Pop Art Figures: Present and Past
by Ekin Erkan

Pop art has been traditionally understood as an art movement that burgeoned in 1950s Britain and America alike, with diverting thematic concerns but common aesthetic choices. This commonality included, above all else, a "return" to representational art following the first half of 21st century Modernism, which had stoked abstraction as its primary motif. Littering early pop art were hard-nosed, tough edges—often comic-book like, à la Roy Lichtenstein—and low-brow subjects, such as pin-up girls and advertising products, knitted together in a collage-cum-latticework. Relatedly, one critical unifying concept behind the diverging strands of pop art was perceptual stimulation, as evinced by one of the early tenets of the pop art movement, Richard Hamilton of the Independent Group, whose *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* (1956) juxtaposed funfair, domestic trimmings of everyday life and interior furnishings (e.g., pot plants, coffee tables, and lamps) alongside commercial iconography (e.g., a crowned Ford motorcar, a gargantuan lollipop). Despite subsequent decades of pop art and postmodern, pop art-inspired works have deviated from the representational grounding that colored the movement's early beginnings, this engagement with perceptual stimulation has remained interwoven within pop art's—and post-pop art's—central plexus.

Indeed, any attempt to concisely reduce the variegated thematic and theoretical strands behind pop art—which could just as easily be pluralized into pop art*s*—will undoubtedly face great challenges. Perceptual stimulation is one notable exception, and the participatory stance that pop artworks take upon their represented (and sometimes compositional) material is another. Susan Sontag's prescient 1966 essay, "Against Interpretation," gets to the heart of the latter. As Sontag underscores, alongside the ingenuousness, arbitrariness, gaiety, and looseness of pop art is its exhilarating freedom from moralism. This freedom signals and frames a sentiment that marked many 1960s counterculture movements that stoked radical politics but simultaneously proffered an ethos that unwittingly participated in the spirit of capitalism. Capturing this disposition, the pop art of the 1960s unwittingly raised a mirror to 60s counterculture movements like the New Left and the hippie movement, illuminating the self-inventing subject whose embracing the aesthetics of Eastern spiritualism and "free love" dovetailed with the narcissist, entrepreneurial commercial advertiser. This intimate reflection would find itself lucidly articulated when many self-pronounced radicals, who had proudly marched alongside the Black Panthers in their youth, matured into the Reagan-voting block who identified with the "novel" conservatism of William F. Buckley. Hence, one genuine virtue of the pop-art movement was its doing away with the "approving or disapproving" critical stance that Modernism proffered. In doing so, one could say that the pop art movement ushered in a post-critical stance, one inherently removed from politics. Alternatively, however, one might take this post-critical stance as one steeped in self-awareness and irony. This latter approaches encourages us to understand pop art as motivating a genuinely political move in its solemn posture and disinterested interest in reallocating commercial indices for the sake of perceptual over-stimulation. That is, by participating in its object of appraisal, pop art demonstrates how the very *possibility* of critique has become impotent under the machinations of contemporary market capitalism.

The works that are grouped together in *Pop Art Figures: Present and Past* all illuminate these threads, and in doing so cull and bridge the mixed figures of pop art since the 1950s. Many of these works seem, at first glance, disparate from the aesthetics of pop art, proper. For instance, Jonathan Horowitz' *Tennyson, Jasper & Bob* (2013) flattens direct textual references to artists

past with an impressionistic sketch-like drawing style, clarifying its historical ties to the pop art movement without embracing pop art's aesthetic penchant wholesale. Other artists, such as Damien Hirst—arguably Andy Warhol's greatest living heir—are more directly in tune with the commercial spirit of pop art. Like his pop art forebearers, Hirst is no stranger to participating in the commercial culture his work often depicts. Hirst's screen print, *Domine, Ne In Furore* (2009), references the Old Testament and finds concentric butterfly wings replicating Buddhist mandalas and stained-glass church windows. Hirst's works do not necessarily criticize the church or spirituality. They merely take an aesthetic vehicle (the church window) and turn it into an adornment. Sean Scully's translucent aquatint, *Cut Ground Red* (2011), is composed of his universally recognizable vertical and horizontal stripes—this time in flaxen, crimson, and charcoal black. *Cut Ground Red* is in continuity with Scully's early work from the 1970s and, as a self-referential piece, speaks to the "brand identity" of the contemporary artist. Similarly, Takashi Murakami's *Jellyfish Eyes* (2001) is unmistakably a Murakami, cartoonish eyelashes and anime eyes cheekily winking and staring back at the viewer.

Pop artist James Rosenquist's *2nd State* (1978) marries the sketchiness of Abstract Expressionism with the commercial indices of pop art, featuring a pair of clearly penned sunglasses peeking through faint, foregrounded auburn-orange figures. Warhol's *Flowers* (1964) and Robert Rauschenberg's *American Indian* (2000) are perhaps the most direct references to the golden era of pop art. *Flowers* is most interesting due to its source and the "pop art-perfect" story behind the piece—it is, in some sense, a reproduction of a reproduction, as Warhol's screen print reproduces the rose-pink hibiscus pullout photographs taken by Modern Photography magazine editor Patricia Caulfield. Warhol had copied the flowers after Metropolitan Museum of Art assistant curator Henry Geldzahler showed them to him. JFK had been assassinated a few months prior to Warhol's work on the hibiscus series, and Warhol himself dedicated the flower prints to Jackie Kennedy, herself a recurrent motif looming throughout much of Warhol's oeuvre. *American Indian* similarly recalls American media culture, including the uncompromisingly American cinema of John Ford, Howard Hawks, and Clint Eastwood, as well as the omnipresent mythos of the "American Indian," something of a jingoist concoction and hangover that, like most American myths, continues to loom in today's sociopolitical background. Like the trailing American fiction it speaks to and is framed by, the Native American face in Rauschenberg's print hangs behind an American automobile, fading into the wall-façade.

Notably, Warhol's hibiscus flowers have often been confused for poppies. Bong Jung Kim's *Poppy* series takes up the poppy as a painterly subject, but, rather than veridically reproducing the poppies by way of screen print, as Warhol did with his flowers, Kim utilizes the gestural, drip-like composition of Abstract Expressionism. The splattered center speaks to Kim's interest in symbolism, with symbolism remaining something that pop art, from its early beginnings in advertising, has been preoccupied with (albeit perhaps unwittingly). However, Kim's symbolism is edge-on and abstract, the bleeding poppies speaking to the addiction and isolation diffuse and commonplace in contemporary life. Kiki Smith's oeuvre—given its critical preoccupation with AIDS, race, and abortion—is much more politically poised than many of the aforementioned pop artists. Nevertheless, Smith's *Untitled* (1997) also speaks to a certain remove from critique, the camera eye straying towards the banal, as it dangles beside a riverbed and a flock of geese.

Michael Halsband's photographic contribution, *Nob and Non* (1980), returns to the human subject, but obfuscates any immediate signs that would signal race or gender with a sun hat—dark lacquer-polished nails embrace a stranger's hand, the photo's composition reminiscent

of commercial fashion photography. Elaine de Kooning's *Taurus VII* (1973) is much more figurative and directly recalls Abstract Expressionism, thereby placing pop art both in relationship with Abstract Expressionism and juxtaposing these two invariably connected, and at times dissenting, Anglo-American movements. One of the ambitions behind *Pop Art Figures: Present and Past* is to enunciate reactions to pop art, including both conciliatory reactions and those more reproachful. Carol Hunt’s *Morning Music* (2007) in many ways continues the alternate American art practice of abstraction that Elaine do Kooning’s lithograph articulates while April Gornik’s *Mirror Forest* (2001) speaks to the time-honored tradition of American landscape painting that has always remained fiercely steadfast and independent from Modernist and Postmodernist whimsies. Zvonimir Mihanović’s contribution similarly speaks to a widespread historical interest in realism, and thus departs from pop art—the small fishing boat is stripped of any brand name, still and swaying in a placid turquoise ocean. Korean-American artist Kate Oh’s contribution, *Nocturne* (2017), uses ground pigment ink and Hanji paper on a wooden panel to display a monochromatic, shadow-cloaked flock. Such works have been intentionally chosen to speak to those alternate traditions that both frame and move beyond the history of pop art—for, in order to effectively speak to any tradition, one must also locate it alongside that which rejects and responds to it.

Thus, *Pop Art Figures: Present and Past* takes the present mode of spectatorship and the gambit of art history as one that must be equally critical of pop art and treat pop art analytically, appreciating how its history is one inseparable from both American art history and our contemporary cultural milieu. Pop art is here poised in conversation with alternate art movements and approaches. Furthermore, this exhibition locates the pop art movement as effectively at the center of a contemporary technique of post-critical authorship that signals the genuine death of the artist and the birth of the viewer. However, in many ways pop art *as such* has been overcome—the weighty prevalence of abstract expressionist-styled paintings in contemporary art galleries and museums provides evidence to this. Nevertheless, both pop art and its post-critical stance remain ideologically steadfast today. Distinct facets of the pop art story are here comprehensively pictured such that the viewer can, themselves, take up a critical posture.