

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTFORUM

Richard Avedon

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

This extraordinary exhibition, “Richard Avedon: Murals & Portraits,” brought together four vast group portraits made between 1969 and 1971, ranging from eight to over ten feet tall and from twenty to more than thirty feet long, in addition to a multitude of smaller portraits made between 1960 and 1976 as well as contact sheets and documentary materials. These were housed within a specially designed interior architecture by David Adjaye that functioned as a perfect machine for viewing, with walls creating sight lines that focused attention either on one of the four “murals” (*Andy Warhol and members of the Factory . . .*, 1969, *The Chicago Seven . . .*, 1969, *The Mission Council*, 1971, and *Allen Ginsberg’s family . . .*, 1970) or on a grouping of smaller images—but never simultaneously on mural-scaled and smaller images, which demand very distinct perceptual approaches.

All of the photographs but especially the murals operate on a double register, at once formalist and journalistic (the subject: American culture at the height of the Vietnam War). The use of entirely white backgrounds—where there are no distracting details, no “atmosphere” or shadows—with black borders around the edges lends the figures shown a kind of Minimalist seriality. More than that, these devices mark the ideas of field and framing as basic to the work and demand that we see the bodies that populate the field as essentially articulations of it. And each frame is, so to speak, a time frame: Being composed of two, three, or five separate images, each mural has been produced as a sequence of distinct moments, then recomposed into a single scene. In each work the internal borders between images divide one or more of the figures, as if to assert an inherent conflict between formal integrity and pictorial unity; each of these split figures is torn between different poses, different moments. In the Warhol and Ginsberg murals, figures recur: A nude Joe Dallesandro stands next to Paul Morrissey on the left of the Factory portrait and a clothed one flanks Warhol on the right; Ginsberg’s brother, Eugene Brooks, and their father, Louis Ginsberg, appear in both panels of the poet’s family portrait. Again, form and rhythm trump verisimilitude. The field—dazzling white and all the more so, as this whiteness is set off by the black bars at each edge—becomes the dominant factor, not unlike, say, the unpainted ground on which

appear the separate color zones of abstract paintings such as those of Morris Louis’s “Column” or “Unfurled” series.

And yet that’s hardly the whole story. After all, this is portraiture in extremis, a psychologically probing confrontation with named, concrete, sometimes quite famous individuals. The scale of the murals encourages a distant view that takes in the friezelike lineup of figures as forms in a sequence but also promotes the opposite, the most minute scrutiny of every wrinkle, every microgesture, every nuance of posture, as if from these details something could be read about the life and times. The tension between formalism and reportorial scrutiny is what lends these works their power, but also their ambiguity.

Given the explosion of monumentally scaled photographs in art galleries over the past couple of decades—what Jean-François Chevrier and Michael Fried have called “tableau form” photography—it’s surprising that Avedon’s murals haven’t more often been cited as precedents. But to do so might be discomfiting; after all, how many of his successors have managed to produce images as trenchant as these? If we limit the field to portraits alone, those of Rineke Dijkstra or even Thomas Ruff might come off a bit soft in comparison.

—Barry Schwabsky

Richard Avedon, *Allen Ginsberg’s family*: Hannah (Honey) Litzky, aunt; Leo Litzky, uncle; Abe Ginsberg, uncle; Anna Ginsberg, aunt; Louis Ginsberg, father; Eugene Brooks, brother; Allen Ginsberg, poet; Anne Brooks, niece; Peter Brooks, nephew; Connie Brooks, sister-in-law; Lyle Brooks, nephew; Eugene Brooks; Neal Brooks, nephew; Edith Ginsberg, stepmother; Louis Ginsberg, Paterson, New Jersey, May 3, 1970, two silver gelatin prints mounted on linen, overall 8 x 20’.

