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Jeffrey Epstein Accuser Maria Farmer Says the New York Academy of Art Helped Enable the Disgraced Financier

The school says it will now assemble a committee to formalize how art collectors can and should interact with students.

Rachel Corbett & Ben Davis, August 26, 2019



A protest group called "Hot Mess" hold up signs of Jeffrey Epstein in front of the federal courthouse on July 8, 2019 in New York City. Photo by Stephanie Keith/Getty Images.

As the lurid details about Jeffrey Epstein's decades of crimes against women and girls continue to trickle out, one unexplained recurring character in the saga has been the New York Academy of Art, a private graduate school known for its emphasis on preserving the tradition of figurative art. It is where he met the young woman who became one of his earliest known alleged victims. It crops up, decades later, in connection with a strange painting of Bill Clinton wearing a dress, purchased from an academy fundraiser in 2012.

Now, in response to mounting questions about Epstein's relationship with the school, the New York Academy of Art has promised to issue new guidelines to govern the relationships between students and collectors.

Epstein was a board member at the academy from 1987 to 1994 and a regular fixture at the school during that time, according to one former student, Maria Farmer, who has gone on to accuse the disgraced financier of assault, as has her younger sister, Annie Farmer. "Sometimes he would just come to the school and walk around and watch the artists. He was at every single event," Farmer told artnet News. He was "often lurking around, looking at the students' studios."

In a recent interview with Mother Jones, Stuart Pivar, one of the academy's founders who became Epstein's art advisor and self-described "best pal for decades," seemed to confirm that the financier was a big presence at the academy. "Jeffrey used to go to the functions of that institution. [Farmer] was there. She was

an artist, and Jeffrey used to buy drawings and what the heck not. My guess is that he was there only for the purpose of meeting... it wouldn't surprise me." (The implication of the latter seems to be that he was at the school to meet women.)

Farmer says she first met Epstein and his associate Ghislaine Maxwell at her thesis show in 1995 when the school's then-dean of students, Eileen Guggenheim, urged her to sell them one of her paintings. (Guggenheim is now chair of the academy's board.) The work depicted a man standing in a doorway observing a nude woman on a sofa, an allusion to Edgar Degas's *Interior* (1868-69), also widely known as *The Rape*, Farmer recently told the *New York Times*.



Edgar Degas, *Interior* (1868–69). Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Farmer remembered that she was reluctant because she'd already sold the painting to a German buyer for \$12,000. "You will be selling to them," Farmer recalled Guggenheim telling her. "They are great benefactors of the academy and you are going to make them happy. Do you understand?" Through a spokesperson, Guggenheim told artnet News that she does not remember this exchange.

Epstein also told Farmer that "if I sold him one of my paintings for half price he would help me with my career," she previously claimed in a court statement.

Farmer ultimately relented and agreed to the reduced fee of \$6,000 and "embarrassingly" informed the German collector that she was mistaken and the

painting had already sold. “I was a trusting student,” she said. “Who doesn’t look up to the dean of their graduate program?”

A Visit to the Ranch

Shortly after her graduation, in 1995, Farmer said that Guggenheim brought her on a visit to Epstein’s ranch in New Mexico. Farmer says she was in town to attend a post-graduate workshop at the Santa Fe Art Institute with the painter Eric Fischl; Guggenheim was there to attend the SITE Santa Fe biennial. Prior to the visit with Epstein, Farmer alleges that Guggenheim instructed her to “act grateful and tell him how wonderful he is,” insinuating that he was important to the academy. Guggenheim said she does not recall this visit.

“He was seated in this chair and he’s all flirty with me,” Farmer recalled, “but I thought he was married to Ghislaine.” She remembers the latter as a formidable woman who initially made her feel comfortable. “While we were there she literally rode up on a white horse,” she added.

Once Farmer returned to New York, Epstein hired her as an art consultant. “Epstein had bad taste,” Farmer said, a fact that has been established in reports about the aggressively unsettling décor of Epstein’s homes, which included displays of prosthetic eyeballs, a female mannequin hanging from a chandelier, and a chess set featuring the likenesses of his staff clad only in underwear. “He liked art that made people react.”

During her employment, she says she did manage to convince him to buy work by some artists she respected, including Chuck Bowdish and Damian Loeb. She remembers that Epstein bought Loeb’s painting of a child swimsuit pageant, *Little Miss Pink Tomato* (1995).



Maria Farmer says Epstein purchased this painting by Damian Loeb, *Little Miss Pink Tomato* (1995), at her suggestion. Courtesy of artnet.

At one point, Epstein offered to provide Farmer studio space to work on a series of paintings she'd been commissioned to produce for the set of the film *As Good As It Gets*. He arranged for her to travel to the Ohio mansion of his friend, clothing magnate and art collector Leslie Wexner and his wife Abigail. While there, Farmer claims that Epstein and Maxwell molested her.

The next morning, she says she called Eileen Guggenheim and told her what happened. "I was sobbing and said Epstein and Maxwell are sick people and I think I could have been raped," Farmer said. In response, Guggenheim "blamed me and mocked me," she claims. Guggenheim said she does not recall this call.



Eric Fischl and Maria Farmer in Santa Fe. Courtesy of Maria Farmer.

The Shanks Lawsuit

Wexner, Epstein, and Maxwell all figure in another odd art-related legal case that links to the academy, the details of which suggest Epstein had an ongoing presence on campus.

In 2003, portrait painter Nelson Shanks sued all three individuals for nonpayment over a \$339,900 portrait of Leslie's wife, Abigail Wexner, and her four children. Shanks alleged that Epstein had commissioned the painting as a gift, using Maxwell as an agent, and that he had gone to the Wexner home to take photos as source material. Both Epstein and the Wexners found the final painting unflattering, and refused to pay.

In the complex legal back and fourth that followed, in an effort to counter Shanks's claim that they had violated the normal protocols of portrait commissioning, Epstein was depicted as having a high level of art expertise based specifically on his extensive time at the school, stating that "Mr. Epstein first met Mr. Shanks several years ago at the New York Academy of Art, where Mr. Shanks was teaching, when Mr. Epstein served as a trustee for that institution."

(In previous reporting on the Shanks lawsuit by [Business Insider](#), the academy had disputed that Epstein had ever been a trustee. The school later confirmed to artnet News that he had been.)

The legal filing goes on to claim that during his time at the academy Epstein purchased portraits from students, and even worked closely with the artists on them. "On each such occasion, Mr. Epstein was given the opportunity to review the finished work, request revisions to the finished work and, only when Mr. Epstein was satisfied with the finished work, did Mr. Epstein pay for the portrait."

The 2003 lawsuit adds that Epstein had also "purchased from Mr. Shanks a portrait of a nude, which Mr. Epstein paid for only after reviewing and being satisfied with the finished portrait."

(Shanks, who died in 2015, is probably best known for his [2005 presidential portrait of Bill Clinton](#). The painter later [revealed](#) that he had encoded a reference to Monica Lewinsky's dress in the painting.)

Asked about the extent of Epstein's contact with students, a spokesperson for the Academy said that there was nothing known about the subject. "It is possible that he or someone in his employ purchased art or made arrangements for a commissioned work by a New York Academy of Art artist, but if there was a commissioned piece, that commission was handled directly between the artist and Epstein."

Continued Contact

According to [a timeline](#) put together by the *Miami Herald*, in 2005, the first public allegations against Epstein and his assistants were made, involving allegations of multiple counts of unlawful sexual acts with a minor. In 2008, he pled guilty to one count of solicitation of prostitution and one count of solicitation of prostitution with a minor, and was sentenced to 18 months in a jail, in an now-infamous plea deal that outraged his accusers, touching off a cascade of civil suits

In November 2011, despite his objections, he was forced to register in New York as a Level 3 sex offender, signaling “high risk of repeat offense and a threat to public safety exists.”

Starting in spring 2012, according to the *Herald*, he went on a major push to remake his image: “Calling himself a ‘celebrated philanthropist’ and a ‘renowned educational investor,’ Epstein undertakes a public relations campaign to counter bad press about his sexual exploits.” Among these major donations, one of Epstein’s charities, the Jeffery Epstein VI Foundation, [announced](#) that it had given “crucial funding” to the academy, lauding it as “one of the few graduate art schools in the United States that focus on a purely classical approach to the visual arts.”

“Rigorous training in technique liberates the artist when approaching contemporary art,” Epstein was quoted as saying in the press release accompanying the donation. “It gives him the tools to express himself precisely. The same can be said for the scientist when approaching science.”

A representative for the school denied that there was any such donation. “Epstein’s foundation issued a press release without our knowledge or approval in 2012. We believe that this ‘funding’ referred to the purchase of tickets at the 2012 Tribeca Ball and his foundation then issued a press release claiming he was a donor to us because he bought tickets at a fundraiser. We have no record of any other donation.” (Epstein is known to have made various [false claims about his philanthropy](#).)

He does seem to have acquired a satirical painting of Bill Clinton wearing a Monica Lewinsky’s blue dress that was shown at the 2012 Tribeca Ball fundraiser for the academy. It is not known whether Epstein purchased the painting or actually attended the event, which honored Robert de Niro and featured both artists showing off their work and numerous attractions (“Nudes were a common sight—and not just on the canvas,” reported [Guest of a Guest](#), a party blog). The Clinton painting’s artist, Petrina Ryan-Kleid, previously told artnet News that the work had sold for about \$1,300, but that she had not known who had acquired the work.



Artist Maria Farmer in her studio in 2019. Courtesy of Maria Farmer.

Life After Epstein

In a statement, the New York Academy of Art said the school is taking steps to reconsider the way art collectors interact with its students going forward.

“The New York Academy of Art is deeply shocked and saddened by what one of our graduates, Maria Farmer, went through at the hands of Jeffrey Epstein, and we are truly sorry for what happened to Maria,” a representative said. “The office of the president is establishing a committee to formalize a protocol for how art collectors can and should interact with the Academy’s student artists.”

After their encounter in Ohio, Farmer says that Epstein and Maxwell threatened to burn her art and destroy her career. As a result, she said she left New York and largely gave up painting. “I was vulnerable because my career was used against me,” she said.

She has also since been diagnosed with a brain tumor and, although it has slowed her down, has vowed to return to work. Today, she’s working on a new series of portraits of Epstein’s victims. She’s planning to meet with the women for sittings and will also create a series of female figures in the form of paper dolls, representing “all the ones we don’t know about.”

Farmer said that although Epstein derailed her career, she’s resolved to have her story told. “I need it said, I want people to know about the people who really abuse artists.”