Truman Library
Independence, Missouri
Herbert Hoover Presidential Library
West Branch, Iowa
Eisenhower Presidential Library
Abiline, Kansas
John F. Kennedy Library
Boston, Massachusetts
Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum
Austin, Texas
Gerald R. Ford Museum
Grand Rapids, Michigan
Jimmy Carter Presidential Libra...
Atlanta, Georgia

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absurdist self-aggrandizement. *Wonderful Sex* (1992) attaches to the canvas a souvenir dishtowel printed with images of presidential libraries, which are reiterated over the surface as repeating red and black shapes blotted with blue—a witty mess inspired by Bill Clinton's infidelities but implicating the rest of the presidents as well. After a terrible vacation with a lover, she made *Wonderful Vacation* (1994), a striated Rorschach blot in green and blue in which the two halves seem to turn their backs on each other.[5]

In the early 2000s, Feinstein increasingly incorporated photography and video, and turned away from the grid as a singular preoccupation. "I Made a Terrible Mistake" is a large group of works dated from 2002 to 2005 that includes video, sound, colored lighting, and a dizzying array of paintings of all sizes, some displayed on the wall and others resting against it. The artist first exhibited this series in a lower Manhattan storefront in 2009 in an even larger version.[6] The title quotes pop star Michael Jackson, who offered the sentence as an apology for dangling his young son from a balcony in Berlin in 2002, to the horror of fans and press gathered outside. One of the most striking pieces in the installation is a blue and pink tempera painting reading AUDITORIUM, with the more precise name of the place, MICHAEL JACKSON AUDITORIUM (indicated on an accompanying plaque), partially obliterated by two rectangles. This *damnatio memoriae* was not Feinstein's invention but an actual phenomenon, as the sponsors of the auditorium covered up the name after Jackson was accused of being a child molester.[7]

Another preoccupation of "I Made a Terrible Mistake" is late soul singer Barry White—he of the sexy lyrics and velvety bass, whom we hear in a faint audio. Among the loveliest paintings in the room are canvases rendering the refractions of a disco ball. In *Deeper, Deeper* (2003), they flicker over painted lines of borderline obscene White lyrics; in the white-on-white *DJ Purity* (2004), they allude both to the '70s dance culture that Barry White pervaded and to the iconic painting by Kasimir Malevich. The installation, however chaotic, resonates with the perverse delights of debased

Opposite, *Wonderful Sex*, 1992, oil, fabric, and printed dish towel on canvas, 33 inches square.

Auditorium, 2002, tempera on panel, two panels, 10 by 36 inches overall.

GNORW, 2002, oil and acrylic on canvas, hand-made pillow, and photo collage, 42 inches square.

heroes and bad practice—call it "wrong," or *GNORW*, the title of a lurid 2002 canvas with those letters painted on a nasty-looking striped pillow stuck onto the surface.

Such "missteps" are humorous, to be sure, but this is a humor rooted in the poignancy of human existence. The disgraced Jackson, a filthy old dishtowel or pillow—Feinstein elevates her subjects even as she offers them up to ridicule. Laughing almost with embarrassment at what we see, we are also strangely heartbroken; we see her works as rooted in human stresses and failings, from soured relationships to the weight of unsold inventory. Her unrelenting criticality produces the darkest kind of hope—evidence of the will to keep creating even in despair ("I can't go on, I'll go on," as Beckett famously wrote in *The Unnamable*). Feinstein's preoccupations are, as literary scholar Robert Alter observed of Saul Bellow and Itzik Manger, "the grossness, the poignancy, and the sadness of things flawed in the world below." In a 1972 essay, Alter identified the bleak optimism in Jewish humor:

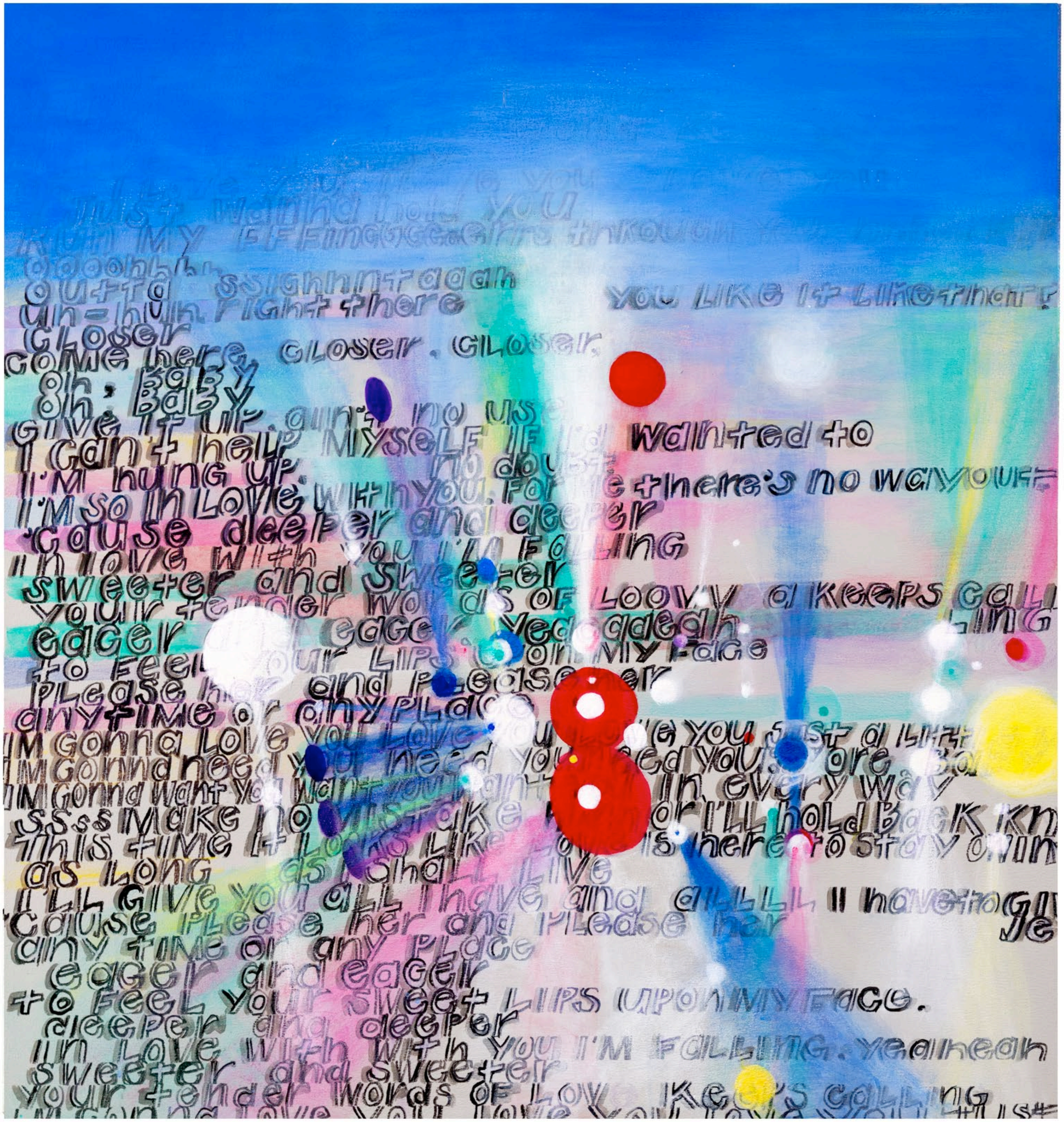
> The perception of incongruity implies the perception of alternate possibilities, humor peeking beyond the beleaguered present toward another kind of man and another kind of time; for the very aura of ridicule suggests that it is not, after all, fitting for a man to be this pitiful creature with a blade of anguish in his heart and both feet entangled in a clanking chain of calamities.[8]

Out of failure the artist scrapes an odd form of dignity, as manifested in creative practice itself. For example, in 2009, in the wake of worldwide economic collapse, Feinstein decided she would, for a time, make work entirely from stuff already in her studio, including earlier paintings that she painted over or cut up and reused. It was unseemly, she felt, to do otherwise. Moreover, like so many New York artists, she had been forced out of her studio; she decided to empty, as well, two storage spaces. The sheer volume of unsold material weighed her down, as it does many an artist as the years pass. The result was "The Estate of Rochelle F.," a "pre-posthumous" (her phrase) group of paintings, numerous explanatory text drawings, and a printed portfolio.

It was not the first of Feinstein's works referring to the physical and psychic toll taken on artists who feel their careers will never properly launch. Perhaps the most poignant work in the exhibition is the multipart *Before and After* (1999). It consists of a dozen canvases. Eleven of them constitute the "Before": some hung, others leaning against the wall, they self-referentially depict, in exceedingly pale pastel colors, blank stretched canvases leaning against a wall and each other. The twelfth work is painted in red and white; it shows studio storage racks, with canvases slotted into shelving and more works implied by a flat file at the lower right. This is the "After," the end of a narrative of seemingly unvalued productivity. Or is it? The strength of this work lies in its allure: the delicately tinted canvases, with their allusion to modernist monochromes, are charged with meaning. The colors imply changing light, as if these paintings have carried with them other spaces and times, a kinetic passage. It is the ultimate representation of an artistic practice that revels in its own unfolding. Alienated from a system in which labor's fruits in the form of earnings will seemingly never accrue to the maker, the artist claims her work—indeed, "loves" her work. Irony of ironies, so does Lenbachhaus, which has acquired *Before and After* for all posterity. ○

Opposite, *Deeper, Deeper*, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 38 by 40 inches.

1. Kerstin Stakemeier treats Feinstein's art as an "affective" practice, interpreting it via Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Lee Edelman, and others, in "Affectionate Expropriation," Stephanie Weber et al., ed., *Rochelle Feinstein*, Cologne, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2016, pp. 14–18. See also "The Gang and the Post-Gang Painting of Albert Oehlen: A Conversation Between Rochelle Feinstein and Kerstin Stakemeier," in Achim Hochdörfer, ed., *Albert Oehlen Painting*, Cologne, Buchhandlung Walther König, 2013, pp. 62–101.
2. In addition, a survey of the work in the form of an artist's book, *Rochelle Feinstein: I'm With Her* was issued by Black Dog Publishing, London, in 2016. It contains facsimiles of catalogue essays and reprints of articles from the past twenty-five years, including Carrie Moyer's "Modernist at the Disco," published in *Art in America*, September 2008, pp. 92–93, and a story I wrote, titled "Sandy's Day," for Feinstein's 1996 exhibition catalogue *Satocpyc*, New York, Bill Maynes Gallery (facsimile pp. 30–45).
3. Quoted in Fabrice Stroun and Tenzing Barshee, "Love Vibe: A Conversation with Rochelle Feinstein," in Weber et al., p. 26.
4. Stephanie Weber, in Weber et al., pp. 68–72.
5. The artist recounts this incident in Stroun and Barshee, p. 27.
6. The exhibition was installed in a lower Manhattan storefront under the auspices of Art Production Fund/Lab Space; for images, see *Rochelle Feinstein: I'm With Her*, pp. 58–85.
7. Jackson died during the run of Feinstein's exhibition, and some visitors arrived thinking it had been devised as a memorial, a situation that transformed the whole show, in one sense, into a mistake.
8. Robert Alter, "Jewish Humor and the Domestication of Myth" (1972), reprinted in Sarah Blacher Cohen, ed., *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1987, p. 26.


just wanna hold you
uh-huh right there
you like it like that?
closer
come here, closer. closer.
give it up, ain't no use
I can't help myself if I'd wanted to
I'm hung up
no doubt
for me there's no way out
I'm so in love with you
'cause deeper and deeper
in love with you I'm falling
sweeter and sweeter
your tender words of love keeps calling
eager
to feel your lips upon my face
please her and please her
anytime or any place
in every way
as long as I shall live
I'll give you all I have
'cause please her and please her
any time or any place
eager and eager
to feel your sweet lips upon my face.
deeper and deeper
in love with with you I'm falling. yeahean
sweeter and sweeter
your tender words of love keeps calling