



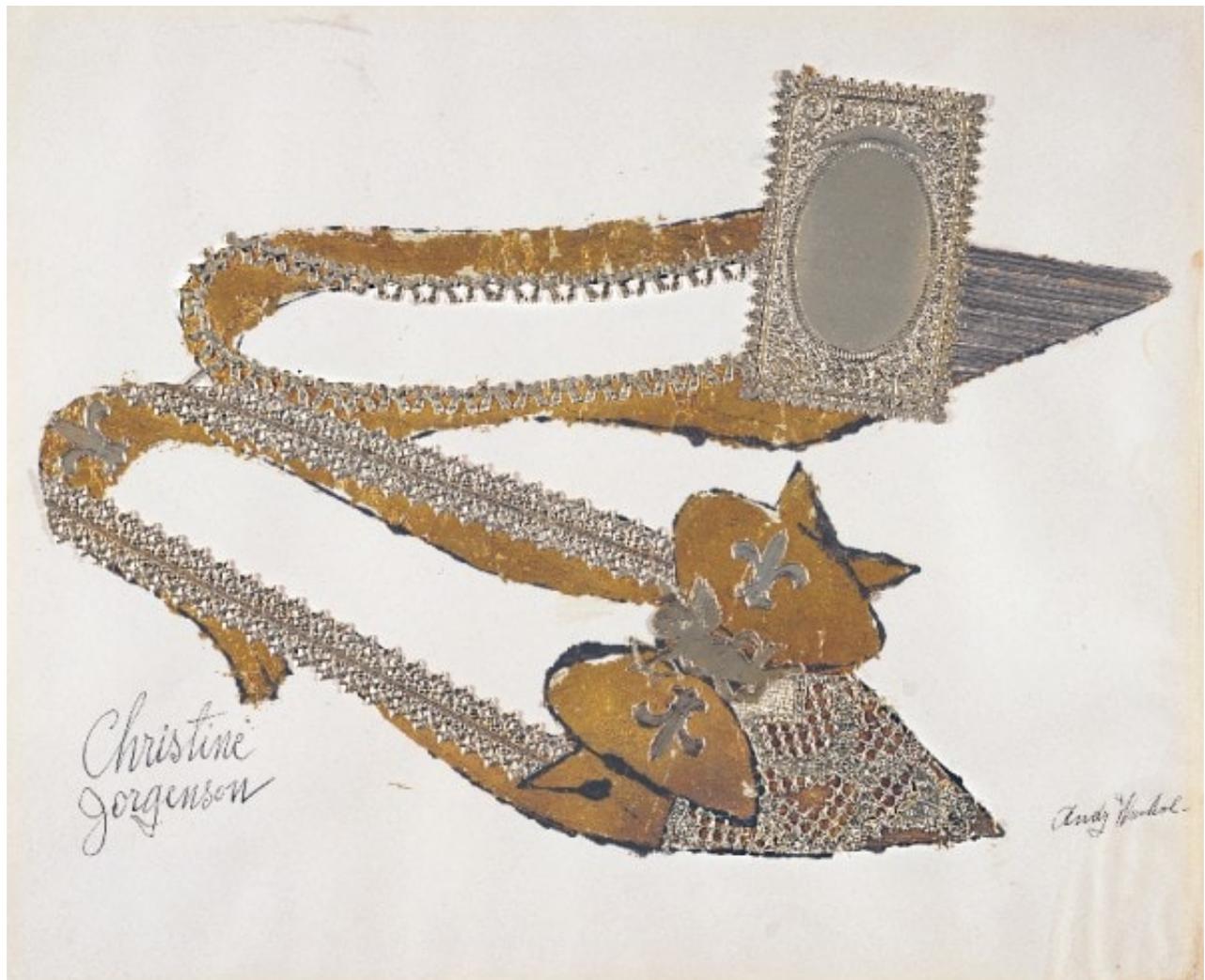
Democracy Dies in Darkness

Museums | Review

Warhol said he wanted to be 'a machine.' Two new shows prove he was anything but.

By **Philip Kennicott**

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An early Warhol work, from 1956, was dedicated to Christine Jorgensen, a trans woman who made headlines in the 1950s after having sex reassignment surgery. (Sammlung Froehlich/Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts,

Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS) New York)

NEW YORK —We live with Andy Warhol in much the same way we live with the visual material he reproduced and exploited — the vast Americana of consumer products, movie stars and news. He sought to claim this iconography as art, to harness its seductive power and mimic the way in which it circulates, and in the end much of his own art became indistinguishable from the commercial culture he both admired and parodied. It is ubiquitous, and mostly invisible, unless you try to pin it down and make sense of it. And then it seems weird, phantasmagorical and a bit alien, in a way that makes its pretense of benign fun seem not entirely in good faith.

Walk into any decent modern or contemporary art museum, and there is Warhol, probably one of his screen prints of Marilyn Monroe or Chairman Mao or Jackie O, colorful images that are both reassuringly familiar and emotionally mute. In a museum, they function somewhat like historic trade signs that would hang outside shops — a fish to indicate a fishmonger, scissors for a tailor, eyeglasses for an optician. Warhol's paintings often disappear into their semantic function: to denote the business of modern art. Or they function as obligatory stations on the docent-guided tour: Here is a Warhol and this is why Warhol matters. The engagement is reflexive and in many ways perfunctory, and if you think, perhaps, that his work covers our museums like wallpaper, the guide may say, "Exactly, and Andy also made wallpaper."

The Marilyn's and Mao's and Jackie O's are now all on view in the [Whitney Museum of American Art's](#) huge Warhol retrospective. So is the wallpaper, in a small gallery off the main show, where surfaces are covered with his brightly colored cows and flowers. The exhibition takes up the entire fifth floor, along with a gallery of video monitors on the third floor and another gallery on the ground floor devoted to the portraits. And beyond the Whitney, there's another Warhol exhibition at the [New York Academy of Art](#), an installation of more than 150 of his drawings.

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The Whitney show, the first major Warhol retrospective in the United States since a 1989 [Museum of Modern Art](#) exhibition, is organized both chronologically and thematically, in 19 chapters. It includes Warhol's early work as an art student in Pittsburgh and commercial artist in New York City: his paintings and drawings based on newspapers; his disaster images; his classic Pop imagery of the early 1960s through to his "retirement" from painting in 1965 (it was more an inflection point than a farewell); his film, video and media ventures; and his large, final works, including the 1986 "Camouflage Last Supper," in which a reproduction of the da Vinci masterpiece is covered, but not entirely obscured, by Warhol's coy nod to abstraction, a military-style camouflage overlay.





Andy Warhol's "Mao," 1972, acrylic, silk-screen ink and graphite on linen. (Art Institute of Chicago/Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./Artists Rights Society)





“Campbell’s Soup Can Over Coke Bottle,” 1962, graphite and watercolor on paper. (Brant Foundation/Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./Artists Rights Society)

The multiple chapters of “Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again” offer up an array of possible Warhols, and it’s clear that curator Donna De Salvo wanted to stress both the multiplicity of his efforts and their interconnections. This is an effort to humanize Warhol, to rescue him from the chilly invisibility of his Pop Art reputation, to make a man who once said, “The reason I’m painting this way is that I want to be a machine” feel a little less mechanistic. The 1989 MoMA show concentrated on Warhol’s classic Pop Art period, and since then, he has been reclaimed as a gay artist, as a media artist, as a conceptual artist, as a philosopher of postmodernism and an oracle of the digital age, and as a painter of nuance and feeling, not merely a machine for the making of silk screens.

The supersize retrospective serves some artists well, others not. Warhol’s particular form of abundance grows deeper the more you see of it, even if the Pop Art for which he is best known seems resolutely silent when seen in isolation. His drawings not only prefigure his interest in commercial imagery but also strive toward a visual distillation of line and shape that makes his choice of silk screen reproduction seem a natural outgrowth of his

hand-drawn work.

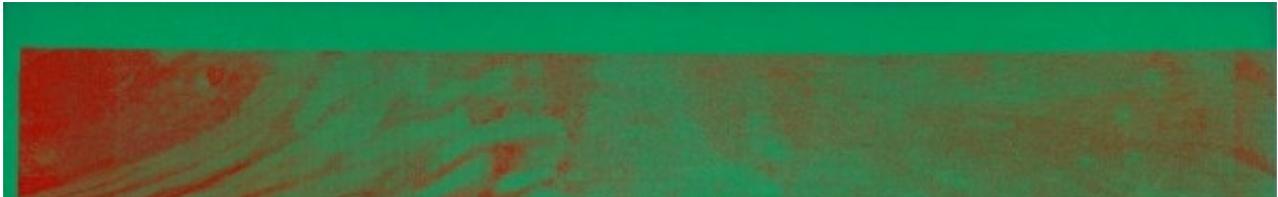
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Early Pop paintings of multiple dollar bills, S&H; Green Stamps and Coca-Cola bottles announce a career-long fascination with ideas of currency, circulation and exchange. Warhol's large-format "Rorschach" blot paintings of the 1980s recall the "blotted line" technique he used as a young artist to create delicate, slightly tentative ink drawings. Even the delicacy and gentle humor of his early drawings seem to connect to his later self-invention as a public persona. They are retiring and quirky at the same time, emerging from the substratum of shyness on which Enigmatic Andy the Superstar was constructed.

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A couple of curatorial decisions at the Whitney tend to reinforce reflexive thinking about Warhol. A series of sexually explicit images — a 1979 portfolio titled "Sex Parts" — is discreetly placed on the side of a large wall panel and easily missed. This seems a concession to the same homophobia that made Warhol circulate these images privately. And the museum has devoted one gallery on the ground floor, which is accessible to the public without paying the \$25 admission, to Warhol's portraits. They are hung salon style, floor to ceiling, and the number of them, as well as the wildly

eclectic range of their subjects (from the shah of Iran to R.C. Gorman, painter of sentimental Native American scenes), underscores the pragmatic role they played in Warhol's business model. He called them "business art," and the money he earned from them helped subsidize some of his less lucrative ventures. But given how eagerly this exhibition wants to change the conversation about Warhol, it seems odd to limit the nonpaying public to his most transactional and perhaps cynical work.



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artist, especially those on view at the New York Academy of Art. Here we see that working directly on paper remained an essential outlet for Warhol's energies throughout his career, not, as the Whitney's website suggests, a habit that defined "Warhol before Warhol." His drawings are astonishingly confident, with only a few signs of revision or rethinking apparent in the earliest student forays.

Warhol worked through the power of early sexual desire by making bold but elegant portraits of men (and men's body parts) in a style reminiscent of Jean Cocteau's drawing, and their intimacy is unlike almost anything else in Warhol's canon. A fascinating subset of this work is seen in both the Whitney and the Academy exhibitions: body parts, especially feet, commingled with other essential Warhol staples — dollar bills, Campbell's Soup cans — and other objects, including a toy biplane. Other drawings suggest an interest in Japanese prints, a quick, sure hand for sketching landscape, as well as private meditations on his public imagery, including the late interest in the gun as icon.

The opening text panel at the Whitney includes a Warhol quotation as epigraph: "Everybody has their own America. . . . And you live in your dream America that you've custom-made from art and schmaltz and emotions just as much as you live in your real one." It's worth pondering that seriously while visiting these shows, partly because it shifts the emphasis from thinking about Warhol's America to thinking about our own relationship to

these same icons. But it also includes a word not much considered in the evaluation of Warhol's legacy: emotions. Yes, we know about art and schmaltz and the games he played eliding the difference between them. But it is in the drawings at the New York Academy that one most palpably senses emotion, and if Warhol tells us that emotions matter — and matter to his art — who are we to ignore them?

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Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again Through March 31 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 99 Gansevoort St., N.Y. whitney.org.

Andy Warhol: By Hand Through March 10 at the New York Academy of Art, 111 Franklin St., New York. nyaa.edu.

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