

Adman: Warhol before Pop

Exhibition: February 25, 2017–May 28, 2017, Art Gallery of New South Wales

Reviewed by Paul Mumme | The University of Sydney

The premise of this exhibition is rather neatly summarized in its title. This frankness is necessary both to describe the show and to prevent disappointment in anyone expecting a Silver Factory greatest hits including Campbell's soup, Marilyn Monroe, and Brillo boxes. Instead, the exhibition, which was developed collaboratively between the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the Andy Warhol Museum, doggedly restricts itself to work produced by Warhol before he transitioned into the pop art persona for which he is remembered. Given the weight of the term *transition* when discussing issues of identity, its use to describe the subject of this exhibition is very much intentional. *Adman: Warhol before Pop* leaves the viewer with a far greater understanding of Andy Warhol's famously elusive personality, subjectivity, and sexuality, even if its thematic emphasis is a little on the safe side (Figure 1).



Figure 1 | Edward Wallowitch, *Andy Warhol with Face in Hands*, 1957–1958, gelatin silver print, 26.7 × 34.3 cm. The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; Founding Collection. Contribution: The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc., © Edward Wallowitch Estate, 2016, all rights reserved.

The manner in which curator Nicholas Chambers has organized the exhibition is loosely chronological. If one enters toward the left, he or she is immediately presented with a pen-and-ink self-portrait from 1953 in which Warhol covers his face with his hands. This first encounter is rather anachronistic because the subsequent works were made a few years earlier, but it prepares the viewer for the rest of the exhibition by inferring questions as to the identity of the artist and subject. Executed as an almost cartoonish line drawing, the work invites comparison with later artists such as David Shrigley. Perhaps because of this association, Warhol's denied self-portrait achieves a certain gravitas associated with mortal questions and the search for self. The rest of the room contains photographs of Warhol and some of the work he made around 1950—a collection of snapshots of an ebullient Warhol with his pictorial design classmates from Pittsburgh as they commenced their careers in New York City and a series of drawings from one of Warhol's early artist's books, *A Is an Alphabet*, which was made for more or less personal viewing and for which one of his classmates provided short texts to accompany the drawings. Given Warhol's rather fey, dandyish appearance in the photographs and the light homosexual undertones of the drawings (particularly *O Was an Otter . . .*, which features what appear to be two male heads kissing and text that reads "O was an otter who slept in the same bed with this young man. . . . There was never an odder otter"), these works, together with the self-portrait, provide an excellent introduction to the rest of the exhibition.

Moving further into the gallery, the viewer is presented with many curious facts about Warhol's commercial art career. Wall plaques outline his relationship with his mother as well as his development of a signature style that involved an inventive blotted-ink drawing technique coupled with his mother's curly Slovakian handwriting. There are many corollaries between these works and Warhol's pop art, and these are made quite clear in the exhibition's accompanying text. For instance, the starry-eyed drawings of perfume bottles and shoes that Warhol made for his clients beg comparison with his later work, which saturates us in the banal and stultifying excess of consumer culture. The curatorial suggestion here is key; although we are unsure for which clients these works were made, the placement of the descriptively titled *Hand Holding Baseball* near *Million Dollar Bill* and *Male Hands Praying* (all 1950s) is rather clever. On the far wall of the gallery, there are two full-size reconstructions of window displays that Warhol made for

the Bonwit Teller department store in 1955. These wood panel displays are elegant advertisements (one of them an almost fetishistic ode to Dior) and certainly worthy of inclusion, but it would have been nice to see paintings like *Superman* and *Before and After* (both 1961), which Warhol later installed in the same window and which indicate Warhol's eventual transition into pop quite effectively.

Although the focus of the exhibition is Warhol's commercial work, after a while one becomes a little tired of his cheeky sketches and clever ads. Perhaps to address this tedium, a selection of Warhol's artist books and sketchbooks is also included and presents a compelling distraction that eventually dominates one's impression of the show as a whole. Some of the books are relatively tame, featuring chintzy poems and cheesy drawings of cats and cherubs. Others are rather frank in their depiction of homoerotic content, like the drawings from one of Warhol's first art exhibitions, *Studies for a Boy Book* (1956). Among this selection are a nude portrait of a male friend with his legs spread and genitals exposed; a top-view drawing of two feet pressing their soles together around what appears to be the head of a penis; and a study of a man's lower torso from behind, with his legs parted such that his front carriage is neatly silhouetted. But perhaps most frank is the efficiently titled *Male Genitals*, which depicts an erect penis pointing upward, with a bow tied around its shaft and tiny flowers and hearts decorating it beneath the tip. What makes this work such a compelling digression from the rest of the exhibition is not its explicitness, nor its originality and execution, but the fact that Warhol made it at all. It is refreshing, bordering on shocking, to see work that seems so intimate and personal made by a man who was infamous for his utter lack of intimacy and personality (Figure 2).

Several writers have commented on the way that Warhol changed when he became a pop artist, and many have written about the persona he then assumed and its relationship to his thoroughly branded oeuvre. It is as though Warhol decided to mirror the bland superficiality of his subject matter in his face and the way that he carried himself. David Bourdon describes this conspicuous change in Warhol as he adjusted his act to suit his art. Beginning as a more quintessential dandy figure "who held tickets to the Metropolitan Opera," Warhol metamorphosed into a pop personality, "a sort of gum-chewing, seemingly naïve teeny-bopper."¹ In a similar vein, Robert Storr refers to Warhol's latter demeanor as one of "assiduously cultivated indifference," stating that he "never broke character."² Taking the



Figure 2 | Andy Warhol, *Barne*, circa 1957, subject: Edward J. Brown, gold leaf and ink on colored graphic art paper, 50.8 × 35.6 cm. The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; Founding Collection. Contribution: The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc., © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc/ARS. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney.

matter further, Wayne Koestenbaum regards Warhol's laconic and deadpan approach to media interviews as an extension of his art practice, viewing it as a kind of collaborative performance between himself and the media.³ Arthur Danto, one of Warhol's more sensitive biographers, describes a certain defensiveness to Warhol's manner, calling it "the air of stupidity he used as a kind of camouflage."⁴ In a more psychological approach, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick regards Warhol's passivity and inexpressiveness as affects of his distinctly queer "shy exhibitionism."⁵ She reads it as Warhol's

defensive effort to “own” other people’s dismissive attempts to describe his appearance and personality.⁶ These are all strong arguments, and whether or not one is to subscribe to any of them in particular is irrelevant to the fact that they all emphasize Warhol’s performance of a blank surface, or mask, that he used to conceal his subjectivity.

In a passage from *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, which the artist wrote collaboratively with Pat Hackett, Warhol reflects on his public demeanor while looking at his face in a mirror. He writes: “I have to look into the mirror for some clues. Nothing is missing. It’s all there. The affectless gaze. The disaffected grace . . . the childlike, gum-chewing naïveté . . . the perfected otherness.”⁷ Coming from the artist, this meditation gives weight to the idea that Warhol deliberately obfuscated the charmingly fey and fanciful person that is apparent in this exhibition and likely confirms the fun he had by playing with his persona and the terms that were used to describe it. Toward the end of the exhibition, there is a cluster of portraits of Warhol in which he poses like a bashful teen in a park—in one photograph, he leans against a tree with his hands behind his head, and in another he lies in the grass with an arm over his head, one eye longingly staring into the camera. Although all of these portraits give the viewer a picture of a comparatively unguarded young Andy, one is particularly worth extra pause. In this image, Warhol leans to one side with an elbow propped by his other crossed arm, and with his raised hand he pops his thumb into one side of his mouth. Warhol smiles a cheeky half-smile and looks at the viewer through squinted eyes, and the viewer has to decide whether he is sucking his thumb or whether he is biting it at the audience (Figure 3).

This is a curious exhibition; it is both disappointing and compelling. The show is only disappointing in that its framing is far less interesting than its actual content. For audiences familiar with Warhol’s life and work, the exhibition is hardly illuminating, with its emphasis on the influence of his commercial practice on his art; however, what is quite alarming is the manner in which his art and persona seemed to invert over those years like a double negative. He went from a well-dressed, worldly, and rather conservative dandy who made art that was intensely private and erotic to a naïve, camp, pop personality who made art with rigorous conceptual restrictions and behaved in a manner that deliberately obfuscated any sense of subjective agency. It is as though he both found and obliterated himself at once.



Figure 3 | Edward Wallowitch, *Andy Warhol*, 1957, gelatin silver print, 35.6 × 40.6 cm. The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; Founding Collection. Contribution: The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc., © Edward Wallowitch Estate, 2016, all rights reserved.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

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NOTES

1. David Bourdon, "Andy Warhol 1928-1987," *Art in America* 75, no. 5 (May 1987): 139.
2. Robert Storr, "The Idea of the Moral Imperative in Contemporary Art," *Art Criticism* 7, no. 1 (1991): 39.
3. Wayne Koestenbaum, *Andy Warhol* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2001), 79–80.
4. Arthur Danto, *Andy Warhol* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 44.
5. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity: Warhol's Shyness/Warhol's Whiteness," in *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, ed. Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 137.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* (London: Cassell, 1975), 10.