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Liberating Liz

ANDY WARHOL'S GAGOSIAN PRINT SHOW PUTS HUMANITY BACK IN CELEBRITY

BY JOHN DEMETRY

Chelsea's Gagosian Gallery *Liz* exhibit returns Andy Warhol and Elizabeth Taylor to the uses of the post-9/11 audience. Elizabeth Taylor's death on March 23, 2011, joined those of other popular artists who combined expressive and sexual innovation with political conviction: Katharine Hepburn, Marlon Brando, Robert Altman, James Brown, Paul Newman and Michael Jackson. It reads like the honorees of a War Dead Parade, figures who, in the enduring aftershocks of 9/11, constituted the last remnants of a shared culture (values).

These actors, directors and musicians appealed (through palpable—sensual—compassion) to the psychological and spiritual needs of the audience. Now, even the need to mourn their deaths in a communal fashion reflects the repressed trauma of 9/11 to our collective consciousness. Taylor herself gave healing comfort and articulation to fans (and a social body) rocked by the passing of her friend MJ—much of it through social media such as Twitter, continuing her legacy of moral instruction through radical cultural changes—e.g., AIDS and the Internet. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 revealed a society unmoored; 10 years later, gone are most of those figures who anchored the culture by revitalizing and commanding the expressive lexicon. It's the difference between stars and celebrities.

Warhol knew the difference.

Warhol's pop art liberates Taylor from camp and capitalism. "Blue Liz as Cleopatra" (1962) exemplifies that achievement. Etched in pencil black on acrylic blue

background, Warhol's painting isolates and repeats a frame (taken from a publicity still) from Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* (1963). It features Taylor in exotic Cleopatra regalia: ornamented African braids, hieroglyphic eye shadow, and '60s-Hollywood cleavage-revealing dress. In lesser hands, such elements might lend the image to camp simplification and derision. However, Warhol frees the image—and its complex of signifiers—from the context of advertisement, narrative and ideology. He offers it up to the viewer to share his contemplation of its beauty. Warhol also did as much with a can of Coca-Cola.

Through the figure of Taylor, however, Warhol enables the audience to focus on the movie star's meaning-making apparatus. In his series of Taylor portraits, represented here by "Silver Liz" (1963) and "Liz #6" (1963), Warhol emphasized glamour and personality through the specificity and impact of color. Among the pleasures of the underrated *Cleopatra* and of Taylor's unfairly maligned performance is the spectacle of Taylor and Richard Burton (as Mark Antony) bringing out the better in each other. Stage-trained Burton claimed to have learned from Taylor the movie actor's talent for knowing how to communicate feeling and characterization to a camera. Warhol's art gives form to Taylor's intuition.

With "Blue Liz as Cleopatra," Warhol distills Taylor's expressive intelligence to its visual essence. Shakespearean Burton must also have appreciated how Taylor utilized this skill to convey how her character's values and passions (country, cult, Caesar, Antony and son) expressed themselves in political and military strategy. Following the humanist edict of movie star responsibility, Taylor makes vivid how the personal motivations of charismatic people move history. Warhol investigates



"Silver Liz," 1963.

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form (the down-turned, off-screen eye-line angle of Taylor's pose) cutting into color (the subtle gradations in the distinctive hue of blue). Doing so, he captures the intensity of Taylor's emotional and political acuity.

Consequently, the Gagosian *Liz* retrospective remembers a now-passed political relationship to art (and pop) through Taylor's liberal humanism and Warhol's postmodern appreciation. The retrospective features Warhol's radically gendered and sexual perspective on Taylor's movie art. His "National Velvet" (1963) literally and analytically breaks down—through repetition, composition and the delicacy of film stock—the image of a triumphant young Taylor astride a horse, a girl commanding nature. Appropriating Clarence Brown's 1944 Hollywood masterpiece, Warhol makes the fleeting nature of movie memory—and its enduring inspiration—achingly tactile.

In the post-9/11 culture, however, spectators are alienated from their truest responses. Critics condition audiences to assess art (and pop) by a disastrous new criteria based on the degree to which art affirms one's political prejudices. By assembling various expressions of Warhol's personal pleasure in Taylor, *Liz* provides a forum for the post-9/11 audience to honor Taylor's legacy while mourning the loss of individual thought and our shared cultural heritage.

Liz, Sept. 16-Oct. 22, Gagosian Gallery,
522 W. 21st St., www.gagosian.com, 212-741-1717.

John Demetry chronicles his search for new stars to meet the needs of the post-9/11 audience in his book *The Community of Desire: Selected Critical Writings* (2001-2007), available at www.lulu.com.

EXHIBIT

1500 Gallery: Julio Bittencourt: "Ramos." Opens Sept. 21, 511 W. 21st St., #607, 1500gallery.com.

Madison Square Park: Mad. Sq. Art presents Alison Saar's "Feallen & Follow." Opens Sept. 22, madisonsquarepark.org.

Marlborough Gallery: Red Rooms: "New York: 1976-2011." Opens Sept. 21, 40 W. 57th St., marlboroughgallery.com.

Salmagundi Club Patrons' Gallery: "The Art of John Pierce Barnes." Opens Sept. 15, 47 5th Ave., salmagundi.org.

Thomas Erben Gallery: "Come Closer." Opens Sept. 15, 526 W. 28th St., 4th Fl., thomaserben.com.

Vileek Foundation Gallery: Nicole Awa: "Almost Undone." Opens Sept. 17, 167 E. 73rd St., vileek.org.

LAST CHANCE EXHIBITS

Minus Space: "Pointing a Telescope at the Sun." Ends Sept. 17, 98 4th St., Rm. 204 (Buzzer #28), Brooklyn, 347-525-4628, minuspace.com.

Onishi Gallery: "Wa-Ring." Ends Sept. 22. "Japanese Contemporary Crafts by Three Great Masters." Ends Sept. 22, 521 W. 26th St., 212-695-8035, onishigallery.com.