

Pop Art Portraits

National Portrait Gallery, London
Until 20 January 2008
www.npg.org.uk

Inserting Pop Art into London's National Portrait Gallery creates something of a shock, and is clearly part of the gallery's campaign to secure for itself the sexy ground of art.

We usually think of Pop Art as a celebration and occasional critic of the consumer society. In other words, objects, in and of themselves. Yet a *portrait* gallery is more concerned to persuade us that portraiture remains important in conveying the essence of a person: their individuality and their role in society – even if, recently, the National Portrait Gallery happily concedes that environment and objects have some part to play in how a person is defined. So, does this exhibition imply that in the heyday of Pop Art, from the mid 1950s to the late 1960s, people were defined by inanimate objects? To an extent, 'yes' is the response here.

The exhibition's curator, Paul Moorhouse, points out that without people there would have been no consumer society, no popular culture – and therefore no Pop Art. Put another way, people were implicit in the movement from the start; or, as Peter Blake, one of the artists whose work features in the show, was heard to say 'these are not always portraits, but there are always traces of humanity'.

Pop Art had a relatively brief genesis and flowering, and was spurred in each stage by the extraordinary political and social changes of the times. Along with the growth of consumerism and advertising came the growth of mass media and an obsession with fame. It was a time when film stars, musicians, politicians, astronauts and comic-strip characters came to be seen as of equal standing, through being portrayed in the same outlets.

By using images drawn from the media Pop artists produced work that subverted 'high' culture but had an instant and popular appeal. People saw their interests and icons from the world around them – from magazines, newspapers, cinema and television – reflected back at them, and they took notice.

Pop Art Portraits claims that 'Pop Art elevated portraiture to a new, pre-eminent position. It focused on the individual, creating an art with genuine popular appeal: about people and for people.' So how well does this exhibition fit into a gallery devoted to portraits?

Laid out broadly chronologically, the exhibition sketches a trajectory from the portrayal of people as objects with no more value than the latest TV set or sofa, to a sophisticated reflection on the role and position of such people, their motivations and the impact of celebrity on them. So in Richard Hamilton's 1956 *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?*, the near-naked figures of a muscle man and a strip artist are inserted into a suburban living room, not as themselves but as puppets to implicate the viewer in what is judged important in life. At the opposite end of the Pop Art phenomenon, his *Swinging London 67 (a)* from 1968-9, focuses on two known individuals, (Mick Jagger and Robert Fraser, handcuffed and in a police car having been busted for drugs), in a way that both expresses their feelings at that moment and role they play in society's estimation.

Early on, Nigel Henderson's *Head of a Man* uses photographs of buildings, objects and landscapes to create the outline of a person. It posits humans as the sum total of their environment, while Eduardo Paolozzi's important collages of the early 1950s chopped up and scribbled on pages from magazines; they play with the portrait as an inanimate object, a tool of art.

Before Pop Art matured into its own distinctive style, artists such as Derek Boshier and Robert Rauschenberg were playing with the portrait genre while remaining true to the concept of the individual. Rauschenberg's 'Combine' painting, *Trophy V*, was dedicated to his fellow artist and friend, Jasper Johns. It shows only objects – a window, a ruler, a post-box. All refer

to things frequently used by Johns in his work, thus the painting is an evocation of Johns rather than a depiction of him. But as with Boshier's *Man Playing Snooker and thinking of Other Things* (1961), it acknowledges that a person's actions and preoccupations tell us as much as their physical outline.

In contrast, while many works in the central rooms of the exhibition are of recognised individuals, many are not, and even when known celebrities are depicted, there is little sense in which these are portraits seeking to define the psychological essence of the sitter – the rationale for most works in the National Portrait Gallery. Indeed, Pop artists went out of their way to wipe away any trace of the individual behind the image. Andy Warhol's *Self-portrait* from 1964 turns the regular processes of the silk-screen print onto a photo-booth image of himself. He appears distrusting and suspicious, but commanding. Drained of texture and inner self, it is evidence of his assertion 'everyone should be a machine'.

In a room entitled 'Fantasy' the works borrow images from girlie magazines or sexualised advertising. It is perhaps telling that all the artists here are men, since even real people – the artist Mel Ramos' wife or Brigit Bardot and Marilyn Monroe in Peter Blake's *Girlie Door* – are not portraits but people used as inanimate objects to play out society's fantasies.

As the vision of an optimistic future filled with new technology and endless indulgence gave way to the disillusion of Marilyn Monroe's suicide, JFK's assassination, Vietnam and Northern Ireland, so the purpose in depicting people changes through the course of the exhibition. The portraits now are political or social comments, and refer specifically to the people they depict. Richard Hamilton showed the Prime Minister Hugh Gaitskill as a cinema monster to underline the artist's hatred for a man he blamed for prolonging the nuclear arms race. In the 'Marilyn' room, thought-provoking and surprisingly moving works by Warhol, Hamilton and Claes Oldenburg use the Pop Art techniques of removing the 'personal' and leaving only the outer image to reflect that fame did, indeed, remove the personal from Marilyn Monroe, leaving her only to suicide and the elimination of the individual.

This exhibition contains much that would not fit a traditional definition of 'portraiture', and devotees of the genre could leave feeling cheated. Yet by bringing the works together in this way it makes us reflect harder on what true portraiture is; and that some of the works least like 'traditional portraits' can in fact come closer to a representation of the person shown.

Ends

A programme of daytime and evening talks and events accompanies the exhibition.

© Rachel Escott 2007

1076 words

Note to Mike – please see the restrictions on using the images:

Any images that are downloaded may not be cropped or over-laid with text, or used for front/back covers, full page reproductions, or on any homepage without prior permission from the Press Officer, National Portrait Gallery, London. An image shall only be used on a website if the image is used at no more than 72dpi and displayed at an on-screen size of no more than 300x300 pixels. Images shall only be used in connection with the relevant exhibition, and not for any other purposes.