Major retrospective at the Whitney Museum in New York City

“Andy Warhol—From A to B and Back Again”: The artist who wasn’t there

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“Andy Warhol—From A to B and Back Again,” a retrospective on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art from November 12, 2018, to March 31, 2019, provided an opportunity for a reacquaintance with and reappraisal of the artist’s work.

Andy Warhol (1928-87), of course, was one of the best known and influential artists of the latter half of the 20th century, and his influence still reverberates today. Much of the work in the exhibition had a surprisingly contemporary feel, but this observation does not mean that Warhol, talented though he was, was a visionary. On the contrary, it rather indicates that many contemporary artists are still grappling with the problems raised by Warhol’s career and example.

To understand Warhol’s art, it is necessary first to understand the historical and art-historical context in which it emerged. Warhol began working as a commercial artist in the 1950s. The dominant artistic movement in the period after World War II was abstract expressionism, which itself had been shaped by the historical events of the previous decades.

During the 1930s, many of the artists who would later become the pioneering abstract expressionists were in the periphery of the Communist Party, or considered themselves anarchists or supporters of Trotsky, among them Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, Lee Krasner and Robert Motherwell. Many believed, or at least sympathized with, the idea that socialism was a necessary advance for mankind.

The succession of terrible defeats and betrayals that these artists witnessed—including Hitler’s rise to power, Stalin’s show trials and the systematic murder of the Bolsheviks who had led the Russian Revolution, the victory of Franco in Spain, the horrors of the Holocaust—caused tremendous demoralization, confusion and doubt. The working class and the cause of transforming society, it seemed to them, had failed.

In addition, the barbarity of World War II, which ended with US nuclear bombs incinerating masses of civilians, drove many of these artists to despair. They were further disillusioned by the growing conformism and philistinism of postwar America. Impressionistically, along with wide layers of the erstwhile left intelligentsia, they drew the conclusion that “communism” and capitalism were equally brutal and inhuman. What was the path forward for humanity? How could the artists assimilate these defeats and transcend them in artwork that pointed the way toward a progressive future?

The conditions were not favorable for the artists to find their way out of this quandary. Unable to cope with or find their way toward social reality, they turned almost exclusively inward. They began adopting primitive imagery and sought to depict supposedly primal impulses. Mythical themes, Freudianism and Jungianism, and an idealized natural world held increasing attraction for them. This orientation gave rise to the vigorous gestural abstraction of artists such as Pollock and Franz Kline, as well as Rothko’s ethereal, otherworldly shapes.

The abstract expressionists produced bold and enduring paintings that stood out amid the small-mindedness of postwar society. Yet these artists failed to grasp and creatively transform in their work the social reality they inhabited. They found that task too painful or too complex. Their paintings did not come to terms with the world, but turned away from it. Ultimately, some of the abstract expressionists succumbed to their own despair. Painter Arshile Gorky, who had a profound influence on the trend, hanged himself in 1948. Plagued by alcoholism, Pollock died in an automobile accident in 1956. Sculptor David Smith also died in a car crash, in 1965. Journalist Patricia Goldstone (*Interlock*) writes bluntly that “Franz Kline drank himself to death” in 1962. (One commentator notes that even “by modern-art standards, the incidence of alcoholism in the Abstract Expressionists is frightening.”) Rothko died in 1970 after overdosing on barbiturates and slashing an artery in his right arm.

Andy Warhol, born in Pittsburgh in 1928 to parents who had emigrated from what is now Slovakia, belongs to a generation that came of age in the postwar years. His father was a coal miner, and he and his brothers grew up in a working-class neighborhood. By the time he was 21, Warhol had lived through the Great Depression and World War II. The economic boom that followed the war laid the basis for the media-saturated consumer culture that provided him with subject matter. Cameras and movie cameras became more broadly accessible, and Warhol came to rely on them to make his drawings, paintings, and films.

The Whitney exhibition begins with some of Warhol’s most famous work, including the paintings of Campbell’s soup cans that he exhibited at his first solo show at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles in 1962. In the same room was a stack of his Brillo boxes (which, unlike the mass-produced, cardboard originals, Warhol had built by a cabinet maker before painting them with the product logo) and a silk-screened painting of row upon row of Coca-Cola bottles.

These works reflect Warhol’s artistic legacy. Unlike the abstract expressionists, Warhol engaged directly with and indeed embraced the contemporary world. But his stance toward the celebrities, commodities and events he painted had no trace of criticism or analysis. What is more, he progressively and systematically eliminated any evidence of his hand from his work. His canvases became void of emotional content, much like the sphinxlike public persona that he cultivated. In short, Warhol ultimately renounced any expressive relationship with his materials and seldom exercised any imaginative vision. If the abstract expressionists represent the artist as doomed, angst-ridden individual, Warhol perhaps represents the artist as living dead.

Warhol’s interest in consumer products and the power of the image derived from his early, successful career in advertising. After earning an

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art degree, Warhol moved to New York, where he worked as an illustrator and commercial artist in the 1950s. His goal became creating personalities for products, which did not necessarily entail representing them accurately.

The exhibition represented this early period with prints of Warhol's many drawings of shoes, which were decorated with gold leaf. They reveal the keen observation and delight in detail that he retained at this stage. Warhol soon adopted the technique of blotting wet ink to create a distinctive line in his drawings. This technique may have been his initial effort to create a "brand" for his own work as he sought to leave commercial art behind and gain recognition as a fine artist.

Another, more intimate series of ink drawings from this period depicts male feet posed near flowers, an eyelash-shaded eye, a male torso, and male genitals. The economy of line in the drawings recalls the work of Matisse.

The first half of the 1960s were a turning point for Warhol. He began taking his subjects from comic books, newspapers, advertisements, and publicity photos. Initial efforts during this period, like his 1960 painting of the comic strip detective Dick Tracy and a subsequent painting of Superman, include a few drips and smudges that bore witness to his physical manipulation of his materials. Some read these marks as a wry reference to abstract expressionism.

But by adopting the silk screen technique, used in graphic design to create multiple identical prints, Warhol erased any sign of his own hand from his work. He began enlisting friends to help him create his paintings, further removing himself from his art. These shifts in Warhol's focus and technique developed the pop style that would come to define him in the public imagination. His work reflected the comparative affluence that sections of middle-class Americans in particular enjoyed during the postwar stabilization of capitalism. It became an unreflective record of life awash in media, entertainment and advertising.

Warhol soon founded the studio that he dubbed "the Factory," a name that reflected his working-class origins and the "socialized" nature of the work that took place there. The Factory attracted friends, artists, bohemians, and hangers-on and soon became a well-known center of hedonism. Warhol's bizarre, withdrawn affect encouraged others to shed inhibitions, often with the help of drugs. Warhol accepted their suggestions about what to paint.

The death of Marilyn Monroe (and attendant controversy) in 1962 prompted Warhol to paint "Gold Marilyn," a publicity still of the star silk-screened onto an iridescent gold background. "Silver Liz" likewise reproduced a silk-screened photo and was inspired by Elizabeth Taylor's extramarital affair with Richard Burton. "Nine Jackies" (1964) is a grid of three repeated photos of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy taken just before and just after her husband's assassination.

Warhol continued to indulge this appetite for scandal in his "Death and Disaster" series, for which he chose photos of car crashes, suicides, and electric chairs from newspapers and silk screened them onto monochromatic canvases. Although it followed the celebrity paintings, this series had more in common with the police blotter than with the publicity still.

The painting of this series with the clearest political implications is "Mustard Race Riot." The left of its two panels shows three repeated photographs, taken from a 1963 issue of Life magazine, of a black civil rights demonstrator being attacked by white police officers and dogs in Birmingham, Alabama. The photos were taken mere months after the racist, reactionary George Wallace had assumed office as the state's Democratic Party governor. The work is something of an aberration, as the artist aggressively adopted an apolitical, even anti-political stance.

As Warhol became famous, wealthy patrons began commissioning works from him. Among the first was the art collector Ethel Scull. Warhol escorted her to a photo booth and silk screened the resulting images onto a canvas. The painting could be mistaken for a collage of selfies posted online. Commissions would become an increasingly important part of Warhol's work, to the point that he was accused of having become a court painter to the rich.

In 1965, Warhol ostensibly retired from painting and turned instead to making films, which he had begun to do in 1963. Consistent with his refusal to comment or imaginatively interpret his materials, he at first simply set up a camera in front of a subject, such as the Empire State Building or his sleeping lover, poet John Giorno, to create portraits that moved. The result was akin to cinema verité taken to a tedious extreme. Later, he cast Factory *habitués* in narrative movies such as "Lonesome Cowboys," which were campy and deliberately amateurish spoofs of Hollywood films. To promote his movies and his "superstars," Warhol founded *Interview* magazine, several issues of which were on display in the exhibit. In his book "POPism: The Warhol Sixties," Warhol said of his jumping from medium to medium, "The Pop idea, after all, was that anybody could do anything, so naturally we were all trying to do it all."

Warhol's "Mylar and Plexiglas Construction" of 1970 incorporates bolts of mylar in various colors stacked horizontally in clear boxes. Although the work acknowledges the minimalist art of contemporaries such as Donald Judd, its torn and taped mylar is too irregular to jibe with other minimalist sculpture. Nor are its materials natural enough to rhyme with the *arte povera* sculpture then developing in Italy. The work feels perfunctory, and Warhol did not pursue sculpture afterward.

The exhibition also documented Warhol's 1972 experiment with performance art. At the now-defunct Finch College Museum of Art in New York, Warhol opened a box containing a new canister vacuum, assembled the vacuum, and cleaned the gallery's rug. At the end of this performance, he removed the vacuum bag and signed it.

By the end of the decade, most critics had dismissed Warhol as past his prime. However, an overlooked highlight from the 1970s is "Ladies and Gentlemen." An Italian gallerist commissioned this series of paintings of transvestites in 1975, about six years after the Stonewall riots. Warhol found drag queens at a Greenwich Village club and paid them to sit for Polaroids.

As in the celebrity paintings, these photos were silk-screened onto canvas and colored. But instead of appropriating photos, this time Warhol took his own. Nor were the subjects famous. Warhol applies color with more sophistication here and, in contrast with his previous work, seems to show genuine affection and empathy for the sitters.

Meeting younger artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring in the early 1980s briefly brought Warhol back to life, although his work remained in an artistic blind alley. The exhibition included two of the large canvases that he and Basquiat painted collaboratively. In Basquiat's words, Warhol would begin with something "concrete, like a newspaper headline or product logo, and then I would sort of deface it." In these canvases and in Warhol's collaborations with Haring, the younger artist dominates.

Upon his death in 1987, Warhol left behind a body of work that reflects and tacitly accepts the world as he found it, without investigating its contradictions, understanding its historical context, or plumbing its future possibilities. Viewed in its totality, his work resembles a Twitter feed: a barrage of undigested information. Warhol offered no philosophy or program, unless distance or apathy counts. He did not encourage us to develop ourselves or build a better world. His is the art of the voyeur or, at worst, the self-promoter. He reinforced and actively participated in the cult of celebrity. In uncritically bringing the banality of popular culture into the world of fine art, he relinquished all that is most vital and nourishing in art, for the artist as well as for his audience: the imaginative reinterpretation of reality.

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