

Interview

POP ART, STILL

By ANN BINLOT



(Left to Right) Vija Celmins, *Eraser*, 1967, Painted wood, 4 x 21 x 8 inches (10.2 x 53.3 x 20.3 cm), National Gallery of Art, Washington; Gift of Edward R. Broida (2005.142.8), Art © Vija Celmins. Jeff Koons, *Flower Drawing (Yellow)*, 2003, Mirrorpolished, stainless steel with transparent color coating, 58 3/4 x 58 3/4 x 1 inches (149.2 x 149.2 x 2.5 cm), Collection of the artist, © Jeff Koons. Wayne Thiebaud, *Three Half Cakes*, 1966, Oil on canvas, 16 x 28 inches (40.6 x 71.1 cm), Courtesy of Gretchen and John Berggruen, San Francisco, Art © Wayne Thiebaud / Licensed by, AGA, New York, NY.

For Andy Warhol, the Campbell's soup can was a familiar sight long before the world associated it with him, starting when he was a child in Pittsburgh and his mother fed him Campbell's for dinner. In 1962, Warhol paid homage to the seemingly dull food product by immortalizing it in a series of 32 canvases—one for each variety. “It’s one of the most recognizable, strong graphics there is in all of American marketing,” says Princeton professor and art historian John Wilmerding. Warhol went on to use the imagery of the iconic red-and-white can throughout his career.

One of Warhol's interpretations of the Campbell's soup can, a 1966 aluminum cast, is part of *The Pop Object: The Still Life Tradition in Pop Art*, an exhibition curated by Wilmerding at Acquavella Galleries. For the survey, Wilmerding chose to focus on a subject that he felt highly impacted the Pop movement: still lifes, the genre that he says was “traditionally ranked as the lowest form of artistic subject matter” from the 17th century on.

Pop changed all that. Artists like Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, and Marjorie Strider breathed new life into everyday objects, using innovative methods like sewing and stuffing or casting to make three-dimensional renditions of Coke bottles, hamburgers, and erasers. “The banality was being upended, and the most ordinary subjects were being elevated to high art,” explains Wilmerding.

Wilmerding chose to forgo the typical protocol of organizing a show chronologically or by artist, instead opting to group the more than 75 works of art into four themes: food and drink, the garden, body parts, and clothing and housewares. Upstairs, Robert Arneson's “Hydrox Cookie” (1966) stands in the same room as Wayne Thiebaud's “Three Half Cakes” (1966) and Oldenburg's Popsicle sculptures “Soft Fur Good Humors” (1963), while in another room, Warhol's 1977 untitled silkscreen of a penis is grouped with a foot and mouth by Tom Wesselmann. In the two smaller rooms on the first floor, Edward Kienholz's “Cement TV” (1969), is displayed with a Vija Celmins 1967 sculpture of an eraser and Jim Dine's 1962 canvas of colorful tools. Across the hall, Jeff Koons's 2003 “Flower Drawing (Yellow)” hangs opposite of Warhol's familiar “Flowers” (1964).

“Many of its innovations, and the wittiest contributions of Pop tend to be in still life subjects,” explains Wilmerding. “It’s all about taking something like the Coke, like movie stills, and turning it around and thrusting people’s faces.”