

ART VIEWS By BRIAN APPEL

ANDY WARHOL: MAO

L & M Arts
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 New York, New York 10021 USA
 212 861 0020

ANDY WARHOL: SKULLS AND HAMMERS & SICKLES

Perry Rubenstein Gallery
 526 West 24th Street, New York, NY 10011
 212 627 8000

The eighteen Mao paintings on loan here from private collections, all synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen ink on canvas (or in four cases linen) propel you into a kind of "surrender mode" the instant your eyes hit their surface. You are subject to the intense gaze of the Chairman of the most populous Communist country on earth. The sublime savagery of Mao's Mona Lisa smile, sleekly designed to control and protect the flow of the currency of ideas in China, was one of the world's most resonate propaganda images, accompanying "The Quotations From Chairman Mao Tse Tung" with 2.3 billion reproductions circulated. But the image is turned on its head by Warhol's strategic re-contextualization. In one of his most radical and subversive turns, Warhol re-shaped the visual codes of the all-powerful, all-knowing Mao portrait "freeing it" from its original function of eradicating vestiges of bourgeois consumerism lingering in society.

Applications of a bright undercoat of paint and sensual Ab-Ex brushstrokes on top of the silkscreened "aura" made the dictator/ Chinese leader look as if he were wearing lipstick and eye shadow. The impact of the macho leader's propaganda image is made to stand on its head. Through the eyes of the homosexual artist—daringly provocative and subversive for his time—Warhol explores sexual mutability with its implications of self-transcendence transforming the severe high-collared militaristic Chairman into a foppish, middle-aged queen.

The official photographic image of Mao is not only stripped of its propaganda meaning by Warhol's "feminization" of his surface, but in the process, the visage of the Chairman of an autocratic social system that cost of lives of tens of millions of people is placed into the world of fine art. Warhol re-cycles an image of pain and power and uses it like advertising agencies use A-list celebrities to sell everything from clothes to perfume.

1972 was the year Warhol re-entered the arena of painting—he had ceremoniously given up the medium for film and 'happenings' in 1966 with the infamous release of his silver pillows/clouds in front of the press—and it was also the year the Twin Towers opened in an almost bankrupt New York City. As importantly, President Richard M. Nixon decided to go to Beijing in a historic overture that would lead to full open diplomatic relations with China. From February 21 - 28, Nixon broke through a quarter century of mutual antagonism between the United States and China. In what he later referred to as "the week that was", millions of Americans got their first glance of life behind the "Bamboo Curtain". Both the Chinese government-controlled media and America's corporate television stations and print media outlets followed the many events that Chairman Mao and President Nixon witnessed together, with extraordinary pictures that overrode the printed word.

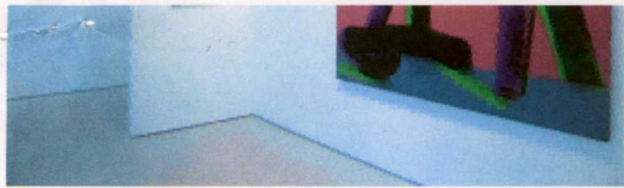


Andy Warhol *Mao* 1972
 synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen ink on linen, 82 x 64 inches
 Courtesy The Stephanie and Peter Brant Foundation, Greenwich, CT
 © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts

Warhol showed uncanny acuteness in introducing the Mao image into his art at a time when the artist himself was just coming to enjoy the full-scale benefits of Western 'decadence'. In 1972, Warhol shifted into high gear – Fred Hughes had come on board playing a key role in connecting the artist with Bruno Bischofberger, a Zurich-based art dealer and Warhol collector who commissioned the Mao paintings and arranged for the first exhibition of the work that fall in Basel, Switzerland. It was at Hughes's instigation that Andy's return to painting was characterized by two important changes: from that point on, all Warhol artworks would also be reproduced as prints to be sold in signed portfolios and he would work mostly on commission.

Warhol's provocative mix of symbols of commercialism and Communist authority are still embraced by contemporary Chinese artists who play with fusing military uniforms with symbols of consumer culture like Coca-Cola, Nike and McDonalds:





installation shot at Perry Rubenstein- © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts

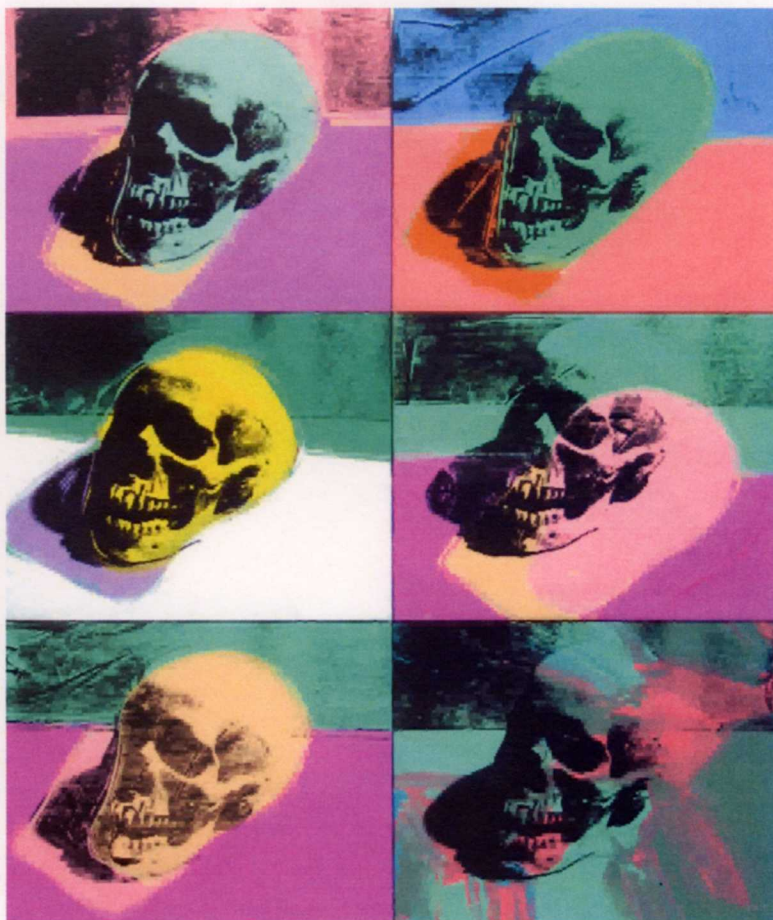
Yu Youhan, for instance, paints Chairman Mao's visage alongside Whitney Houston's. Materialism, politics, economics and media will continue to be arenas of exploration for contemporary Chinese artists who are still living in a country where ten thousand people are executed every year. Denying freedom of speech and the right to a fair trial is still commonplace thirty years after the Chairman's death in 1976.

Warhol took the despot's public image—which was thriving on the extremely public persona of the man who was notorious for his grip on power—and defused it as efficiently as JFK did the Cuban missile crisis. He took a man who had regulated content and banned anything that would endanger China's national security, reputation and interests and drained his image of its totalitarian associations— this was no mean feat during the cold war. What other artist in 1972 or, for that matter today, could "empty" the revolutionary spirit of a man responsible for the incarceration or death of seventy million people?

The installation of Andy Warhol's fourteen individual synthetic polymer and silkscreen ink "Skull" (1974-1976) works on canvas in two horizontal rows of seven and "Six Skulls" of 1976, a work comprised of six canvases butted together into a vertical grid of three high and two across is a compelling portrait of everyone-- from starlet to drag queen. Demonstrating his genius for identifying the seminal motif for a culture at the peak of punk rock (Clash, Blondie, Talking Heads and all the new wave groups frequenting the Factory) it also allows for a rare opportunity to experience the artist's innovative use of his silkscreen technique.

The idea for the "Hammer and Sickle" series began in Ferrara, Italy in 1975 when Warhol became increasingly aware of the conspicuous communist graffiti scattered throughout the countryside.

His obsessive re-use of the same image singly within a series of individual works or in a multi-paneled composition illustrates both the flexibility of the medium and the virtues of repetition. Is this Warhol tipping his hat to the emblematic omnipresence and repetition of modern mass media perhaps? With its varying lurid colors, tonal contrasts that emphasize the grainy cinematic effects, and the skulls' nuances of difference in the 'chance' off-registration of the screen, the viewer is lured into a game of pleasurable optic if not philosophical discovery. The subtle shifting of the variation in the silkscreen ink in the eye cavity of the skull alone propelled this viewer into a morbid reverie on the process of decomposition that faces us all. Perhaps this was Warhol's way of reminding us that famous or not, we are all equal--death is the great leveler.



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ANDY WARHOL [1928-1987]

Six Skulls 1976

Synthetic polymer and silkscreen inks on canvas

15 x19 in. each

38.1 x 48.3 cm each

Illustrations courtesy "Skulls & Hammer And Sickles" exhibition at Perry Rubenstein Gallery (through October 28th, 2006)

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