

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Warhol and Avedon Form an Unlikely Tandem in London

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“Four Marilyns” by Andy Warhol, from 1986.

2016 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc., via Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

LONDON — If his diaries are any indication, Andy Warhol had little affection for Richard Avedon. In an entry from December 1976, Warhol recalled running into a woman they both knew at a dinner party in New York.

“We talked about how horrible Avedon is,” Warhol wrote. “She said he gets what he wants out of a person and then drops them. I agreed and then everybody screamed at me that I do the same thing.”

Whatever their animosities, Avedon and Warhol are being posthumously paired in an exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery here. The show, which runs through April 23, presents 33 Warhol silk-screens and 22 Avedon works (including a single series of 69 portraits) dating from the 1950s to the 1990s.

At first glance, they form an awkward tandem, as towering figures in separate artistic disciplines.

But they had similar backgrounds and early career trajectories. Born five years apart in the 1920s to East European immigrant families, they got their starts in the New York fashion world, both working for Bonwit Teller and Harper’s Bazaar. Although their paths then diverged — Avedon

shifting from fashion photography to portraiture and Warhol becoming a painter and filmmaker and a Pop Art stalwart — they moved in the same New York circles, often portraying the same people.

The Gagosian is illustrating that overlap, eager to present the two men as equals who documented similar themes from different angles, thrusting aside hierarchical distinctions between painting and photography. The exhibition also has a commercial logic: It presents the work of two hugely famous artists, one of whom (Avedon) has the advantage of being relatively affordable.

The majority of the Avedons and a number of the Warhols are for sale, with prices that Gagosian says range from the tens of thousands to the millions of dollars.

The idea for a combined exhibition came up in 2011 after the Avedon Foundation — a nonprofit organization that owns Avedon's photographs, negatives and archives and raises money through print sales — made the Gagosian its exclusive representative. The gallery thought of twinning Avedon with an artist “to change people's ideas about photography and the standing of photography in the world,” said Kara Vander Weg, a director of the Gagosian in New York.

Mark Francis, a Gagosian director in London who previously steered the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, described both artists as “recording angels of their period.”

“It's impossible to understand the visual world of today without either one of them,” Mr. Francis said. “So I don't think we're trying to force a relation between them, either historically or iconographically.”

The first room of the exhibition plays on the theme of power. On the main wall is Avedon's “The Family” from 1976, a group of 69 portraits of American establishment figures including President Gerald Ford, Senator Edward M. Kennedy and his mother Rose Kennedy, and a young Donald Rumsfeld, a briefcase tucked under his arm. Hanging on other walls are Warhol portraits of personalities from the period, including Mao Zedong and the shah of Iran with his wife and sister.

A radically different family appears in the next room, in Avedon's sprawling triptych “Andy Warhol and Members of the Factory” (1969). Warhol lurks in the corner of the image, while his disciples, five of them nude, take center stage. He reappears on the wall across — in the famous Avedon portrait of his scarred torso, taken in 1969, a year after he survived an assassination attempt. Other Warhols in the same room depict the artists Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring and the drag queen Wilhelmina Ross.

Death is evoked in the next gallery. Surrounding Warhol's “Last Supper” (1986) are silk-screens of a skull and a gun, and a bewigged self-portrait. They are interspersed with Avedon portraits of the authors Samuel Beckett and Truman Capote, of the two killers depicted by Capote in his book “In Cold Blood,” and of a melancholy Marilyn Monroe.

The last room is a celebrity potpourri. There are Warhol silk-screens of a mourning Jacqueline Kennedy, of Liza Minnelli, Elvis Presley and Monroe. Avedon is represented by portraits of Mrs. Kennedy in happier times, Audrey Hepburn and a playful Charlie Chaplin.

Donna De Salvo, a deputy director of the Whitney Museum who curated Tate Modern's 2002 Warhol retrospective, and who is staging one at the Whitney in 2018, described Avedon and Warhol as a "provocative pairing" but a valid one, though she had not yet seen the Gagosian show.

"Avedon's work to me was always on this fine line between fashion and high art, and that's the line Warhol walked as well," Ms. De Salvo said. She noted that the two artists did in fact share a medium: "Warhol would be inconceivable without the photographic image. It's so deeply embedded."

She described Avedon as a "giant" of photography who was a worthy exhibition companion for Warhol. In any event, "nobody can diminish Warhol: You can put him with just about anything," she said. "He becomes a great foil to play off."

In London for the opening was the Avedon Foundation's executive director, James Martin, who was Avedon's studio assistant before his death in 2004. He described the photographer as "extremely demanding — a demanding that was absolutely invigorating and horrifying at the same time. You wouldn't want to mess it up."

Mr. Martin, who also was Avedon's darkroom technician, said it sometimes took more than a dozen versions of a print to satisfy him. "This needs to be more dramatic," Avedon would respond at first, Mr. Martin recalled. When the next version was shown to him, he would say, "Well, maybe you've captured the ear. Match the rest of the print with the drama of that ear."

Despite the challenges, Mr. Martin said he missed having Avedon around, including for the installation of this show.

"There is a burden that I have of no longer having his voice there to steer the ship," he said. "What I miss is the certainty that he would take into all these decisions that we're faced with."