

Provocative Summer Shows

From Warhol to edge of the world, post-pop, multimedia extremism.

By Liz Goldner

Andy Warhol, who said that "In the future, everyone will be famous for 15 minutes," has received more fame than that; 15 years after his death, his celebrity continues to grow. Even before the opening of "Andy Warhol Retrospective" at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles, the show made national news. In true Warhol fashion, promoters hyped the commercial importance of the event which runs through August 18.

The media told us that: it's the first comprehensive exhibition of his works to be presented in Los Angeles in more than 30 years; it includes more than 200 works; it features key early works as "Campbell's Soup," "Marilyn," "Jackie," "Liz," "Elvis," "Flowers and Disasters;" it includes the artist's last major paintings, based on da Vinci's painting of The Last Supper.



The show is a blockbuster. MOCA's galleries are filled with hip art people who brave crowded downtown streets, squeeze into overpriced parking spots, stand in line and pay big bucks to get in. It's a scene that pop artist Warhol - who has been called a charlatan by some people, an idiot savant by others - would have relished. But beyond the hoopla, is it worth seeing a show of works signed "Andy Warhol," that were often executed by assistants, produced in mass numbers, and made the artist very, very rich?

From a contemporary perspective, the paintings are provocative, sometimes delightful, and frequently tragic in nature: the Marilyn silk-screens were done after her suicide; the Liz ones were completed during her hospitalizations; and the Jackie ones were done after Jack's assassination. The works are large, colorful, and evocative of the 60s, an era that we seem never to forget.

Warhol may have been smarter than many people realized; his works have purpose, intelligence and a keen empathy for the pulse of the time. His large, repetitive silkscreens have an attractively mindless quality that reduces the mundane (soup cans), the famous (Marilyn) and the audacious (Mao) to a common denominator, that says we are all equal and entitled to express ourselves in the human arena, no matter how trivial, bold or bizarre those expressions. In this post-9/11 era, Warhol's paintings are more relevant than ever.

OCMA 2002

Fast forward to the "2002 California Biennial," running through Sept. 8 at the Orange County Museum of Art. The exhibition, which reflects the tenor of the past two years in art, has roots in the pop art movement that Warhol exemplified. The celebration of the mundane, the unusual and the tragic, the repetition of themes, the often daring presentations, the use of non-traditional mediums in execution and the derivative nature of the works all are evocative of pop.

The show, representing 12 California artists in their 30s, is not pretty or comforting. In many works, it is refreshingly outrageous. In others, it is reflective of the frustrations we often feel but seldom express in public.

At the opening, as guests milled around the lobby, many nearly bumped into two fragile plastic sculptures by Yoram Wolberger. "Toy Soldier," a green blow-up of a miniature dime-store army man, and "Bride and Groom," a blow-up of the plastic bride and groom that top wedding cakes, are meticulously recreated, from original miniatures, to life-size sculptures.

Standing next to "Bride and Groom," a woman remarked about its garish qualities and how it appears so different from the small wedding cake versions, now with black smudges for eyes and smeary red ovals for lips.



Wolberger's sculptures are representative of the show in that many of his works have elements of normalcy juxtaposed with strong aspects of the absurd. Charlie White's almost-life-size photographs feature often beautiful, sometimes tormented, California people. In many photos, Joshua, a skinny, potbellied, alien creature (actually a puppet created in Hollywood) is the center of attention. Joshua apparently is seen by others in the photos as normal but sees himself as ugly and unsure, representing male insecurities.

Kristin Calabrese's "Luck of the Draw," a large, exquisitely detailed interior of a dilapidated Los Angeles apartment, is so striking that it draws the viewer to the far end of the gallery. The architectural details, collapsing ceiling, peeling paint, kitchen doors flung open, and Post-It notes with phrases such as, "I'm not over you," and "Why are you so crazy?" creates a scene of a home and life that are falling apart.

Joe Sola's very short videos include "Climaxes," a series of 36 explosions, each from a film from a different year in Sola's life. Other artists are Rebeca Bollinger, a conceptual artist whose videos, drawn from the Internet and from digital photographs, are on the gallery walls; Chris Finley, who starts with computer images, stretches and bastardizes them, then re-creates the digitally produced designs onto canvas; Tom LaDuke, who creates fictional landscapes, from parts of his own body, and a mass of 300 naked pink bodies, modeled on his own; Kelly Nipper, who creates large, formal, photographs that direct the viewer's attention to the intervals between the photos; Roman de Salvo, whose giant rock-like balloon floats 65 feet above OCMA's sculpture garden.

The works in OCMA's Biennial are innovative, provocative, and in many cases, unsettling. The show can stretch your perspectives on what art is, and what it can teach us about our viewpoints, our lives and the world around us.