

GAGOSIAN GALLERY FINANCIAL TIMES

Shoulders hunched between a stoop and a shrug, Andy Warhol offers the camera a scar-threaded torso, seamed by stitches to resemble a piece of patched canvas. His body sags like a rag doll's; pale flesh is offset by a shiny black leather jacket. The poet Stephen Spender unkindly called this intense portrait of Warhol soon after he had been shot in 1968 "the Ecce Homo of modern exhibitionism", though its iconographic allusions range broadly, from a *pietà* and St Sebastian to Watteau's hapless white-suited clown Pierrot.

The photographer was Richard Avedon, and a monumental version of this image of the artist as martyr introduces a smart, glamorous exhibition, *Avedon Warhol*, launching next week at London's Gagosian Gallery.

Never juxtaposed before, the two make an obvious, compelling pair. Both were born in the 1920s to immigrant parents of modest backgrounds, had star-struck childhoods through the Depression, became commercial artists in the 1950s, then evolved styles dizzily embodying how postwar America replaced religious tradition with celebrity, while also chronicling the dark underside to that glossy pageant.

No artist craved fame more than Warhol, and his key insight, that celebrities are commodities like soup cans or Coca-Cola bottles, only made him more desperate to become such a product himself. That story is told in an enlightening new show of some hundred privately owned, little-seen works, *Andy Warhol: Works from the Hall Collection*, at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

It opens with a youthful turquoise silkscreen "Self-portrait" (1967), a profile head coolly posed yet heartbreakingly innocent and eager, and closes with a late "Fright-wig" self-depiction (1986), also turquoise, the features transformed by age and fear into grotesquerie: hollowed cheeks, thin ragging mouth, piercing stare, confrontational yet ghostly.

Together, the two exhibitions refresh our response to an artist known so widely through mechanical reproductions — the crux of his practice — that a close-up encounter is piquant. That is particularly so with the Hall collection's early pieces, made as Warhol was hitting his stride: ink drawings of a repeated motif "Keys" (1959); a first black-and-white silkscreen of a car, "Avanti" (1962); four coloured images, spontaneous, laconic, by turns darting, reflective, grainy, smooth, like a movie sequence,



57 varieties of sameness

Warhol | Two UK shows display the artist's inventive aesthetic — and his failures. By Jackie Wullschlager

from his first commissioned silkscreen portrait, "Ethel Scull" (1965).

"I expected to see Avedon," Scull recalled. "Instead we went to one of those places on 42nd Street where you put a quarter in a machine and take three pictures. We kept two booths going for an hour."

These works fizz with the excitement of discovering a new medium, one perfect for the times: democratic, blending high/low references, its casual imitations and manipulations echoing the advertising formats in which Warhol had honed his skill as an illustrator.

"With silkscreening, you pick a photograph, blow it up, transfer it in glue on to silk, and then roll ink across it so the ink

goes through the silk but not through the glue. That way you get the same image, slightly different each time," Warhol said. "It was all so simple — quick and chancy. I was thrilled with it."

The range of examples in Oxford and London shows how inventively, ambivalently, he played the aesthetic of sameness in these years. Are the Ashmolean's bland, beige serial portraits of Des Moines insurance executive Watson Powell, "The American Man" (1963), a homage to success and confidence, or a mockery of corporate vapidity?

From the same year, Gagosian's shimmering, silver-painted life-size "Double Elvis" portrays a supercharged western gunslinger: does that doubled image evoke the singer's swaying movements, celebrate male bodies touching, or interrogate American assembly-line celebrity and mythology?

Collector Andy Hall, whose foundation is based in Vermont, calls Warhol "the greatest portraitist of the century". Portraits are the core of his collection, and they persuasively demonstrate how radical Warhol's concept of figuration was in the early 1960s, outstripping even Gerhard Richter in his appropriation of photography, rivalling the affectless, hard-contoured portraits from that decade by David Hockney or Alex Katz.

But then — and this is where comparisons with these painters' evolving careers emphasise the point — Warhol's edginess disappears.

repetition is the overwhelming visual experience in a banalised, information-overloaded society. Warhol's long reach, then, is not as a painter but as a conceptualist, working through the implications of the collapse of the avant garde into social parody. Gagosian's show neatly sets fashion photographer Avedon's formal yet *intimiste* approach — studio portraits on white backgrounds, isolating subjects graphically and psychologically — alongside Warhol's aura of power and indifference.

Warhol's golden "Marilyn", remote as a Byzantine icon, competes with Avedon's 1957 portrait of the exhausted, bewildered actress, public façade down. Among Avedon's penetrating old-age depictions — a frenzied, furious Ezra Pound, just released from prison; a gnarled, quizzical Francis Bacon — hang Warhol's impersonal heralds of death: silkscreens of skulls and guns.

Among Gagosian's other highlights are the two uneasy collaborations between the photographer of romantic engagement and the deadpan artist: the image of wounded torso that seems to peel back Warhol's skin, and its pendant, also from 1969, a frieze representing the members of Warhol's Factory, loosely grouped across white space. Five stand naked, in a mannered, recrea-

Warhol's 'Marilyn', remote as a Byzantine icon, competes with Avedon's portrait of the bewildered actress

tional rather than defiant way; the rest lounge in black, languorous, resigned, linked through a network of poses and gazes. Separate at the end is Warhol, the bored, sullen voyeur whose presence orchestrates this entire tableau of New York subculture and sexual revolution.

"Who wants the truth?" Warhol asked "It's not what you are that counts, it's what they think you are."

To which Avedon answers: "We all perform. It's a way of telling about ourselves in the hopes of being recognised as what we'd like to be."

*'Andy Warhol: Works from the Hall Collection', Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, to May 15, ashmolean.org
'Avedon Warhol', Gagosian Gallery, London, February 9-April 23, gagosian.com*



Above: 'Bianca Jagger, actress, Hollywood, California, January 25, 1972', by Richard Avedon, and right, 'Tina Freeman' (1975) by Andy Warhol. Left: Warhol's 'Hammer and Sickle' (1976)

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