What's IN A Name

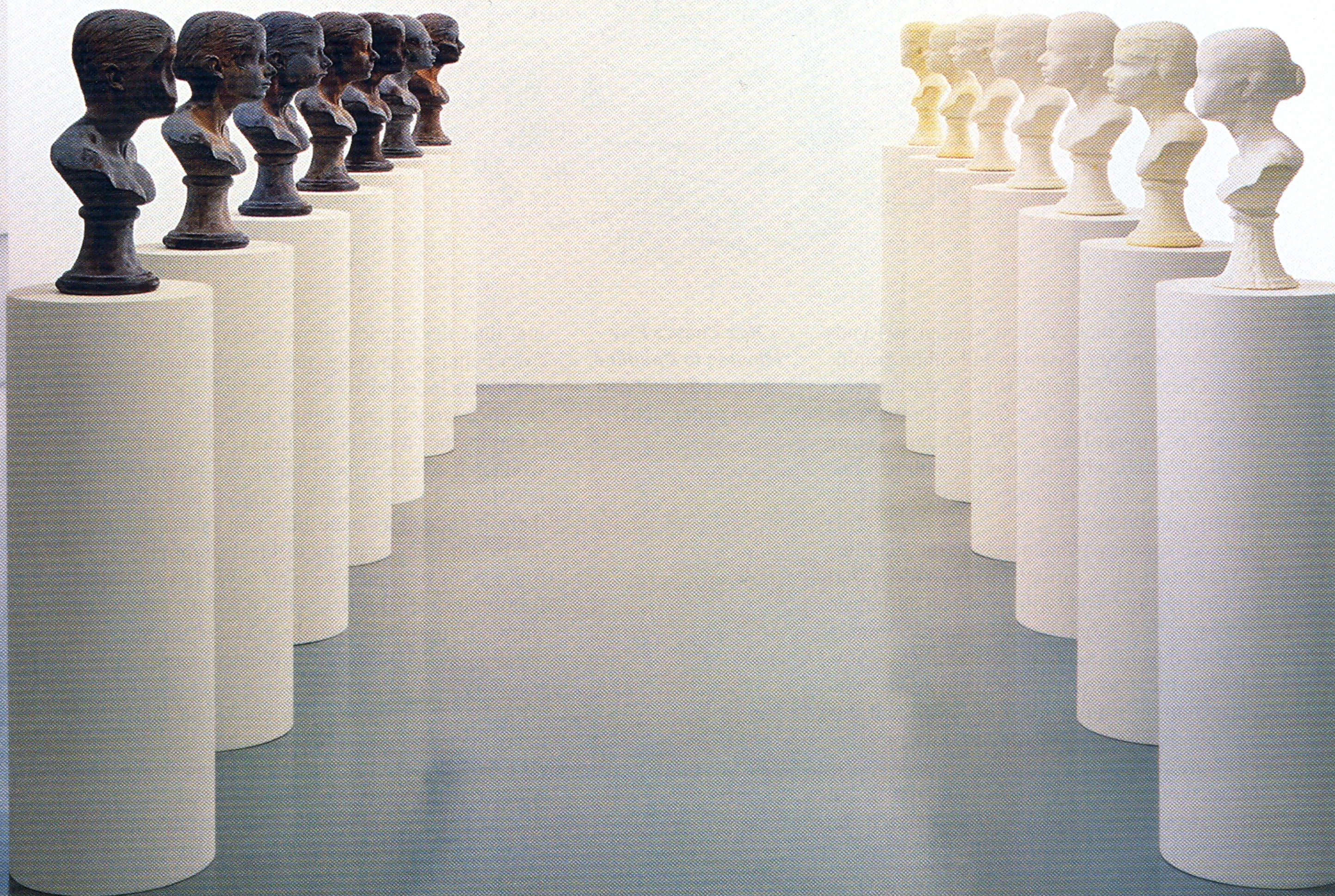
Artists use titles to illuminate, explicate, confound, frustrate—or justify a tax deduction. Even *Untitled* suggests a meaning

BY KELLY DEVINE THOMAS

FRANK STELLA HAS NAMED HIS WORKS AFTER Brooklyn apartment buildings, Polish villages, Nazi death-camp slogans, racetracks, exotic birds, and chapters in *Moby-Dick*. Janine Antoni has chosen titles like *Gnaw* and *Lick & Lather* in part because she likes the way they feel in her mouth when she says them.

Eric Fischl recently found inspiration in an unpublished poem he wrote in the 1970s, using lines from it—like "Surviving the fall meant using you for handholds"—to name a series of bedroom scenes. Helen Frankenthaler says she used to keep a long list of possible titles that she had thought up or come across. "It's a poetic job," says Frankenthaler, adding that her titles, like *Jacob's Ladder* (1957) and *Nature Abhors a Vacuum* (1973), are meant "to place a picture."

Art dealer André Emmerich has known artists to pick up titles from jazz songs, Russian fairy tales, lists of horses' names in studbooks, and dictionaries of angels. One well-known ac-



JANINE ANTONI
***Lick & Lather*, 1993–94, seven soap and seven chocolate self-portrait busts. The title refers to the processes Antoni used to create the works.**

countant, Emmerich says, used to advise prominent artists to name their works after their vacation locales so they could claim the trips as business expenses.

From Gauguin's *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* (1897) to Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* (1966–70) to Mike Kelley's *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* (1987), artists may choose their titles to be descriptive, poetic, philosophical, nonsensical, humorous, or hyperbolic. But all succumb to the notion that, as artist Robert Therrien puts it, titles can "verbally control what people see." Says art historian and critic Leo Steinberg, "Titles are very important. They are like the clothes you wear when you step out of doors."

When Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) was shown at the 1913 Armory Show in New York, it wasn't the Cubist picture so much as the title that drew throngs to the exhibition and incited critics, who referred to it as "The Rude Descending a Staircase (Rush Hour at the Subway)" and "a collection of saddlebags."

"Duchamp's fame—or infamy—ultimately came from that title," says Duchamp scholar and New York dealer Francis Naumann. "Duchamp wrote the title right on the picture. You couldn't get away from it. Nudes in paintings weren't supposed to ambulate. They could lie down, like classical nudes, but to suggest one walking around was too erotic, too provocative for the American puritanical mind."

James McNeill Whistler was deemed eccentric when he used titles with musical connotations, such as *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* (1871–72), suggesting that the subjects of his paintings were subordinate to their compositions. "Whistler used his titles as a weapon," says John Welchman, professor of art history at the University of California, San Diego, and author of *Invisible Colors: A Visual History of Titles* (Yale, 1997). According to Welchman, Whistler wrote in a letter to his patron, Frederick Leyland, who had suggested that he use the word "nocturne" in his titles: "You have no idea what an irritation it proves to the critics, and consequent pleasure to me."

Cézanne and Picasso titled their works when they were sold or exhibited, and often delegated the task to their friends and colleagues. Picasso's *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907)—a title the artist disliked, Steinberg notes—was initially baptized *The Philosophical Brothel* by André Salmon, Max Jacob, and Guillaume Apollinaire, but given its current name by Salmon in 1916. Edvard Munch's *Love and Pain* (1893–94) was likewise renamed *Vampire* by Munch's friend, the writer Stanislaw Przybyszewski.

Clyfford Still refused to title his paintings. According to Welchman, Still wrote in 1972, "My paintings have no titles because I do not wish them to be considered illustrations or pictorial puzzles. If made properly visible they speak for themselves." In a similar vein, Welchman quotes Robert Morris as stating in a BBC interview, "I think that the reason that I don't title them is that I don't think the work is about allusions. And I think titles always are. And I think the work is very much about that thing there in space, quite literally. And titles seem to me always to have some allusion to what the thing isn't, and that's why I avoid titles."

Like Still and Morris, other artists have tried to avoid titling altogether by numbering their works or naming them *Untitled*. But the practice creates its own problems, says Robert Rosenblum, curator of 20th-century art at New York's Guggenheim Museum and a professor of fine arts at New York University. He says of Cindy Sherman's works, which are untitled, "I can never find the one I'm looking for." And with works by Martin Creed, says Andrew Renton, director of the curatorial master's program at Goldsmiths College in London, "If a work is numbered 235, it doesn't necessarily follow that it came after number 234."

ERIC FISCHL
***Bedroom Scene #6 (Surviving the Fall Meant Using You for Handholds)*, 2004. The title came from an unpublished poem Fischl wrote in the 1970s.**

What viewers are meant to make of a given title often remains a mystery. "I think a lot of artists give titles because they have to," says art historian and critic Judith Goldman, an *ARTnews* contributing editor. "Some titles are meant to reveal meaning, but I think many more are meant to conceal or obscure meaning."

Says Harry Cooper, curator of modern art at Harvard's Fogg

Kelly Devine Thomas is senior writer of ARTnews.

OPPOSITE: LEE STALSWORTH/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LUHRING AUGUSTINE GALLERY, NEW YORK; THIS PAGE: COURTESY MARY BOONE GALLERY, NEW YORK

Art Museum, "There are a number of artists who purposely have gone for nonhelpful titles. They frustrate you and your desire to get a handle on a work."

Renton warns that no matter how evocative titles are, they cannot be relied on. "You can't bring a title in as evidence. You can't bring it to prove a point. It might send you on an absolute wild goose chase." René Magritte emphasized the subversive when he painted a pipe above the phrase "This is not a pipe" and titled it *The Treachery of Images (This Is Not a Pipe),* ca. 1928–29. Bruce Nauman once pointed out in an interview that his sculpture *Wax Impressions of the Knees of Five Famous Artists* (1966) was neither made of wax nor from the knees of famous artists. "I was interested in the idea of lying or not telling the truth," Nauman explained. Likewise, Gerhard Richter's *Ferrari* (1964) is a photorealistic painting of a car that "is not a Ferrari at all," notes Robert Storr, professor of modern art at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts.

DANIEL LEFCOURT
***The Banality of Evil*, 2004. Lefcourt gave his rock paintings "disproportionate," hyperbolic titles.**

The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living (1991), Damien Hirst's title for a 14-foot-long tiger shark floating in a tank of formaldehyde, also plays with its audience. "Does that mean something?" asks Renton. "Or does it just sound like it should mean something?"

Daniel Lefcourt knows firsthand how an artist's intent can be lost on the public. When he exhibited a series of rock paintings last year, he gave the canvases portentous, hyperbolic titles, like *The Banality of Evil* (2004) and *The Pleasure of Pity and Fear* (2004), that were "disproportionate in their declarations to what you were looking at," says Lefcourt. "The titles were read in a much more self-serious vein than I intended. I continuously wish I could go back and rename pretty much all of my works, because I think something else would work so much better."

Antoni says she prefers to choose a verb or an action to describe one of her works. "I like to keep the emphasis on how the object was made," she says. Hence *Gnaw* (1992), an installation of two enormous cubes of chocolate and lard, which she gnawed at with her teeth and then, using the chewed-up material, sculpted into dozens of heart-shaped chocolate candy boxes and lipsticks. Likewise, *Lick & Lather* (1993–94), a series of self-portraits in chocolate and soap, refers to the processes Antoni used to create the works—licking the chocolate busts and washing the ones made of soap until the facial features partially dissolved. Antoni likes *Mortar and Pestle* (1999) as the title of her photograph of herself licking her fiancé's eyeball, because, she says, "it implies an action and maybe a certain violence."

Antoni titles her works after she finishes them, but Fischl says that early in his career, his titles would come to him during the making of a painting. "It would reveal itself to me," he says. "It was a clarifying type of thing. I felt like I needed words to guide me."

When he began *Bad Boy* (1981), for example, Fischl says, he started with a bowl of fruit, then painted a bedroom. He added a postcoital couple, but he didn't like the man and painted him out. He was replaced by a baby and then a five-year-old boy, neither of whom was included in the final composition. It wasn't until Fischl painted an eleven-year-old boy into the scene, facing the nude woman splayed on the bed while stealing from her purse, that the title *Bad Boy* came to him. "The ironic thing is that it should be titled *Bad Mother*," he says. "But that title helped me finish the painting. I saw what the boy was doing."

Not all titles are favorably received. One of Steinberg's least favorite titles is Matisse's *Decorative Figure on an Ornamental Ground* (1926). "It's too bloody long, pedestrian, and philistine," Steinberg says. "Every time I have to mouth it, I'm embarrassed. It might as well have been given a number."

John Baldessari disapproves of pretentious titles that refer to the name of a city the artist has visited or, worse, recently revisited, or that adopt some ancient Greek phrase. "I don't like titles that are meant to impress, where not one person in a thousand knows what it means," says Baldessari, whose ti-

PABLO PICASSO
***Les demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907, was originally called *The Philosophical Brothel*.**

tles—like *Fire, Money, Water, Sex* (1984)—tend to be descriptive or, like *My Heart Belongs to Dada but I Know Motherwell* (1957), incorporate wordplay. "I think the title should be just as interesting as the work, with one being no more important than the other," he says.

Antoni, meanwhile, has "never, ever understood why someone would call a work *Untitled*. It's like not giving a name to your child. I think you should use all the means you have to communicate. Language is just one of them." There is a school of thought, however—popular among Abstract Expressionists and Minimalists and advanced by the late formalist critic Clement Greenberg—that "frowns on titles," says Ann Temkin, curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. "There is this whole idea that words can never match the power of the visual image. So a title becomes one more tool or arrow in the quiver that some artists really use to maximum effect, and others are less interested in."

But even nontitles "suggest an area of association when they are apparently neutral," says art historian Robert Pincus-Witten, director of exhibitions at New York's L&M Arts. "*Untitled* underscores the notion of art as an abstraction and the abstract nature of a work of art. Numerical and sequential titles work in the same way. Even when a work is untitled, it suggests a meaning."

Therrien says that for years he rejected any attempt to title his sculptures. First he named all of his works *Untitled,* and then he switched to *No Title*, because he preferred the way it looked and sounded. "In the 1970s, I was pretty emphatic about it," he says. About six years ago, when he began compiling indexes for a group of sketchbooks, he realized the consequences. "Trying not to have a title seems like you'd be simplifying things, but it actually makes things more complicated," he says. "And it doesn't work. People just ignore the fact that there's no title and give the works their own names. You can't fight the world in how people see things."

So Therrien has adopted the names other people have used to identify his works over the years, such as "Joyce"—a female figure who has recurred in his work for some 40 years and a title others suggested based on her resemblance to the author Joyce Carol Oates. Deciding to name her "Joyce," he says, required about "a hundred times as much thought as someone naming a baby."

Charles Yoder, too, says that his attitude toward titling has changed over the years. "I used to think titles were important as a teaching tool and should make a statement about some polemic or theory or policy," he says. Now he's more likely to choose a title based on his emotional association with a work, such as *Deep Woods* (2000), a phrase he picked up from his father. "He was coming down with Alzheimer's at the time," says Yoder. "We would be driving around and he'd get confused and say, 'Oh, we're in deep woods now!'"

While Baldessari views naming a work *Untitled* as a "cop-out," Lane Twitchell sometimes wishes he had the gumption to let a work stand on its own. "I get carried away with titles sometimes," explains Twitchell, who has given his works split titles like *Mountain Meadow's Mysteries or the Evening Redness in the West* (2004). "I wonder what the implications would be if I dropped all the titling. But then I don't think it would be true to my personality. Titling is something I enjoy and something that seems pretty harmless. They just end up on a price list or in the back of a catalogue."

Even those who come up with titles can't always remember them. "You can call a dog Rufus or a child Peter and remember it. But a name doesn't always adhere to a picture in the same way," observes British artist Patrick Hughes. Fischl says he doesn't remember most of his titles, particularly the bad ones that are "so unnecessary it's embarrassing." When collectors tell him the title of a work they own, "I'll think, are you sure that's mine? I won't remember it. I'll tell them, 'Oh, yeah, yeah. That's a good one.' But I'll have no idea which one they're talking about." ■

MIKE KELLEY
The wall hanging *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid*, with a related work, *The Wages of Sin*, both 1987. Some artists like titles that confound the viewer.

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