

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Avedon Warhol

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Richard Avedon: 'Audrey Hepburn, actress, New York, January 20, 1967', 1967. © The Richard Avedon Foundation



Marilyn, Liza, Jackie... When two icons of twentieth-century art like Richard Avedon and Andy Warhol share the billing, you'd expect plenty of big names to show up. And, sure enough, this free exhibition at the cavernous King's Cross branch of Gagosian sometimes feels like a Hollywood hall of fame.

Incredibly, this is the first show to pair up the photography and pop art legends. They had plenty in common. Both men not only shared a fascination with America's nascent celebrity scene but also gauged the world's appetite for images of stars from stage and screen. They also nailed a signature aesthetic that became as instantly recognisable as the people they focused on: Avedon's pared-back, black-and-white photographs finding a high-key counterpart in Warhol's super-refined screenprints.

And both dealt not only in the glamour of the age but also in its undercurrents of violence and tragedy, excess and death. There are two killers, at least, in this show. In 1960, Avedon was able to shoot Dick Hickock and Perry Edward Smith five years before the State of Kansas put nooses round their necks for the 1959 murders of the Clutter family. The story gripped America and obsessed Truman Capote, who wrote 'In Cold Blood' about the crime. Capote appears in this show as well, bloated and scowling into the lens in an Avedon headshot from 1974. It's one of the exhibition's defining moments: one veteran facing down another. Like Capote, both Avedon and Warhol dealt not only in the glamour of the age but also in its undercurrents of violence and tragedy, excess and death, as well as its complicated sexual dynamics. Here, these strands spiral into one another like in a crazy MC Escher drawing.

Born five years apart in the 1920s, Avedon and Warhol cut their teeth in the 'Mad Men' era of advertising and glossy magazines. They went after the same subjects and mixed in the same circles. Avedon's 1969 photograph of Warhol's Factory fills one wall. Impossibly cool, it's also like one of those school photos where the class clown legs it from side to the other in order to appear twice. Here, Warhol's star stud Joe Dallesandro features, clothed and naked, at either end of the throng. It makes you think of that irony-drenched Bowie lyric to 'Andy Warhol': 'Dress my friends up just for show. See them as they really are.'

No one reveals much, whether they're in their finest threads or bollock-naked; both Avedon and Warhol seem complicit in keeping it that way. And yet, in isolation, their subjects possess a touching vulnerability. Not just notorious casualties like Janis Joplin (photographed by Avedon in 1969) or tragic muses such as Jacqueline Kennedy (in mourning in a 1964 Warhol silkscreen), but even the brittle Francis Bacon, captured by Avedon in 1979, away from his studio clutter and Soho coterie.

It's partly this that gives the show its haunted atmosphere, partly the fact that the people on the walls belong to a very different era from our age of over-sharing. Images endure, of course, but our relationship with the rich and famous has shifted irrevocably, even in the dozen years since Avedon died. Avedon and Warhol are masters who changed the way we looked at the world. But that world is long gone.