

▼ Art

Pop's Pop

The Met looks back at Andy Warhol and the people he influenced

BY R.C. BAKER

In the early 1960s, Andy Warhol (1928–87) unleashed the brute mechanics of commercial reproduction upon the amorphous passions of fine art. Traditionalists were appalled, but this mixed marriage has endured, and now the Met is hosting a golden-anniversary blowout. Although a shambling affair crowded with some 150 works by the maestro and scores of his contemporaries and progeny, “Regarding Warhol” ably illustrates that Warhol’s influence has been—no need to stop the presses—immense.

Start with Andy’s nearly six-foot-tall 1961 canvas *Icebox*, a fascinating muddle of abstract-expressionist smears surrounding a supermarket cornucopia bursting in hard-edge black-and-white from a packed refrigerator, door swung open. Warhol’s own *Door of Perception*, as it were—revealing not Huxley’s cosmic patterns but an adman’s vision of America’s bounty.

Andy was soon the zeitgeist. In Cold War West Germany, where original works from America were not widely available, the painters Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter played telephone with American pop art. Both artists (represented here by multiple canvases) quickly caught on to the concept of editing the ever-metastasizing onslaught of mass media into amped-up images that commented sardonically on the sources from which they were appropriated—Culture as Nature, as the late critic Robert Hughes had it. Post-war artists everywhere were beginning to question the excess at the core of the American dream.

The show’s catalogue essay states: “Notwithstanding Warhol’s native subject matter and embrace of his country’s way of life, he embedded within his work an implicit critique of the United States, and a significant group of artists evolved from his example to stress the darker aspects of American life.”

Earlier artists had also plumbed America’s darker side. In a review of a 1934 Whitney Museum exhibition, the painter Moses Soyer railed, “Yes, paint America, but with your eyes open. Do not glorify Main Street. Paint it as it is—mean, dirty, avaricious.” Warhol, though, dispensed with the sketches and reference photos that Soyer and his compatriots employed to lend verisimilitude to their scenes of breadlines, exploited workers, and heartless robber barons. Andy’s brilliant insight was to take such mundane source materials as newspaper halftones and publicity stills and enlarge them to painting scale.

This changed the raw information of a grainy newspaper photograph into haunting drama—death bigger than life! Form was elevated over content: In the Met’s exhibition, you forget that you’re looking at 15 electric chairs because the smudges and slips of the black silk-screen prints are so abstractly beautiful against that pumpkin-orange ground. Nearby, Matthew Barney suavely echoes this luminous pall in a 2002 color photograph of five shiny Chrysler behemoths from the late 1960s.

Warhol’s dark voyeurism fully flowered in his tragedy-tinged celebrity portraits of

In 1968, Warhol was shot and almost killed by a deranged hanger-on; after that, he shifted from his danse macabre to wallflower at the disco. The beautiful people of his ’70s celebrity portraits are now enervated in flash-blasted Polaroid prints silk-screened atop overripe acrylic hues—socialite Nan Kempner tosses a smile over her shoulder, her purple sleeve disappearing into the green sludge of the background. In a rush for commissions, Andy was losing his eye for powerful composition, both his own and appropriated. Unfortunately, this low point in his ca-

painting, absent any of that genre’s charming abandon. (Both are flattened by Cindy Sherman’s nearby masquerade as Marilyn caught in the clutches of her own sexual vulnerability. Throughout the show, Sherman plays Sugar Ray Leonard to Warhol’s Muhammad Ali.)

Andy was losing his mojo in the ’80s, but later artists found his groove. Warhol once quipped, “Good business is the best art,” and Louise Lawler smartly immortalizes this balm to any collector’s heart in *Pollock and Tureen, Arranged by Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremain, Connecticut* (1984). Taken inside the wealthy couple’s house, Lawler’s deadpan color photo focuses on the ornate serving bowl and severely crops Pollock’s painting in the background—one object elevated, the other dropped to the level of tasteful home decor.

Shortly before he died, Warhol cranked out a series of prints of Neil Armstrong walking on the moon that were fairly inert, despite their Day-Glo color scheme. In 1990, Vik Muniz did a sweetly beguiling drawing from memory of a *Life* magazine photo of the same event that he then had printed as a series of half-tone photographs. This daisy chain of reproduction and memory channels the same intimate transformation—a world-renowned figure first rendered

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banal by reproduction and then resurrected by the imperfections of the human hand—that Warhol achieved in his greatest work.

The best thing about Warhol’s later portraits is a palpable empathy; in the catalogue, artist Cady Noland writes that Warhol “didn’t seem interested in dragging the reluctant into the limelight. (He enjoyed exposing those who enjoyed being exposed.)”

And from the beginning, he found those seekers in the demimonde; see Factory superstar Taylor Mead’s homely mug flouncing through *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968), and the battered, swollen countenance in *Most Wanted Men No. 2, John Victor G.* (1964). There was something profoundly democratic about Andy. Yes, he could be cloyingly enigmatic in his pronouncements—“I never like to give my background, and anyway, I make it all up different every time I’m asked”—yet these subterfuges couldn’t hide his blue-collar work ethic and ferociously calculating eye.

A quarter-century after his death, perhaps Warhol’s most enlightening bequest to every striver engaging the sprawling enigma of artistic representation is yet another aphorism: “I’ve never met a person I couldn’t call a beauty.”

For once, we can take Andy at his word.

‘Regarding Warhol: Sixty Artists, Fifty Years’

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Top: *Ice Box* (1961)—still cool.
Right: *Red Jackie* (1964).

the ’60s—publicity stills of Marilyn, appropriated only after her suicide; Jackie in mourning for JFK; Liz, gorgeous but tortured by a surfeit of love. Warhol’s blotchy screen-prints give back to these goddesses the human imperfections that Hollywood and wealth airbrushed out. Still, even his roughest processes couldn’t completely dim these immaculate studio portraits. Warhol’s Marilyn may be a painted whore, but in this practicing Catholic’s hands, she’s also an icon forever frozen in ecstatic limbo. This same conflation of the sacred and the campy swirls around Félix González-Torres’s 175-pound pile of colorfully wrapped candy, which the exhibition’s viewers can pluck up and eat, a poignant Eucharist in honor of his partner, who died of AIDS in 1991.



reer attracted as many imitators as did his earlier triumphs: In the show, Karen Kilimnik’s portrait of Paris Hilton as Marie Antoinette (2005) collapses under its own flaccid execution and witless concept, while an excruciating portrait of Barbara Walters by Julian Schnabel (1990) seems a child’s finger

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