

Warhol at the Whitney

Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again

Whitney Museum of American Art

Some terrific, stunning, and brilliant (much of what he did was brilliant!) work, including some of the groundbreaking early work that so shook up the artworld. (So shook it up that it caused Arthur Danto to write his own groundbreaking analysis entitled “The Artworld”, his reaction to Warhol’s 1964 exhibition of the Brillo boxes.) So much going on here — intellectually, visually, historically, philosophically, socially.

When I saw the Brillo boxes here, I chuckled out loud, twice. I had never seen them before in person. Had read about them, heard about them, seen photographs, but never seen them before. What made me laugh was the blatant



fake-ness of them when you look up close. From a distance they look just like what inspired them – packing boxes for the Brillo product. But when you step closer you see very clearly and obviously that they are seamless boxes made of wood. They are completely useless from a “box” point of view. They have no opening, cannot be opened, cannot and will not ever contain anything. They are thoroughly non-functional (dysfunctional?) replicas of a quintessentially functional original. Except...

They are brilliantly functional within the swirling world of art ideas. They say: What does it mean to “represent” something? What is it we are *allowed* to represent artistically? (If I make a mimetically realistic sculpture of shit, is that OK? Can that be art?) Is it important to fool the eye? Is it ever fully *possible* to fool the eye? (Zeuxis and the grapes. More recently, our culture’s film, *The Matrix*. And my own [1981 sketchbook notes](#) and [1985 article](#) about the eventual impossibility of distinguishing physical reality from virtual reality.) These Brillo boxes were so deceptively simple looking. But they were, and remain, terrifically challenging intellectually and philosophically.

The Campbell soup cans are similar. As you move up closer you realize they are painted. Painted, for God’s sake! Not even silkscreened, the technique we associate with Warhol. Painted! A similar sort of deception (though less convincing because two-dimensional as opposed to the three-dimensionality of the Brillo boxes).

And color. Warhol loved and was so good with color. Playing with color, having fun with color. And in the process saying, “None of these is real. None of these is ‘correct.’ I could go on and on with these variations!” And indeed he did.



Warhol was *extremely* good visually. His sense of color, his strange and delightfully surprising and surprisingly effective way with color. His many variations on the Mao image, each reliant on varying the color.



And his monumentally large variations of Mao in the form of paintings+silkscreen on canvas, one of which is in the exhibit. Again, what a terrific eye for color! And what impact this image has!

And the “make up” on the Maos — “lipstick”, rouge, eye shadow,... Yes, Andy, when men apply makeup they too do look stunning.



And in this large Mao image (as in some others), also the wonderful gestural work, the use of which he had so thoroughly and successfully rejected in the '60s with his Brillo boxes and soup cans. Here in this detail from the big Mao, his use of Abstract Expressionistic swaths of gesture, swaths of paint, swaths of color — color for color's sake, pure painting — all done on top of the reproducible silk screen, gestural, performative painting. Warhol, who challenged the conceits and methodology and *weltanschauung* of the

Abstract Expressionists here matching them stroke for stroke. “Is this a deKooning?! Oh. No. It’s a Warhol.”

And how wonderfully irreverent he was! Here, thirty repetitions of the *Mona Lisa*, with his title being “30 is better than 1”. And doing his repetitions in black-and-white, as if the repetition of thirty instances of what many consider to be one of the most sophisticated paintings in the Western tradition were not slap in the face enough to our revered traditions, he says “Oh, and let’s remove the revered color too!”

A great deal of irreverance and a great deal of deliberate deception throughout his



art. And speaking of deception: One thing the exhibition did not have were examples of Warhol's "I-am-so-stupid" interviews, where he plays dumb in response to the interviewer's questions. "Why do you repeat the image?" "It makes it bigger and I can sell it for more money." Etc. The play-dumb interviews were part of his persona, his public face, one might even say his art, and they were also consistent with the deception of so much of his artwork.

And then the skulls and death images as he approached 60 years old. Did he have AIDS? Did he know or suspect he was dying even before he was shot and before his surgery and death in the hospital?



Whatever he did or didn't know about any of that, he was brilliant and changed art, changed the way we think about art, changed human culture.

