

warhol portraits

In a wonderful talk, Eric Shiner, a previous Director of the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh shows a slide of a 30s vintage photo album and calls it the “Rosetta Stone” of the Warhol world. It’s a scrapbook of Hollywood studio head shots. Andy had talked his older brother Paul into writing stars asking for autographed photos, and his most prized addition is, ta-dah! Shirley Temple. This is at a time in the 1930s when she is truly “America’s Sweetheart” and 9 year old Andy Warhol both idolizes her and fantasizes about becoming just as famous.

When we add this detail to what we know about Andy Warhol’s very serious religious upbringing, sitting at Mass every Sunday surrounded by the gilt and oil icon portraits of the Byzantine Catholic Church, it’s fair to conclude that both the pursuit of fame/celebrity and the importance of portraits were constants through most of Warhol’s life.

LADIES AND GENTLEMAN

In 1975, inspired by the art dealer, Luciano Anselmino, Warhol sent his friend Bob Colacello to recruit NYC transvestites for a series of portraits. Bob went to The Gilded Grape, recruited participants and then Warhol did his thing...polaroid photos, silkscreens, and color (both paint and torn paper) embellishment. Warhol was undeniably fascinated by these performers who represented self-fashioned personas in a glamorous exhibitionist manner. (Remember, the real Andy Warhol was ethnic and plain, bordering on ugly. The created Andy Warhol had a nose job in 1959 and sported an iconic hairdo.) The resulting, spectacularly colored works were first exhibited by Ferrara at the Palazzo di Dement in Italy.

Each portrait maintains the gender ambiguity of its subject. Seen through Warhol’s lens the drag queens are as beautiful and poised as the actual queens he does later in the 1980s. (Compare these to the Childers photos which capture the same moment in time; but includes the sheer fun, camaraderie, and joy of the decade between Stonewall and the coming of AIDS.)

COMMISSIONED (CELEBRITY) PORTRAITS

After the post-Factory years, Warhol looked to celebrities...moneyed folks who could and did commission portraits. He famously says, “making money is art, and working is art and good business is the best art. (p.92 Philosophy from A to B)

The following is taken from the Warhol Museum site, www.warhol.org

Warhol started painting commissioned portraits in the early 1960s. These works represented a significant aspect of his career and helped finance his many other interests in the 1970s. He began each portrait with a Polaroid shoot, producing a high contrast image. This photo was enlarged, transferred to a screen. Each portrait was underpainted first. Warhol traced simple outlines of the photographic image onto the canvas and painted in blocks of color. Some portraits were painted in slick hard-edge styles (See Ted Kennedy and Jane Fonda), whereas others had solid fields of color or more gestural brushwork (Mick Jagger portraits)

Art critic Arthur Danto commented that people competed to be portrayed by Warhol because that appeared to give them instant immortality, of the sort usually enjoyed only by the greatest of stars or the most celebrated products, as if they were also part of the common consciousness of the time.

10 PORTRAITS OF JEWS OF THE 20TH CENTURY - 1980

The art dealer, Ron Feldman, was asked by an Israeli for a series of portraits of Golda Meir. Together with the director of a large JCC an expanded list of names was created and suggested to Warhol. There is no reason to believe that Warhol knew anything about the contributions of these individuals. They were famous, he was attracted to source images, and that was enough for Warhol.

The resulting series was pilloried by the critics, in 1980 and then again when they were re-shown at the NY Jewish Museum in 2008.

Hated by the critics, but warmly embraced by the public, these portraits are exhibited in Jewish institutions all over the country. Are they soul-less posters OR “jazzy” layered images with spectacular coloration and gestural line work? You decide. Does knowing who Martin Buber is change how you view the portrait....or do they simply all become “Warhols”?

see:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/28/arts/design/28warh.html>

MUHAMMAD ALI

Like a moth to a light, how could Warhol NOT be attracted to a subject who’s rallying cry was “I am the greatest” and then provided compelling evidence in front of millions. Warhol did his series in 1978 at the height of Ali’s fame. He portrays this giant of boxing in a “combative pose; the raised fists are the tools of his trade...the raw materials with which [Ali] made his name and reputation.

Ali is presented as a contemporary Black hero. Shall we read a comment into racial politics into this series? You decide.

www.guyhepner.com

MICK JAGGER

Warhol met Jagger in 1963 before the Rolling Stones were well known in the US. Their relationship continued over the next 2 decades. Both the artist and the musician were at the height of their fame in the early 70s. Both had carefully curated “personas”.

The artwork for the album, Sticky Fingers (1971) was conceived by Andy and he oversaw the photo shoot and the execution of the design (done by others.) Warhol later “lamented” that he had not been paid enough for the cover, given the spectacular success of the album. Doing a series of the “bad boy” Mick Jagger was a natural and equally important, lucrative.

In the 10 screen prints that comprise this series Jagger plays to the camera. The portraits play up Jagger’s sensuality and, in some, his gender fluidity. Like the Marilyn’s of the previous decade he emphasizes the mouth with color and or gestural lines. Unlike Marilyn, the incorporated blocks of color (seen also in other work of this mid-70s period) move these portraits more towards abstraction. While one is never secure in referencing other artists as inspiring Warhol (Rothko & the “sunsets” comes to mind) one can’t look at the Jagger series without thinking of Robert Motherwell, a painter prolific during Warhol’s art education Which in the series is closest to your image of Mick Jagger?