

FRIEZE

‘Lesbians Are More Fun’: R.H. Quaytman on Gertrude Stein

With a new portrait series for the September 2024 issue of *frieze*, the artist reflects on her connection with the late writer



For *frieze*’s September 2024 issue, we invited R.H. Quaytman to create new works to accompany [Lara Pawson’s essay](#) about Gertrude Stein’s poem ‘If I Told Him: A Portrait of Picasso’. Quaytman responded to the prompt with a whole series of images. We’re sharing those here along with a brief conversation between her and associate editor Marko Gluhaich.

Marko Gluhaich What is your relationship to poetry?

R.H. Quaytman Matriarchal.



MG:What inspires the incorporation of poets and verse in your work? I'm thinking of Jack Spicer in *I Love — The Eyelid Clicks / I See / Cold Poetry, Chapter 18* [2010].

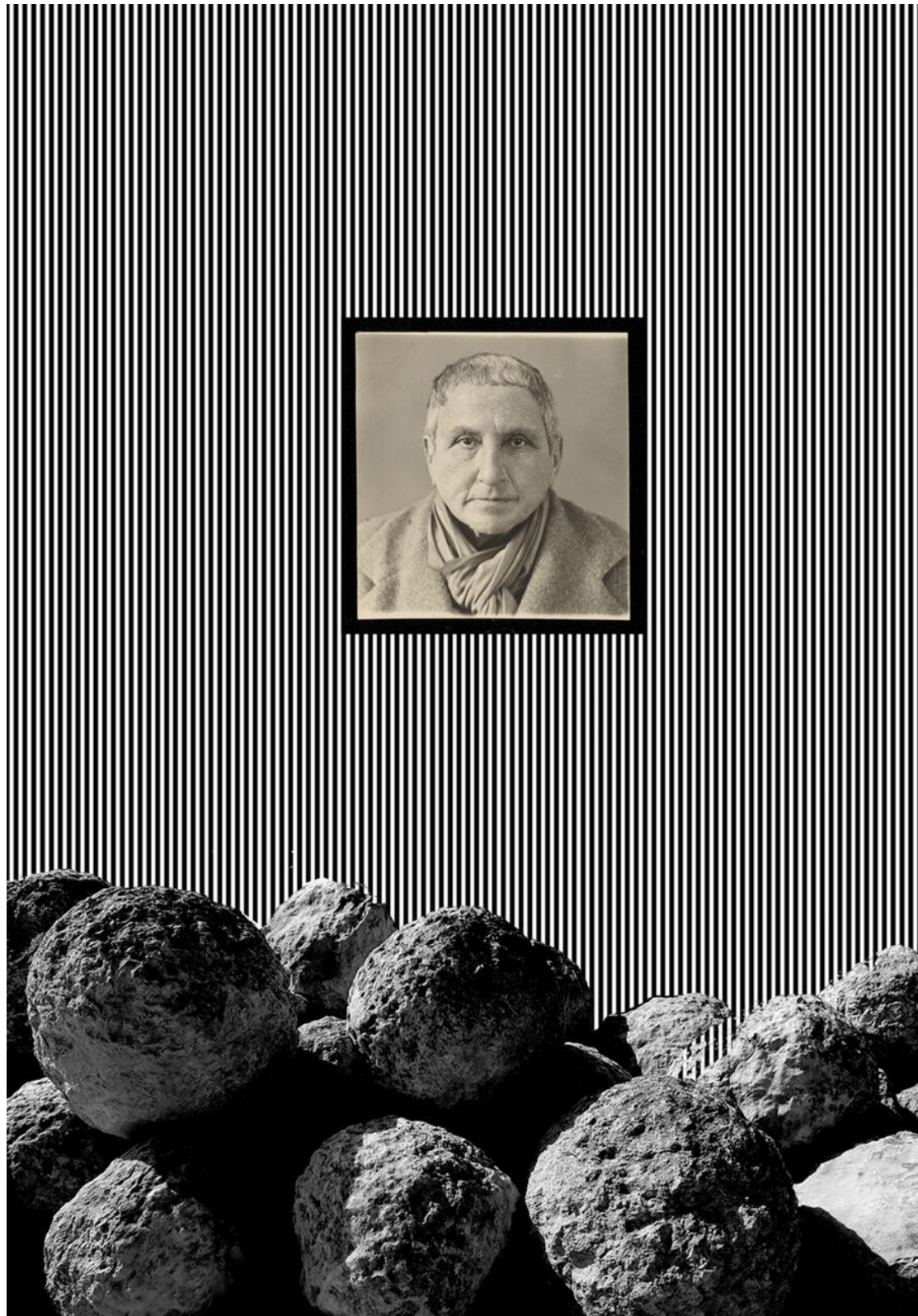
RQ:When I decided to base that chapter for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on a poem by Jack Spicer, it was to see what would happen to a painting if words were added. It turned out that words always win. Or rather they come first. The image can not overcome them. Spicer wrote a lot about correspondences, and so I tried to make some correspondences in the paintings.



R.H. Quaytman, *Stein*, 2 24, tiff. Courtesy: the artist

MG What was it about Gertrude Stein's 'If I Told Him' that inspired this new body of work?

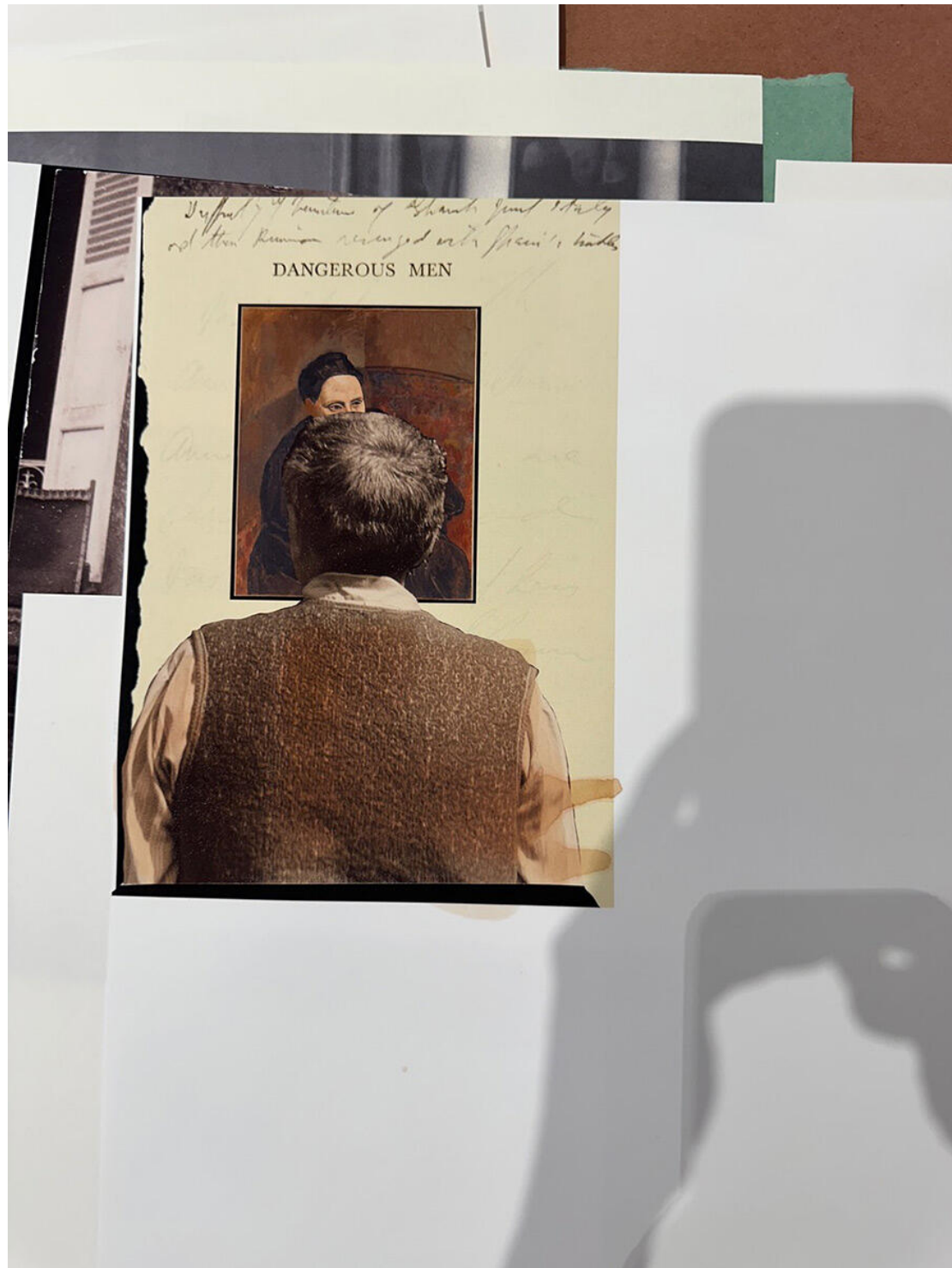
RQ Naturally I was more interested in Stein than Picasso. How incredibly photogenic she was! While playing around with transparencies I accidentally made Picasso's portrait of her look like a self-portrait. Suddenly his face was her face. But, alone, it is a portrait that seems to say nothing at all. He finished it without her.



R.H. Quaytman, *Stein*, 2024, tiff. Courtesy: the artist

MG How do you see Stein responding to Picasso's practice?

RQ Stein tries to do with language what Picasso and the early modernists tried to do with the image. One should read her like one looks at a cubist painting. Picasso, as with Stein, offers the noun first, and then stubbornly stays in a past present. A middle-aged woman sitting down wearing brown. 'If I Told Him' does the same thing with words. It seems to play his game right back. Paintings say, 'this is it / this is that' or 'here is this' or 'I point your attention to that'. And they get stuck there, repeating into history that imperative. Emotions and suspense are absent. Repetition is like a pattern around the subject. Adjectives work no differently than colour and composition.



R.H. Quaytman, *Stein, 2 24*, tiff. Courtesy: the artist

MG What have you learned from Stein in terms of your own creative practice?

RQ Lesbians are more fun.