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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Art Review

Lichtenstein, After the Funny Papers



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

“Roy Lichtenstein: Still Lives” The Gagosian Gallery show, including “Cape Cod Still Life II,” left, and “Still Life With Lobster,” focuses on works from the 1970s and ’80s.

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By now it’s no surprise to find a museum-worthy show of a major artist at a Chelsea gallery. The spoils of this season are such that a large trove of 1970s and ’80s Lichtensteins arrived last month without much fanfare at the Gagosian Gallery on West

24th Street, overshadowed by another Gagosian coup — Monet's late paintings — a few blocks away.



At the Lichtenstein exhibition it's harder to forget that you're in a place of business. The bulk of the more than 50 works in "Roy Lichtenstein: Still Lives" comes from unnamed private collections, not museums, and some are for sale. The very idea of Lichtenstein, who died in 1997, as a studious genre painter may seem like a market-generated fiction; certainly the show is less inviting than the gallery's "Roy Lichtenstein: Girls" in 2008.

Still, this one delivers fresh insights about Lichtenstein in the 1970s. He had moved from the Bowery to Southampton, N.Y., and had stopped using comic-book sources. He continued to identify with commercial art and illustration, but his painting had become less campy and more cerebral. His best-known work from this period is the series "Mirrors," which breaks down reflections into abstract components. Still lifes, assortments of generic objects — as opposed to Warholian, brand-name products — offered him a way out of Pop.

The still lifes at Gagosian date from 1972 to 1988, though the early '70s are the focus. They show that Lichtenstein was deeply engaged with the Cubists Juan Gris and Fernand Léger, as well as the early American trompe l'oeil painters Charles Willson Peale and his son Raphaëlle Peale. He was also adding stripes, crosshatches and comblike spikes to his signature device, the Benday dot.

Other elements of his 1960s art remained. Lichtenstein had moved away from Mickey Mouse and Bazooka gum wrappers, but he continued to work from newspaper

advertisements, postcards and other printed images. He tore out and pasted into notebooks illustrations of silver teapots, faceted-crystal goblets, fruit, garden plants, office furniture.

A few of these pages are reproduced in the show's catalog, a typically lavish but accessible production. It includes an essay by the Princeton art history professor John Wilmerding, a conversation between the dealer and collector Joe Helman and the Gagosian director Mark Francis, a series of still-life photographs by the artist Louise Lawler and some great black-and-white shots from the 1970s of Lichtenstein in his Southampton studio.

The earliest works on view have a clip-art quality: punchy yellow-and-black images of grapefruits and bananas, with graphic backgrounds of dots or parallel lines. They're a visual and sexual tease, like the peel-and-stick banana that Warhol made in 1966 for the Velvet Underground's first album.

Larger, slightly later paintings introduce vessels — cups and saucers, wine glasses, pitchers — and invoke traditional still-life setups with drapery and mirrors. As Mr. Wilmerding argues, Lichtenstein was looking not only at 17th-century Dutch still lifes but also at early-19th-century American “deception” paintings by William Michael Harnett and others. Sometimes the Americana is hard to miss, as in “Still Life With Cow's Skull” and a pair of Cape Cod scenes with lobsters, lanterns and driftwood.

For the most part Lichtenstein wasn't setting up his own still lifes; he was painting from other paintings that happened to be still lifes. As Mr. Helman says of the work “Cubist Still Life With Lemons,” “This is a Cubist still life, but it's not Roy doing still life; it's Roy doing Cubism.”

He did Cubism, all right — paring down already streamlined forms by Gris, making Léger's “mechanical” compositions even more machinelike. He did Purism too, further sanitizing the cleaned-up version of Cubism espoused by Le Corbusier and Amédée Ozenfant.

At the same time he obsessed over a less schematic painter, Matisse. He gave the famous “Red Studio” a makeover, with pale peach walls, a chair rail of Morse-code-like dots and dashes, and his own paintings propped against the wall.

A few years later, in a suite of large-scale paintings, he proposed a working man’s alternative to the artist’s studio: a bunkerlike office with a metal desk and lockers in a drab palette of gray and navy blue. He titled them “Still Lifes,” as in “Still Life With Locker, Bottle and Tray,” even though the contents of these rooms seem less pertinent than the general mood.

A few years later, as Neo-Expressionism became faddish, Lichtenstein’s still lifes revived one of his motifs from the ’60s: the faux-gestural brush stroke. Some of these modestly scaled paintings from the early ’80s, depicting apples and flowers with steam-rolled squiggles, have been cloistered in the small gallery behind the reception area.

In all of these still lifes Lichtenstein was trying to hold onto the formal vocabulary and popular appeal of the comics while letting go of the comic-book image. As Mr. Helman observes, “He finally liberated his style from the cartoon and became this classical painter, which he had always been, but the style had originally lent itself to the cartoon, or the cartoon had lent itself to the style.”

“Roy Lichtenstein: Still Lifes” continues through July 30 at the Gagosian Gallery, 555 West 24th Street, Chelsea; (212) 741-1111, gagosian.com.