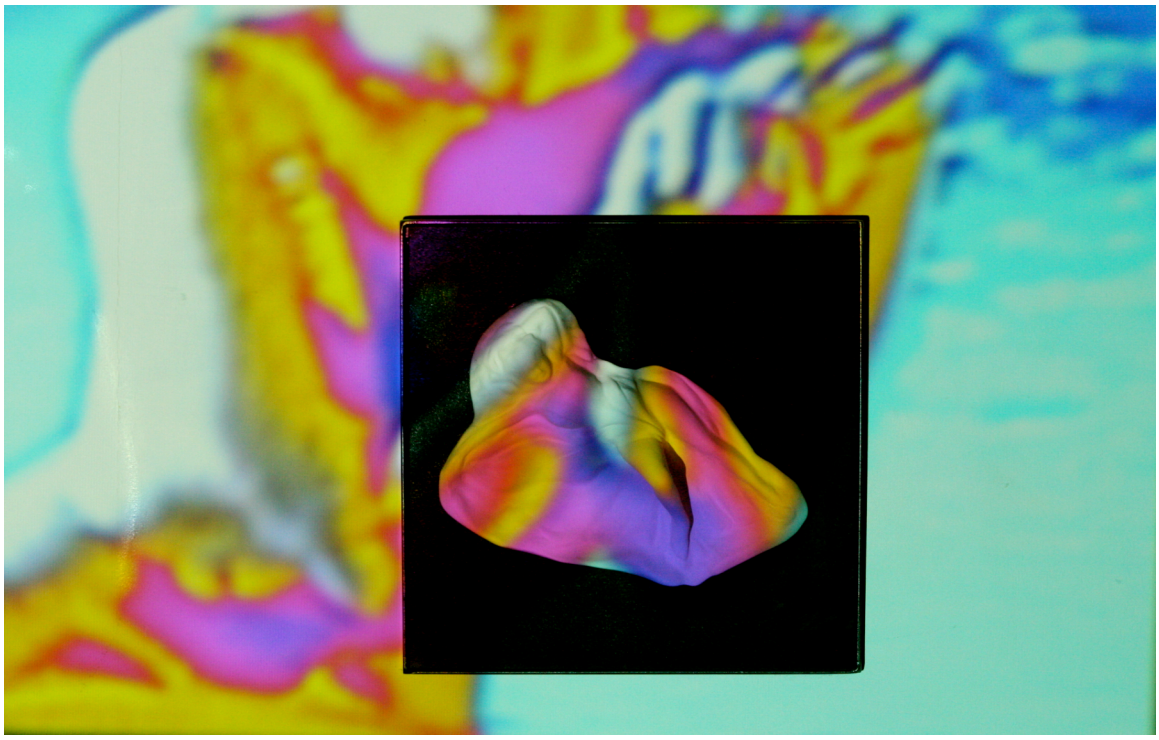

Beyond Warhol in the 21st Century: A Post-Pop Romantic Retrofit

An Exhibition
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"Today's romanticism is a meta-Romanticism working with postmodernist means. It unfolds a synthesis of past and present, emotion and discourse."

Max Hollein, from the catalog introduction for the 2005 Exhibit, "Ideal Worlds: New Romanticism in Contemporary Art" at the Schirn Kunnsthalle, Frankfurt, Germany.

"Romanticism is the art of imagination and ecstatic inner vision…the romantic is a rebel who looks to inspiration rather than laws or logic."

Joseph C. Skrapits, American Artist, May, 2000

"[t]he old hierarchies have been obliterated, and now artists must invent new languages with the alphabet of their forebears."

Amy Finnerty, Wall Street Journal review of the Whitney Biennial, 2008

This groundbreaking exhibit examines the work of four contemporary artists who react in a quite different manner to the legacy of Andy Warhol than that of the lockstep march of his direct post-pop descendants--Jeff Koons, for example. In a strong, provocative, and entirely original approach, they take Warhol, his work and his aesthetics down their own romantically divergent and individual artistic paths.

The artistic career, indeed the life, of Andy Warhol was a fault line between modernist and post-modernist tensions in the visual arts. He began his career at the end of modernism, and finding it a poor personal fit, was instrumental in ushering in the postmodernist era of pop and to some extent, providing an aesthetical basis for minimalism. Then, during in the last ten years of his life, he made his way back to modernism. Finally, although his aesthetics stood in stark contrast to romanticism, they didn't fully bury it, for as Joseph Skrapits has correctly noted, "[r]omanticism is a component of art in all periods, but is not the dominant trend. Sometimes the romantic impulse is suppressed and surfaces in

disguise…." (For the purposes of this discussion, the contemporary romanticism of which we speak is not your great-great-great-grandfather's romanticism, but that as defined by Max Hollein in the above introductory quote).

First, let us approach the divide between modernism and post-modernism, particularly pop. Without bogging down in the morass of what these movements mean across a broad cultural, social and political spectrum, the focus herein will be on the visual arts alone. We take as a base of reference for both modernism's definition and its duration those delineated by the eminent historian, Peter Gay, in his intriguing, entertaining, often brilliant, and at times frustratingly oblique, 2008 book, *Modernism.*

For Gay, the following two qualities define modernism in the visual arts: one, committing calculated offenses against conventional sensibilities (specifically, bourgeois values) often in the form of an insubordination against ruling authority; and two, the exploration of subjective experience or, in effect, "a principled self-scrutiny." He loosely sets the perimeters of modernism to run from the impressionists through the abstract expressionists and sees as its demise the rise of the pop artists, namely Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein.

Unfortunately, when it comes time for him to differentiate postmodernist pop art from modernism, Gay struggles mightily because he leans too heavily on a historian's perspective to the pop phenomenon. He places far too much emphasis on the first part of his definition of modernism, that of the artist's stance against prevailing middle class values. To somehow distinguish pop artists from that position, which they did not really stand in contrast to, he is forced to reconstruct his original definition (without truly acknowledging it) to make it work. In this altered definition then, the modernist artist was no longer just standing against prevailing middle-class conventions; now his primary intention shifts and

becomes an effort to elevate "high" art from anything resembling commonplace or "low" art. That alteration strikes a false note and is unnecessary. It is emblematic of much of the confusion regarding pop art, for it falls into the trap of primarily portraying the pop artists as opposing modernists in an effort to erase the lines between high and low art. This confuses the issue and ignores the most important distinguishing factor between modernism and postmodernism pop artists: the second part of Gay's definition, that of the supreme emphasis on the subjective personal vision of the artist as an individual.

It is this that is the truest demarcation line between the modernists and the pop postmodernists, with Andy Warhol as the poster boy for the split. As a successful commercial artist who enjoyed doing what he did, he was hardly in rebellion against prevailing bourgeois values. Flying in the face of middle class art ethos was of little or no importance to Warhol. He sought society's embrace; he didn't recoil from it. He didn't endeavor to upend social convention by painting soup cans, although in a startlingly ironic twist, he did just that; most of society at the time (and probably more than would acknowledge today) did not accept such subject matter as worthy of fine art. If Warhol could have obtained the fame he sought simply by continuing to do his commercial art, the story would have ended there.

What he did struggle with was the reigning supremacy of Pollack and the abstract expressionists. He tried to fit into that world and was found wanting. It accommodated neither his talent nor his temperament. No wonder he professed to hate it. Andy Warhol was not one to look inward. He relished having art directors tell him what to draw and how; he worked with them to achieve their visions, not his. For Warhol then, the ascendancy of pop art was a godsend. No longer would he be sneered at by the art elite as nothing but an undeserving commercial artist and be turned away from gallery doors. He could do the commercial art he enjoyed

and in his own manner, but now the world would welcome it as avant-garde and herald it as high art. He could remove himself as the artist entirely from his art and instead make his public persona and his lifestyle his great expressionist canvas. What a wonderfully absurd world this can be at times.

Given all that, why did Warhol during his last decade turn back to modernism, back toward the subjective, toward a "principled self-scrutiny?" One can only assume maturation as an artist, weariness with the cultivated circus machinations of the Factory, and perhaps, the acknowledgment of a long-buried need to actually express a part of himself, not on the gossip pages, but on the canvas before him.
And what, then, are artists to make of Warhol today; how do they carry forward in his pop wake (both literally and figuratively)?

Straight-Line Warholian Adherents

Some simply have gone the direct route, taking the pop amusement ride Warhol helped create into the present like a gravy train hell-bent for leather: Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, probably the two most famous and well-paid contemporary artists today, are the clearest and perhaps guiltiest examples.

For his part, Koons has continued the integration of pop iconography into the world of "fine art" with a vengeance. He has pushed it further and further into the world of "kitsch." Initially, he promoted his work as a serious effort to include such tacky and showy ware as worthy subject matter of high art. But when he was sued for an all-too obvious appropriation, he put forth the primary defense offered in such lawsuits: parody. And with that, his work suddenly transformed into a parody of kitsch and not his original Duchampian treatment of it.

Koons has sought fame and celebrity as singlemindedly as Warhol ever did and has turned Andy's "Factory" into an assembly-line manufacturing plant. If Jeff Koons has ever looked deep inside, he's kept any revelations found there far removed from his art. His genius lies primarily in his brilliant marketing and self-promotion.

Damien Hirst presents a less clear scenario, probably more closely aligned with Duchamp than Warhol, although in addition to the preserved sharks, sheep, cows, etc., he certainly has played with pop culture in his work. Undoubtedly he is as much a fame junkie as Warhol was; and, like Koons, he employs a cadre of workers to pump out his works in a neutered version of the "Factory."

Hirst's closest link to Warhol, however, lies in their mutual fascination with death and its accoutrements. Hirst, of course, sees dead things everywhere. And as for Warhol, after an art dealer suggested "death" to him as potential subject matter, he became so enamored of it (the 1962-63 "Death and Disaster Series" for example, which included car wrecks, tuna cans poisonings, electric chairs, etc.) that he wanted to title one of his shows traveling to Paris "Death in America." Lastly, Warhol was including skulls in his works long before Damien Hirst ever thought to encrust them with jewels or try his hand (instead of those of the legions of others who normally do his painting for him) at portraying them in badly reviewed expressionist paintings.

Romantic Divergents

In opposition to the straight-line approach to Warhol, another group of contemporary artists takes a completely different course, as beautifully displayed by the work of the four artists included in this Exhibition.

Rather than a simplistic repetition of Warhol's Pop work and postmodernist style, with inconsequential tweaks here and there, these artists look at his work and life through a highly subjective lens, filtering their own romantic impressions into a Warhol prism with particular emphasis on the dichotomy between his work in the Sixties and that of his last decade.

While difficult to categorize, as so many artists are these days, they can be best be identified, for the purpose of this exhibition, as contemporary romanticists who would rather revel in the personal vision of the artist than negate it. Exploration is their chief goal whether it is reexamining old truths or retrofitting a synthesis of prior methods, styles and ethos with a new vocabulary.

Mel Smothers, a painter from Brooklyn carries on what he describes as a dialogue with Warhol in his series "Dear Andy: Postcards from Montauk." He first renders Warhol's iconic images—Marilyn, Campbell's soup cans, etc.—in his own style and then overlays them with a distinct romanticist iconography of his own …postmarks, text and items from Montauk, Long Island where Warhol owned an idyllic summer residence he seldom visited. These items include images from nature—jellyfish, birds, etc. as well as inanimate objects found on the beach—a wedding album that washed ashore, bottle rockets, etc.

For us, the compelling images Smothers conjures up are more collaboration than dialogue—echoing particularly Warhol's later collaborative pieces with Jean-Michel Basquiat, who brought a raw and romanticized expressionist spirit to Warhol's purposefully staid, commercialized pop imagery.

In his Warhol Rag Series, **Robert Furman**, a sculptor in Chicago, explores the interplay between video and sculpture where both relate to a common theme. He adopts some of the style of Warhol

but adds his own expressionist substance by delving beyond the superficial pop iconography to "detrivialize" the subject matter—Marilyn Monroe, for example in Warhol Rag 1.
In that work he takes a "50's style" ceramic candy dish clearly inspired by Monroe and duplicates it in white porcelain, framing the nine copies with different backgrounds and placing them in a Warholian grid. He then projects an 11-minute film onto the grid which examines the Marilyn Monroe behind the celebrity caricature of the pop iconography, not only in her own voice but in her own words, adding depth and dimension to her life, both the spectacular and the tragic. Pay particular attention to the Warhol-like repetition of imagery and repeating red, white and blue colors, which refer to the subtitle, "Under the Red, White and Blue" (F. Scott Fitzgerald's original title for the "Great Gatsby). This is a serious work that reveals more with each viewing.

In his second work shown here, Warhol Rag 2, the subject is book burning and, indirectly, Fahrenheit 451, and the grid consists of books painted white inset with red fire alarms set to strobe periodically.

It's a shame Andy Warhol didn't live long enough to see the robotic creation of **Pindar Van Arman**, an artist from Baltimore, in action. He would be ecstatic. Pindar cleverly takes Warhol at his word when the "Pope of Pop" said, "The reason I paint this way is that I want to be a machine…whatever I do and do machine-like is what I want to do." Commentators, at times, treat this statement as if it had some mysterious, deep import, but we firmly believe Warhol, who was less enigmatic than he is given credit for, meant exactly what he said, nothing more, nothing less. Pindar's primary artistic tool is an artificially intelligent painting robot named Dahupi. It not only mimics human painting techniques by using a brush to mechanically apply paint to canvas, but it is also programmed to interpret and compose artworks of its

own. It's fascinating to watch the machine in action, truly a performance art piece in itself.

For subject matter, Pindar updates Warhol's pop imagery to include—what else---robots, drawn from popular culture (Battleship Galactica, Star Wars, etc.). Further, he groups the paintings in a Warholian repetitive grid, but with more expressionistic variation among the individual copies.

Peg Roberts, the fourth artist in the show, brings another fresh approach to Warhol. In her "sans electric chair" pieces, she removes the charged (pun intended) image of the electric chair from Warhol's "Death and Disaster" series and uses the remaining blank color field as a starting point for her own captivating expressionist paintings. Thus, she effectively mirrors Warhol's own evolution from the plain pop imagery of the 60's to the abstract expressionist shadow and oxidation paintings of his last decade.

Her series of storefront photos takes as a reference point Warhol's employment, both during his school years and his highly successful commercial art career, as a department store window designer. She beautifully incorporates commonplace commercial goods within in the ordinary window displays (some with direct references to Warhol) with street reflections to produce works incorporating pop, expressionism, symbolism and surrealism in stunning compositions, each seemingly the landscape of a romanticist's last dream.