Commercial art

Contributed by Kris Vagner

The Shadow (II.267)

from the Myths portfolio, 1981

The Andy Warhol exhibit, because the line between ads and art never really existed anyway

By Kris Vagner

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Andy Warhol put a frame around a soup can, called it art, and reproduced it. And that was enough to illustrate and help perpetuate the 20th century’s whirlwind rollercoaster ride of cultural, technological and consumptive revolutions.

Warhol’s poster-sized screenprints, hanging now through May 27 at the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno, would look exactly like advertisements if it weren’t for the frames and glass separating them from the real world.

Warhol wasn’t the first artist to question the distinctions between commercial imagery, media imagery and art-gallery imagery (which, as far as anyone living today can remember, were only ever completely separate in our most nostalgic dreams). But he did it with enough attitude that the Campbell’s-soup-label wallets in the museum gift store, decorated with re-re-reproductions of the 1905 package design

Photo by Kris Vagner

he stared repeating in the 60s, still look as fresh as any new, hand-made accessory from Never Ender. He did it with

enough authenticity that Campbell’s used a Warhol image on its 2001 annual report cover.

I want to say he planned it that way, but he’d probably deny it. Warhol was well known for mumbling cryptic non-sequiturs to reporters. He allowed biographical "facts" of dubious veracity to circulate freely. It’s hard to tell, looking at interview footage, if he’s socially uncomfortable, high, or perpetually masterminding the absurdist narrative he and his close-knit, downtown-eccentric, bohemian artist friends were living.

Warhol’s overlapping sense of fact and fiction had art-world thinkers coming up with their own disparate conclusions. Marcel Duchamp ascribed conceptual motivations to the soup-can pictures. Jordan Schnitzer, the Oregonian collector who lent the prints to the NMA, pointed out the soup can’s personal and cultural associations. Warhol’s mother, he says, used to feed the would-be artist tomato soup, then cut up the cans to make ornaments. Soup in a can signifies the Industrial Revolution’s benefits (potential liberation from the kitchen) and drawbacks (canned soup is impersonal, a symbol of rampant homogeneity). Painter Robert Indiana said, "I knew Andy very well. The reason he painted soup cans is that he liked soup."

Complex as the ideology behind the soup cans may (or may not) be, the images themselves are so easy to absorb it’s almost alarming. A grid of Mick Jagger prints require no more time or attention from viewers than pictures in a fashion magazine.

This is the rare art exhibit you could fully absorb while running through it in a few minutes on the way to pick up the dry cleaning. Not because it’s shallow, but because Warhol used ideas and pictures that we already know. He took ultra-familiar images; somehow magically conferred upon Marilyn, Jacquie and Mick even more clout than they already had; and amped up their already-mythological status into over-the-top ubiquity.

In Warhol’s world, fantasy is reality, we are all voracious consumers, and he seems to be celebrating us for it instead of judging us. He flatters our egos, just like advertisements do.

But it’s art, so it’s OK.

Warhol’s images, perpetually fresh, immortally contemporary, are already so much a part of public consciousness that his job is already done. There’s really no need to go see Andy Warhol’s Dream America in person. You’ve already seen it, whether you know you have or not.

But that doesn’t mean I’m not going back for a fourth visit. There are some things that even us supposed non-materialist, anti-consumerist types just can’t get enough of.

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