

# Living the Fantasy



**A.J. Fries**

AJ Fries paints portraits of Desire.

In the context of his new series of paintings depicting sex toys, this sounds like a clumsy pun fumbling to undo a bra strap in the dark, but it is true enough. Fries is not merely painting the objects that epitomize desire, but the ambiguous and multifarious texture of desire. His practice over the last few years has involved a profligate rendering of groups of like-things such as slices of pie or shot glasses, painted in abundance and found in countless public and private spaces throughout Buffalo. His rapt attention toward these iconic symbols has been a hot pursuit of both alluring images and the sensations of desire that feed their allure.

Which is not to say that Fries does not gleefully concede some measure of prurient fun in his current series. In each of these new paintings, an authentically-rendered sex toy is depicted atop a brightly-colored ground, within which one sees faintly-painted outlines of selected cartoon characters. These figures generally provide a final layer of exuberance to what are already wholly exuberant objects, a saturation of merriment equal to the paintings' saturation of color: Tom and Jerry amplify the mischievous fun of the Jelly Invader, which poses coyly with head tilted. And what could be more innocuously playful than Curious George frolicking behind a big Strawberry Dong or Josie and the Pussycats posing with the flavorful Grape Vagina?

Fries uses these gestures playfully, even pushing them to the extent of the obvious quip of Betty and Wilma framing an image of a strap-on dildo, referencing an adolescent male fantasy a few degrees past foxy boxing and mud wrestling. The appearance of Duck Dodgers and His Eager Space Cadet in a canvas depicting an "artillery shell butt plug" collapses the ongoing homoerotic gag about ambiguously gay superhero duos with a form that undeniably mimics the top portion of a Saturn V rocket. At the same time, Fries' decision to use besotted and unloved Everyman Charlie Brown behind the Senso-Lips masturbation device has the tragicomic air of pathos. It is the only painting that verges on sordid, with a desultory portion of a face placidly awaiting attention.

The sex toys themselves are faithfully replicated, very close to the source imagery Fries references though they resist succumbing to photo-realism and the clinical air that would emit. Fries keeps it real, but with subtle visual adjustments to the objects. While the actual sex toys are designed for comfort and pleasure, Fries' renditions appear even softer, more comfortable, more welcoming. Combined with his successive layers of lush color, it pushes his subject matter past documentary depictions and toward the more ambiguous

realm where we might find the emotions manifest in these objects. He enhances this with an added layer of lacquer that adds punch to the punch.

Fries' countless dozens of pie slice paintings were never about pies. They were about the palpable sensation of desire with which we fill these images, the lemon meringue of all our dreams. Likewise his plentiful series of shot glass paintings, whose symbolism can run the gamut between bottomless possibility and abject failure. Even when he has dealt with specific commercial icons—the Pillsbury Dough Boy, the smiling Kool Aid jug, Oreo cookies—his interest has resided more in the emotive juice with which these objects become saturated.

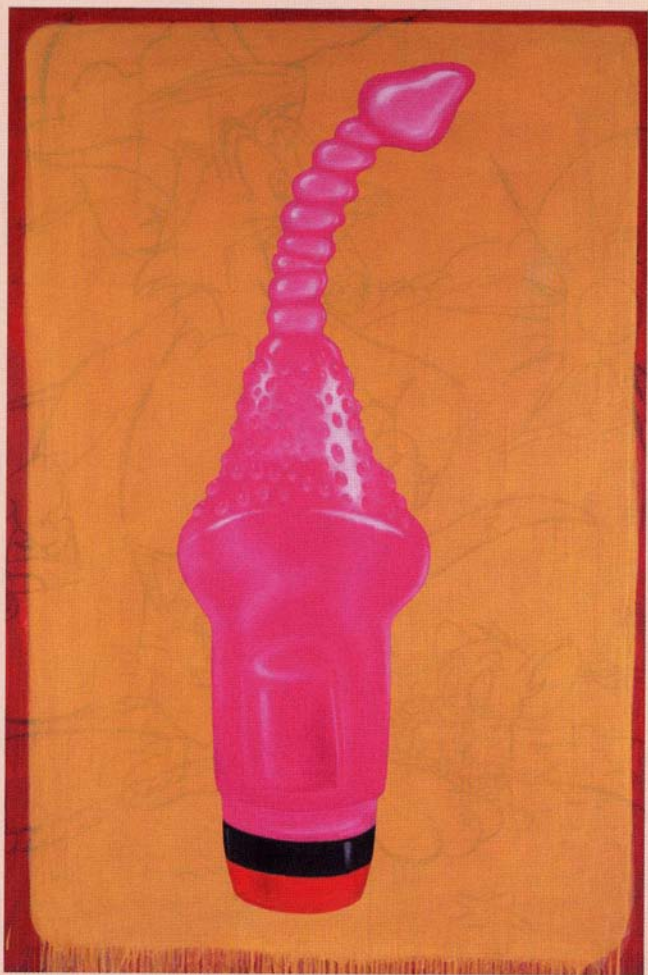
It is important to recognize that like the pies, shot glasses, and consumer icons, the sex toys are entirely and completely ubiquitous. They are not rarified and esoteric references. They are a few samples from among thousands to be found in a multi-billion dollar industry. They may never be sold at Wal-Mart, but they are commonplace consumer items. Even money says there is one on your block somewhere right now.

With the sex toys, Fries seems to be testing the acumen of his practice by posing the question of how much more desirous can I paint these things already designed, engineered and manufactured specifically for pleasure? As a painter—a maker of visually-pleasing things—it is though he were pushing the point home as emphatically as possible: desire is desire, so you might as well give in to it, wherever the heart of your yearning is located.

Have some pie. Face the future. It's all good.

John Massier  
Visual Arts Curator





**Tom & Jerry and the Jelly Invader, 72" x 48"**



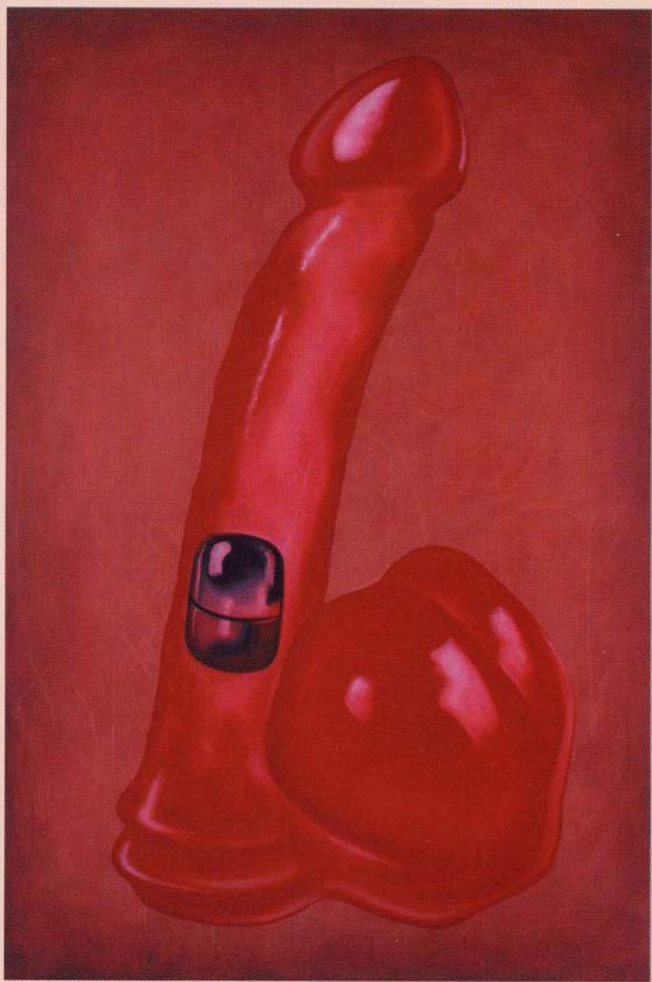
**Josie and the Pussycats and the Grape Vagina, 48" x 48"**



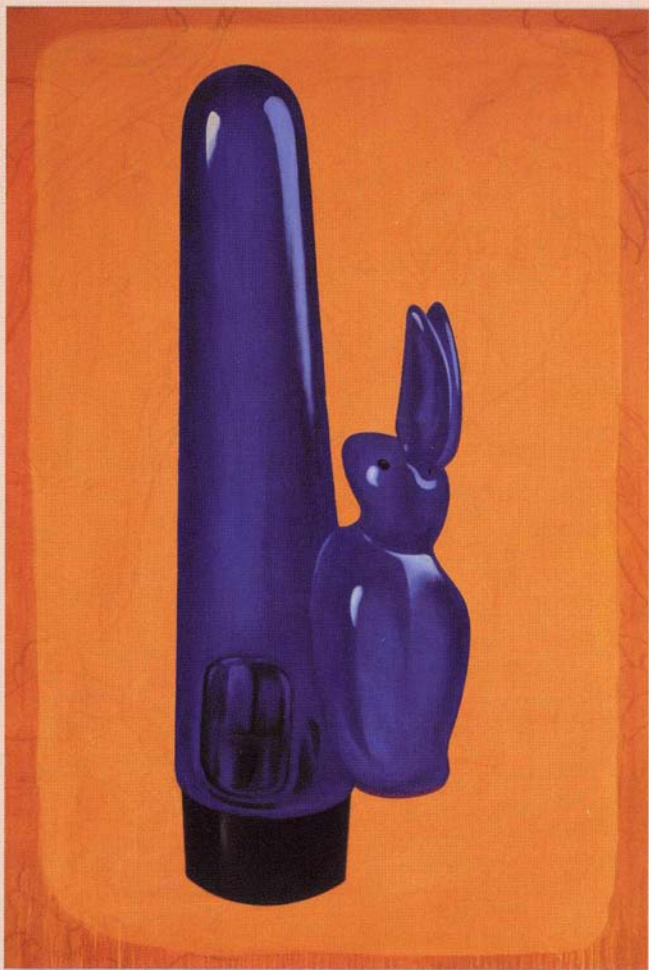
**Wilma and Betty and a Strap-on, 48" x 48"**



**Charlie Brown and the Senso Lips, 48" x 48"**



**Curious George and the Strawberry Dong, 72" x 48"**



**Bambi, Thumper and the Waterproof Rabbit, 72" x 48"**



**Duck Dodgers & his Eager Young Space Cadet and the Artillery Shell Butt Plug, 72" x 48"**

**A.J. Fries** is a visual artist, muralist, and illustrator living in Buffalo, NY. He graduated with a BFA from Buffalo State College in 1995. The work in this exhibition is the result of a series of work he started during his three-month residency at the International Studio and Curatorial Program in New York City. His Solo Exhibits include *New Paintings* at Buffalo Arts Studio in 2000 and *Play with Me* at Big Orbit's Soundlab in 2002. He has also been included in numerous group exhibitions including *Convergence* at The Carnegie Arts Center in 2001 and *9 < 24* at Buffalo State College.

All works:

oil, oil enamel, alkyd, polyurethane, and varnish on canvas mounted on board

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