42.6 Million *Can* Be Wrong

The misbegotten career of Roy Lichtenstein

BY R.C. BAKER

Roy Lichtenstein is the most overrated artist of the 20th century.

Sure, he's a crowd pleaser. His heroically scaled paintings of denizens from a disdained strata of American culture—tearful maidens, wisecracking fighter pilots, and other characters cribbed from comic books—hang in museums worldwide. A woman stares at an alarm clock, her pink, three-foot-high face crafted from a field of red dots, yellow hair trapped within thick black lines. What is she waiting for? Love, as are we all.

Through his masterfully applied faux-Benday screens and heavy black contours, Lichtenstein created the ideal of comics for people who never read them, spawning an industry of T-shirts, coffee mugs, posters, museum retrospectives, and ever-ballooning auction prices. But any canon must be regularly challenged, and what better place to re-evaluate the most popular Pop artist than in this *Village Voice* cartoon issue?

Photograph by Olga Generalova; prop styling by Danielle Hyland

Sorry, hot shot.

During the 1950s, Lichtenstein (1923–1997) had been disconsolately smearing bright patches and squiggles onto canvas, complaining that there was little space for a painting career in a field crowded by followers of such Abstract-Expressionist giants as Jackson Pollock. By 1960, though, he was teaching at Douglass College, in New Jersey, where he was influenced by fellow instructor Allan Kaprow, whose 1958 essay "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock" called for a new art "found in garbage cans, police files, hotel lobbies."

Kaprow might have added comic books to his list of street-level inspirations. A few years earlier, the U.S. Senate's Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency had released a sensational report stating that comic books offered children "murder, mayhem, robbery, rape, cannibalism, carnage, necrophilia, sex, sadism, masochism, and virtually every other form of crime, degeneracy, bestiality, and horror." The senators even scrutinized the ads, noting that many included "pictures of scantily clad young women in sexually provocative poses." A self-imposed censorship code soon scrubbed the industry of its wildly popular crime and horror genres, but the tales of funny animals, lovelorn teens, stoic GIs, and wholesome superheroes still being printed were, in the public's mind, guilty by association.

Lichtenstein was dismissive of the genre, saying in an early interview, "Comics really haven't anything I would call art connected with it." But that didn't deter him from making freehand copies of romance comics and ads, such as one featuring a peppy girl hefting a beach ball, which he then traced onto large canvases with the aid of an opaque projector. When gallery director Ivan Karp first saw these paintings, in 1961, he said, "It was just too shocking for words that somebody should celebrate the cartoon and the commercial image like that."

This overwrought reaction seems to have less to do with aesthetics than with snobbery—the horror of seeing lowly snippets of the American id enlarged to mural scale. Lichtenstein wasn't the only one going downmarket—Andy Warhol had earlier exhibited big canvases of Superman, Popeye, and other comic icons in Bonwit Teller's display windows.

Warhol believed that Lichtenstein had stolen his idea. But who cares? Artists are always ripping each other off. The key is to insightfully expand upon what you've stolen, and that's where Lichtenstein consistently falls flat. While Warhol embarked upon his *Disaster* series of paintings, which inverted the comics' format of multiple panels by repeating the same image over and over until his canvases hummed with a moving, numinous static, Lichtenstein was laboriously cutting and pasting other artists' images into leaden pastiches.

In 1963, Lichtenstein ransacked five comic panels originally drawn by the virtuoso Russ Heath and the stalwart Irv Novick to cobble together his fighter-jet painting *Okay, Hot-Shot*. The critic Adam Gopnik has pointed out that Lichtenstein transformed the pilot's exclamation, "Okay, hot-shot, okay! I'm pouring!," into a dig at the "cult of the poured painting," a form of abstraction championed by critic Clement Greenberg (who was no admirer of Pop art). But such a wan in-joke, entombed within Lichtenstein's trademark fields of dots, can't elevate his spindly lettering and clunky contours to the realm of great painting.

Curators make much of Lichtenstein's tweaks to the original comic compositions—in the case of *Okay, Hot-Shot*, shifting the six-foot-tall pilot's face just enough into the frame to include his left iris, a crop that echoes the angle of a jet added to the background. But this is Composition 101, as the website Deconstructing Roy Lichtenstein illustrates by pairing Lichtenstein's paintings with the original comic panels. The artist's flabby lines, blunt colors, and graceless designs are invariably less dynamic than the workaday realism of the comic pros. Where a comics expressionist like Jerry Grandenetti deftly angled gun barrels to just nip the corner of a panel, Lichtenstein hoists them to a rote diagonal in his 1963 appropriation *As I Opened Fire*, a layout miscue that reduces painting to poster.

Lichtenstein had been an academic and was steeped in modernist theories of how figure and ground relate on a flat canvas. His belief that "drawing doesn't have to be done with sensitive line" might have surprised the Abstract-Expressionist master Philip Guston, who was making gorgeously expressive ink-and-pencil sketches as he developed his own style of bold cartoon canvases in the late '60s.

Guston's hulking Klansmen and cyclopean heads transcend their ridiculous initial impact through subtle colors and textures that fuse their shapes into visceral, slow-burning narratives. Like all great paintings, they have a corporeal presence, an ineffable element that is leached out of Lichtenstein's work by his ponderous formalism. The pilot's huge face in *Okay, Hot-Shot* harangues the viewer like a billboard; nothing lingers except the advertisement for more product. Lichtenstein kept the brand consistent through an immediately ossified style, cranking everything from Greek columns to Monet's Rouen Cathedral to Ab-Ex brushstrokes through his Image Duplicator (to borrow one of his snider titles).

Lichtenstein's work entices collectors to cough up big bucks, most recently 42.6 million of them at Christie's for *Ohhh . . . Alright . . .*, a painting featuring one of the artist's signature heroines—boneless hands, wide eyes, starched hair. In works such as *Drowning Girl* (1963), give him credit for editing the most ludicrous interior monologues—"I don't care! I'd rather sink than call Brad for help!"—into pain-free existentialism.

A half-century has blunted none of the aesthetic jolt of Rauschenberg's Pop-presaging combines or Warhol's best *Disaster* canvases, and another 50 years from now we'll still be creeped out by Takashi Murakami's immaculately rendered anime mutants and marvel at the mordant reverberations of Ed Ruscha's missing-text paintings. But despite acres of canvas on museum walls, Lichtenstein's inoffensive achievement works best when his pallid wit is pared down to a scale ironically close to the originals he pilfered. Admit it—you've got a Lichtenstein postcard on your refrigerator.

I know I do.