

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Of Then, But Still Now

By Richard B. Woodward



'Andy Warhol and members of The Factory: Gerard Malanga, poet; Viva, actress; Paul Morrissey, director; Taylor Mead, actor; Brigid Polk, actress; Joe Dallesandro, actor; Andy Warhol, artist, New York, October 9, 1969'

After a dinner in 1977 with Richard Avedon, Susan Sontag wrote in her journal, with apparent amazement, that he had said, "The past is completely unreal to me. I live only in the present + the future. Is that why I look young?" To which she added a line about "Dorian Gray."

Mr. Avedon wouldn't look so boyish today. Had he not died in 2004, he would have been 89 on May 15. His photographs, on the other hand, seem hardly to have aged at all. Indeed, one of the spooky aspects of "Murals & Portraits," the Gagolian Gallery's exhibit of work done primarily between 1969 and 1975, is that so many people on the walls, from Gen. Creighton Abrams to Allen Ginsberg's Aunt Hannah, seem as alive and present as the day they posed.

Such timelessness, of course, is built into photography itself, a rejuvenating process by which *then* can be continually *now*. But credit is also due to the larger-than-life scale of the figures in the four murals at the heart of this retrospective. When three of these were shown at the Marlborough Gallery in 1975, they caused artistic tremors. The current gigantism of photographic prints, and the begrudging recognition that the medium can compete with history painting, date from that event.

The murals—some as long as 25 to 30 feet, and composed of as many as five panels—depict four groups that for Mr. Avedon exemplified the cultural-political upheaval of the time: the uninhibited young actors (self-described "superstars") employed at Andy Warhol's Factory; the "Chicago Seven," defendants in the trial for inciting riots at the 1968 Democratic Convention; the outwardly gay Mr. Ginsberg and his extended family; and men of the Mission Council overseeing the war in Vietnam.

All of these figures are presented in the austere style developed by Mr. Avedon in the late 1960s when he began to purge photography of the anecdotal and set his subjects against stark-white backgrounds. With

nothing but their own bodies and the clothes on their backs to fix them in time and place (the men from Mr. Warhol's Factory don't even have clothes) the figures appear to float, weightless as astronauts.

With this flexible, multipanel approach to portraiture, Mr. Avedon could make a series of portraits over many months and then assemble them to reveal what he had sensed about group dynamics. The shrewd diffidence of Mr. Warhol's leadership, for instance, is suggested by pushing him to the edge of the picture and almost outside it.

This method succeeded better with some subjects than with others. The anarchic pugnacity of Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, clown princes of the New Left, is nowhere visible in the portrait of the Chicago Seven. A clinical approach was better applied on the men in suits and ties from the Mission Council. A bitter opponent of the Vietnam War, Mr. Avedon must have secretly enjoyed posing them under an interrogating light, as if in a police lineup of bureaucratic criminals.

The most ebullient of the murals is the rendering of Mr. Ginsberg's family. Mr. Avedon has ingeniously framed them as though they had crowded into the dining room of a middle-class Jewish home where too many people have gathered in too small a space. He has even allowed a few props—a chair and plates of cake—to enliven what appears to be a moment of multigeneration harmony. It takes another moment to realize that Mr. Ginsberg's lifetime partner, the poet Peter Orlovsky, is missing and should be among the celebrants.

Each of the four murals is spotlighted on a separate wall in the gallery, which is divided into V-shaped quadrants where related portraits are hung. None of these smaller works, it must be said, has quite the psychological impact of the friezelike projects and some, including several of Vietnamese men and women disfigured by napalm, are clunkers.

Vitrines of other historic material from the archives of the Richard Avedon Foundation contain everything from a signed model release by transsexual actor Candy Darling to Mr. Avedon's I.D. card from the Department of Defense for his Vietnam trip in 1971.

When exhibited at Marlborough in 1975, the murals were unframed and mounted on the walls with Velcro. That rough-edged, confrontational installation by art director Marvin Israel has become almost as legendary as Mr. Avedon's pictures. This more somber one by David Adjaye, and the uniformly excellent catalog essays, should only enhance Mr. Avedon's reputation. Even protected behind glass, his photographs seem as brazen and futuristic as ever.

Richard Avedon:

Murals & Portraits

Gagosian Gallery

522 W. 21 St., (212) 741-1717

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