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Roy Lichtenstein's Destroyed Mural Briefly Resurrected at Gagosian by Original Creator

Cait Munro



Roy Lichtenstein drawing from the projection for the mural.

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© Estate of Roy Lichtenstein. Photography by Michael Abramson. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

In December 1983 at the Leo Castelli Gallery on Greene Street, Roy Lichtenstein painted a mural that remixed imagery from some of his most iconic paintings. Weeks later, the artist destroyed his creation in an act demonstrating the ephemerality of the medium. All that remains of the project are a few photographs, a blueprint, and a handful of studies.

While the work may have been intended to be lost to time, on September 10, the mural will come alive for a brief period once again to a new generation of New Yorkers thanks to former studio assistant Rob McKeever. *Greene Street Mural*—as the 2015 iteration is called—is a bold compilation of Lichtenstein's modular paintings, Art Deco inspirations, pyramids, composition books, and picture frames.

“He was moving into the city from his studio in Southampton, and I knew he needed an assistant,” McKeever, who began work in Lichtenstein's studio a few months prior to the creation of the original mural and remained with the artist until his death 14 years later in 1997, told artnet News. “When he finally hired me, [the mural] was the first job that we worked on.”

Unlike the original, which was painted by McKeever and Lichtenstein using a massive projection, the 2015 version was not produced by artists, but by commercial sign painters. “I think they wanted to make it clear that it is a copy,” McKeever said. “Roy drew out the original body himself, so for us to try to do that is not really the same thing.... We wanted to just make it a faithful reproduction.”

In the role of supervisor to the new mural, McKeever has been responsible for ensuring that the painters get the colors just right, and that “the mechanics are the same way Roy would want them to be done.”

“The stripes have to be the same way he did them, and the dots,” said McKeever. “When you’re trying to imitate his work, that’s the biggest factor.”

Lichtenstein was adamant about hand painting as much of his own work as possible. Amazingly, given how prolific he was, he only maintained one assistant in each of his studios—a far cry from some of the most successful artists today who maintain staff in the double digit

Indeed, the *Greene Street Mural* harkens back to an era of the New York art world that was simpler and grittier. McKeever recalls that, almost every day, he and Lichtenstein and whoever else they were with would lunch at the beloved, now-defunct Meatpacking District diner Florent. “That’s actually how I met Larry,” McKeever said with a laugh referring to art dealer Larry Gagosian, for whose gallery he is currently head archivist and photographer.

McKeever described Lichtenstein as “very sweet, never angry, very easy to work with.” Of course, not all of the artists he encountered during his tenure as an assistant were quite as down-to-earth.

“One of my most interesting encounters with an artist was actually before I met Roy, and it was with Andy Warhol,” McKeever recalled. “I was working for [photographer] Martha Swope at the time, and she was [doing photographs for a two-person show]...and Andy had been hired by the publicist to do a poster for it. Andy came to the gallery, and the press agent was there, and Martha had to go answer her phone. So he just stepped up, took about six or seven pictures of the two guys, and left. Never said a word to anyone.”

Roy Lichtenstein: Greene Street Mural will be on display at Gagosian Gallery at 555 West 24th Street from September 10–October 17, 2015.