

# 'The Pop Object'

Acquavella

This dense show, subtitled "The Still Life Tradition in Pop Art," brought the whole Pop spread to the table.

Cleverly curated by art historian John Wilmerding, the show enabled Pop to make its point. Or, several points: It both celebrated and ridiculed object worship, it alluded to consumerism yet showed how much fun consumption can be, and it let us indulge in nostalgia not only for the playful images themselves but also for the culture of their time. Here were

iconic pieces and unfamiliar ones

by well-known and

lesser-known

artists.



Tom Wesselmann, *Still Life #34, 1963*, acrylic and collage on panel, 47½" diameter.

Of course, it was strange seeing this gathering of mostly banal objects in such a highfalutin French Neoclassical townhouse. But the setting enabled Pop to do what it does best—engage with and defy its context.

The show was divided into categories, including The Still Life Tradition and American Pop, Food and Drink, Flowers, Housewares and Appliances, and Body Parts and Clothing.

In the entryway, in effect telling viewers how to read the show, was Roy Lichtenstein's *Mirror I* (1976), in painted and patinated bronze, reflecting nothing. It

offered us an inscrutable look at the artwork, and ourselves—ultimately intercepting narcissism.

Then, filling the two floors of capacious rooms was an exceptional gallery of still lifes: a strangely melancholic Lichtenstein painting *Black Flowers* (1961), and Larry Rivers's uncharacteristic cut-steel vase of artistic contradictions, titled *Steel Plant II Rubber* (1959).

From modern takes on traditional subjects came literal reflections on art and its making, including Vija Celmins's witty 1967 wood eraser and 1966 painting with graphite, dead-panly titled *Pencil*, and Edward Kienholz's *Cement TV* (1969). The eraser as symbol is scary and reassuring, hinting at obliteration and self-correction, as was also evident in Claes Oldenburg's bent and crumpled vinyl *Typewriter Eraser* (1970), installed near Andy Warhol's earnest 1961 painting *Typewriter (I)*.

Alimentary subjects abounded in all their charm and vulgarity, not least James Rosenquist's *Orange Field* (1964), a.k.a. spaghetti; Oldenburg's graceful, super refined 1983 stainless-steel rendering *Tilting Neon Cocktail* (think Brancusi's *Endless Column*); Ed Ruscha's supremely subtle, laconic drawing *Lemon Drops* (1962); and many homages to Coca-Cola, from Tom Wesselmann's to Marisol's.

In fact, Wesselmann's acrylic and collage *Still Life #34* (1963) brilliantly captures the allure and artificiality of America's iconic products and pleasures. Set in a traditional tondo panel, the updated classical still life includes a strawberry ice-cream soda, a bottle of Coca-Cola, a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes, two walnuts, an uncomfortably positioned yellow pear, and a blue vase with bright-red roses.

After food came themes of living and coping, suggested in the 1963 *Untitled Pillow* with lightbulbs by Stephen Antonakos (who died August 19), and Rosenquist's *Idea—Middle of the Night* (2007), a lightbulb with pencil and electric wiring on wood. It's a wonderful sight gag and a visually elegant object, one that brilliantly captures the unfathomable potential of generating an idea.

This was Pop prime, rendering mute the persistent high/low art dichotomy, for what, indeed, elevates one object, or idea, over another? —Barbara A. MacAdam

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