

KANTOR GALLERY

PRESS



WOW Magazine Features Daft Star
Friday, June 27, 2002

Dark Star

by Irit Krygier



Andy Warhol
1964
photo Fred W. McDarrah

By accepting the photograph directly into the domain of pictorial art, not as an external memory prop for the painter's handmade re-creation of reality but as the actual base for the image on canvas, Warhol was able to grasp instantly a whole new visual and moral network of modern life that tells us not only about the way we can switch back and forth from artificial black and white on our TV sets but also about the way we could switch just as quickly from a movie commercial to footage of the Vietnam War. For Warhol, the journalistic medium of photography, already a counterfeit experience of the world out there, is doubly counterfeit in its translation to the realm of art. He takes us into an estheticized Plato's cave, where the 3-D facts outside, whether concerning the lives of a superstar or an anonymous suicide, are shadowy factions of equal import.

-- Robert Rosenblum
in *Andy Warhol: Portraits of the 70's*, 1979

In European countries of advanced capitalist culture, Warhol's work was adamantly embraced (at first in West Germany in particular, but subsequently also in France and Italy), as a kind of high culture version of the preceding and subsequent low culture cults of all things American. It seems that these cult forms celebrated with masochistic folly the subjection the massive destruction that the commodity production of late capitalism held in store for postwar European countries. Inevitably, Warhol's work acquired the suggestiveness of prophetic foresight. It cannot surprise us, therefore to find the key collectors of Warhol's work in Europe: first the West German scalp cosmetic industrialist Stroher followed by the chocolate tycoon Ludwig, and most recently by the Saatchi admen in London. It seems that they recognize their identity as well in Warhol's work and perceive their identity as culturally legitimized.

-- Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Andy Warhol's One-Dimensional Art*, 1989

"Warhol: A Retrospective" which is on view at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, May 25-Aug. 18, 2002, is a riveting exhibition. Curated by Heiner Bastian for the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, the show appeared at Tate Modern before arriving at MOCA, its only North American venue.

Companion exhibitions in local galleries pepper the city. Gagolian Gallery in Beverly Hills is showing the extraordinary paintings Warhol made in collaboration with Jean-Michel Basquiat in the late 1980s. Grant Selwyn Fine Art in Beverly Hills has Warhol's Polaroids. Kantor Gallery has an exhibition of Warhol's drawings, entitled "Icons," while Hamilton Selwyn and Ikon Fine Art have Warhol print exhibitions.

The Los Angeles art scene has embraced Warhol since the beginning. In 1962, Ferus



Andy Warhol
Untitled (Huey Long)
1948-49



Little King
1961



Do It Yourself (Seascape)
1962



Shot Blue Marilyn
1964



Cagney
1964

Gallery (directed by Irving Blum) mounted the now-legendary first solo show of Warhol's Campbell's Soup Can paintings. The series of 32 paintings were purchased by Blum himself with Warhol's enthusiastic consent (for the princely sum of \$1,000), and only recently acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York in a deal that was part sale, part donation. In 1963 Warhol showed the Elvis and Liz paintings at Ferus, and in 1970 had his first traveling retrospective at the Pasadena Museum, organized by curator Walter Hopps.

MoMA, anticipating the unveiling of its new Queens outpost, refused to lend the soup can series to the MOCA show, which the local press has considered a major slap in the face to the city. "The headline should read, MOMA to MOCA: Drop Dead!" wrote Christopher Knight in the *Los Angeles Times*.

Warhol's fascination with celebrity culture made his bond with Los Angeles a special one. Celebrities embraced him in return, as did collectors, dealers and artists. Ace Gallery had taken over representation of Warhol's work in the late '70s after Ferus Gallery closed and Irving Blum moved to New York, and at the gallery (where I was gallery assistant, my first art-world job), I was a witness to much of the pandemonium generated when Warhol came to town.

The atmosphere was electric, and lines for openings stretched blocks down Market Street in Venice. The after-opening parties at the home of collectors Marcia and Fred Weisman or Mr. Chow's restaurant had many of Andy's celebrity friends in attendance, happily mixing with the art crowd. I remember one emergency at the Weisman's, when the actor Ryan O'Neill was spotted with his elbow pressing into a Morris Louis painting. The unpleasant task fell to me to request that he remove his elbow, which he did with profuse apologies.

This present Warhol retrospective, however, is markedly different from one that might have been organized in the United States. Bastian's view of Warhol is notably European (many of the works are on loan from European collections), and it is a fascinating, rigorous and yet very dark take on the work.

Because Warhol was so prolific, Bastian said, he decided to concentrate on works of "quality," excluding from the exhibition many images that focus on celebrity culture. No commissioned portraits are in the exhibition at all. This is definitely not Warhol as flaneur of New York society via Studio 54 or *Interview Magazine*.

The exhibition focuses specifically on Warhol's evolution into a Pop artist from his early days as an art student and later as a commercial illustrator in New York. The show is particularly strong in early Pop paintings from the '60s and '70s, and then jumps to the paintings Warhol made just before his demise in 1987. After the Marilyn Monroe's 1962 suicide, death became the central theme of Warhol's work, according to Bastian. "Every day of his life, Warhol thought about death," Bastian said. "He followed the Marilyns with the Suicide Paintings, and for Warhol, the deaths of these anonymous individuals were as important as that of the superstar."

Whether or not Bastian is correct, the curatorial choices in this exhibition certainly make it seem that way. And the result is chilling.

The exhibition opens with a larger-than-life-size blowup of a photograph of a young Warhol from 1964, in Los Angeles shyly peering out from behind three stacks of Brillo Boxes. The photograph was taken during his second exhibition at the Ferus Gallery. The viewer then moves into a group of galleries displaying a wonderful selection of early drawings and collages, many of which are from private collections and have never before been seen in public. Warhol's acute dexterity as a draftsman is clear, as is his early interest in Pop subjects like the death of James Dean, and covers of tabloid magazines in general.

Other early drawings with political subjects, like *Untitled (Huey Long)* (1948) and

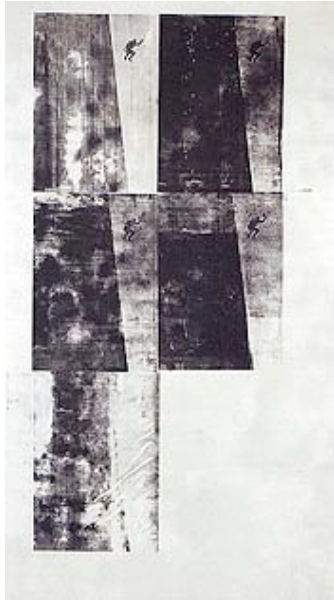


Most Wanted Men No. 6, Thomas Francis C.
1964

Communist Speaker (1950), are reminiscent of works by Saul Steinberg or Ben Shahn. According to Bastian, Warhol at the time wanted to become known as the Matisse of his generation, and in fact he did become a successful commercial illustrator, doing commissions for the *New York Times* and other publications in addition to stores such as I Miller. His career path changed, of course, after he saw Jasper Johns' first exhibition of targets and flag paintings at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1958.

Warhol then began exploring the kind of Pop subjects that would make him famous. Several galleries are devoted to his works from 1960 that comprised his first paintings exhibition -- *Advertisement, Little King, Before and After* and *Saturday's Popeye*, all of which were displayed in 1961 in the windows of Bonwit Teller in New York. The installation then progresses onto the early paintings of diagrams of dance steps and Coca-Cola bottles.

The immense Paint-by-Numbers works, entitled *Do It Yourself (Seascape)* and *Do It Yourself (Sailboat)* are a revelation, and show Warhol's development into a fully formed Pop artist. The Paint-by-Numbers works are an ironic commentary on the Abstract Expressionist style that dominated the art world at the time. To say that these paintings were not particularly well received is an understatement.



Suicide (Silver Jumping Man)
1963

Warhol himself describes the contrast in cultures:

The world of the Abstract Expressionists was very macho. The painters who used to hang around the Cedar bar on University Place were all hard-driving, two fisted types who'd grab each other and say things like "I'll knock your fucking teeth out" and "I'll steal your girl." In a way, Jackson Pollock had to die the way he did, crashing his car up . . . the toughness was part of the tradition, it went with their agonized, anguished art. They were always exploding and having fist fights about their work and their love lives. This went on all through the fifties when I was just new in town, doing whatever jobs I could get in advertising and spending my nights at home drawing to meet deadlines or going out with a few friends.

-- Andy Warhol, *Popism: The Warhol Sixties*, 1980

We then have amazing examples of the great early Pop paintings -- Campbell's Soup, Liz as Cleopatra, Elvis. Quite a few Marilyn paintings are in the show as well, including the chilling *Shot Marilyn, Blue*, which is marked by a spot on Marilyn's forehead made by a stray bullet when Valerie Solanis visited the Warhol studio and started shooting. Another astonishing gallery features a large installation of Brillo Boxes and Tomato Soup Boxes from the collection of the Norton Simon Museum, donated to the museum by the artist at the time of his retrospective there in 1970.

At this point, the dark side puts the show into a hammer lock, with large electric chair paintings, car crashes, race riots, atom bomb paintings, a gangster funeral and an entire space devoted to the 12 Most Wanted Men series. Here are the Jackie paintings, as well as a painting of James Cagney as a gangster, plus paintings of guns and knives, skulls and the hammer and sickle.



Skull
1976

Many self portraits depict Andy in dark glasses or in profile with shadows that also look quite austere. The most chilling paintings are the suicides. Particularly after Sept. 11, these images of people jumping out of tall buildings have an extra poignancy, as do several large paintings of the Statue of Liberty. Even the large flower paintings in this context look like they are from a cemetery.

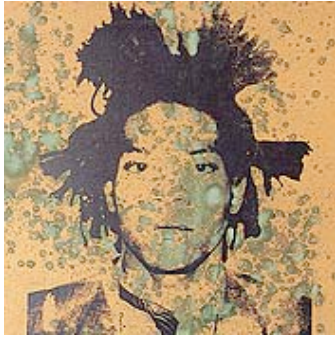
One wall features portraits, and the choice of subjects is fascinating. We have Warhol's mother, Julia Warhola, and the artists Jean-Michel Basquiat and Robert Mapplethorpe, who both died prematurely. We have Warhol's dealers: Irving Blum, Leo Castelli, Ileana Sonnabend, Ivan Karp, Thomas Ammann, Alexander Iolas. We have his three closest celebrity friends: Dennis Hopper, Mick Jagger and Liza Minelli. And we have major collectors of his work: Peter Ludwig, Dominique de Menil and Eric Marx. One wonders



The Last Supper
1986



Statue of Liberty
1963



Jean-Michel Basquiat
ca. 1984

how many viewers of the show will have any idea who these people are. In many ways, this wall is for the insiders.

The exhibition finishes with a huge gallery that includes paintings that Warhol made at the very end of his life -- *Leonardo's Last Supper*, plus other oversized works, including some shadows, portraits of the artist Joseph Beuys, a very large oxidation painting, a series of camouflage paintings and an immense Mao portrait. Warhol's sudden death was a shock. But considered in light of his final works, it didn't come without premonition.

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