

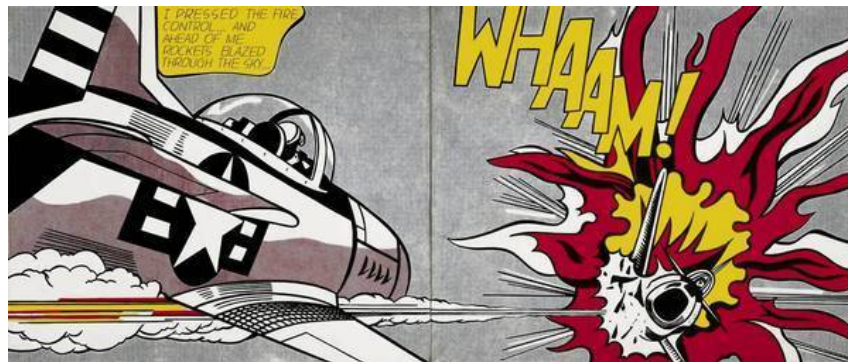
## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

# Los Angeles Times

### Art review: 'Roy Lichtenstein: A Retrospective' smashes clichés

The worthwhile 'Roy Lichtenstein: A Retrospective' at the Art Institute of Chicago deftly destroys clichés about art with humor and smarts.

By Christopher Knight



Roy Lichtenstein's "Whaam!," 1963. Magna and oil on canvas. (Art Institute of Chicago / February 28, 2012)

CHICAGO — Roy Lichtenstein's 1963 painting "Whaam!" shows an American fighter pilot shooting down an enemy aircraft in a dramatic explosion of comic-book color. Among his most familiar works, it turns up in the third room of a wonderfully revealing retrospective at the Art Institute of Chicago. But the painting looks very different than it has before — deeper, richer, more bracingly complex.

That's one sign of a worthwhile show. "Roy Lichtenstein: A Retrospective" is huge — more than 100 paintings, plus sculptures and drawings, spanning half a century. The first full survey since his death in 1997, a month before turning 74, it's studded with revelations.

"Whaam!" is a big painting, more than 13 feet wide and almost panoramic in scope. This mural format is relatively rare for portable contemporary art, except for its obvious reference to Jackson Pollock's late-1940s drip paintings. But Lichtenstein's Vietnam-era battle scene is as much an "action painting" as any Cold War Pollock was.

Abstract Expressionist art was Lichtenstein's first great subject. "Whaam!," with its cartoon splatter of red, yellow, black and white paint flung from midair, drives the point home. Like Ed

Ruscha and Andy Warhol, he used mass-media techniques to demolish art's firmly entrenched clichés.

Not the least of them was the claim that figurative painting was dead and only abstract art was serious. Pop art snickered at such hubris.

Before this show I hadn't given any thought to something that suddenly seems significant. "Whaam!" is a diptych. Two side-by-side panels are separated by an obvious split down the middle. Horizontal panoramas might have been rare, but diptychs hadn't been a big deal for 500 years.

The story Lichtenstein's painting tells is split into two scenes. On the left, a jet streaks through the heavens at a dramatic angle, firing its missile. On the right is the resulting explosion. It's like a juiced-up 15th century "Annunciation" by Fra Angelico or Rogier van der Weyden, showing the dramatic moment when the angel Gabriel flew in to tell a dumbstruck Virgin Mary some explosive news about a forthcoming nativity.

In the Middle Ages, portable religious diptychs paired iconic images for veneration. (The hinged-panel format evolved from ecclesiastical lists kept on paired tablets by local churches, the names of the living on one and the dead on the other.) "Whaam!" is a story of the mystery of life and death, rewritten for a secular age. Abstract Expressionism was Old Testament, and Pop art was New.

To assist his precision painting technique, Lichtenstein built a special easel that could rotate a canvas a full 360 degrees. Needless to say, it couldn't accommodate a 13-foot panorama. Could the diptych format of "Whaam!" merely have been a functional requirement of that contraption?

Maybe. But that wouldn't explain a 1961 Lichtenstein diptych, its panels each barely more than 2 feet wide. The subject of "Step-on Can With Leg" points toward what was to come.

It looks like any old magazine ad selling wastebaskets, this one decorated with jaunty garden flowers. On the left, a woman's shapely leg approaches the common kitchen can, the lidded variety that opens with a pedal. At the right her high-heeled foot has stepped on it, opening the lid above the flowers.

A glimpse inside the waste receptacle's indigo interior shows it to be a deep-dark void. In an idealized kitchen garden, Lichtenstein's cheeky modern Eve performs a mundane meditation on transient life and eternal interment, tossed into the trash. Mortality and the biblical fall from grace are filtered through Good Housekeeping, rather than Genesis.

This modest diptych is not entirely successful, its layers tangled. But Lichtenstein was on his way to bursting the bloated bubble that had swelled around abstract action-painting. His art marshals humor but not cheap jokes. As a wild attempt at fusing the sacred and the profane, it's got pizzazz.

Lichtenstein was a 37-year-old Rutgers art professor when he made his first Pop painting — Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse fishing off a pier. Adapted from a children's book illustration, it was anything but child's play.

A typically exuberant, bug-eyed Donald thinks he's snagged a whopper on his fishing line. Mickey, stifling a chortle, looks on with silent bemusement, since Donald is unaware that all he's really caught is his own coattail, which he's hooked behind his back.

The reigning Abstract Expressionist faith in a self that can know only its own experience, its own states of being, gets affectionately skewered. Lichtenstein rescued commercial reproduction techniques from snobby disgrace while flooding the abstract-art zone with figures.

"Look Mickey" (1961) rightly has pride of place at the show's entry. Four very busy years and three snappy rooms later, he made what I think of as his "coming out" picture. "Little Big Painting" flatly declares what he had been up to in less obvious, more circumspect ways in now-classic, then-controversial works like "Look Mickey" and "Whaam!"

The large painting shows five fat, vigorous brush strokes of paint, layered in energetic slashes across a 61/2-foot-wide canvas. The style, although meticulously painted by hand, again derives from printed comic books. (A sci-fi comic panel inspired his first awkward attempt at a brush stroke painting, which hangs nearby.) Lichtenstein used a new acrylic resin, mixed with more traditional oil paint, to get a flat, dispassionate surface wholly unlike the thick and expressive brush strokes being depicted.

The work's all-American title, "Little Big Painting," is sly but unambiguous. Think Crazy Horse shouting "Enough!" at Custer's Last Stand, a.k.a. the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Thoroughly abstract, it's also a figurative picture of an abstraction. Art about art describes Lichtenstein's entire output between 1961 and 1997.

I'm not certain that's fully embraced by the show's able curators — the Art Institute's James Rondeau and Sheena Wagstaff, formerly of London's Tate Modern, where it travels next year. (After closing Sept. 3 in Chicago, it also goes to Washington's National Gallery and Paris' Centre Pompidou.) Midway through, the largest gallery sports two dozen paintings and sculptures said to reveal Lichtenstein's interest in "art history as subject matter."

But it's hard to find any Lichtenstein that doesn't do that, from a 1962 "Golf Ball," which has a circle of black indentations that rhyme with Mondrian's pivotal "plus and minus" abstractions of the 1910s; to the exquisite "Landscape With Fog" from 1997, inspired by traditional Chinese scrolls. It's the show's final work.

The erudite Song Dynasty tradition of artistic copying is applied to an ostensibly unique, De Kooning-style gestural brush stroke, wittily meant to indicate fog. The copyist paint-slasher cuts right across the Chinese landscape, clouding any path to the scene's heroic mountaintop.

Art history subjects really just demonstrate an appropriation technique — Brancusi's "Sleeping Head," a Picasso guitar, Gilbert Stuart's George Washington, etc. Even a bunch of grapes

conjures Zeuxis, the classical Greek illusionist whose mythic painted still life was pecked at by puzzled birds.

Lichtenstein's cultured meditation on mortality reaches an apex in a powerhouse room of seven paintings of mirror surfaces. Panels of colored dots and rippled light, they reflect nothing — including us.

Figure painting being officially dead, Lichtenstein's mirrors transform a viewer into a bloodless Dracula. Absent a soul, the undead are incapable of reflection. Among his most abstract — and under-appreciated — works, the unnerving mirrors remake Abstract Expressionism's existential ache.