

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

VANITY FAIR

You Have 38 Days to See This Lichtenstein Mural Before It's Destroyed

Max Lakin



*The original Greene Street Mural on view at Leo Castelli Gallery in 1983.
Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery.*

The life span of an art exhibit is predictable. It opens, exists for a while, and closes. The work is curated, displayed, and packed up again—unless someone throws an arm through a painting, or the whole thing is set aflame, or it simply disappears in the dead of night as if fleeing unpaid rent. Christo and Jeanne-Claude's saffron fabric panels, *The Gates*, rippled through Central Park for two weeks in 2005 before disappearing per an agreement with the city. Kara Walker's sugar fantasia held court at the Domino factory last year for a spell, then washed away for more Williamsburg condos. New York sustains art, but only for so long. The city has other things to look at.

In December of 1983, when Roy Lichtenstein painted the *Greene Street Mural*—a huge pastiche of Deco-, Pop-, and Cubist-inflected flotsam on a white wall at Leo Castelli's SoHo gallery—the idea was thoroughly a New York one: a 96-foot-long blink-and-miss-it conceit. *Greene Street Mural* was Lichtenstein's *Guernica*, except funny: a wall-size tableau of comic vocabulary running along experiments in geometric abstraction running along office supplies running along Lichtensteinian translations of Picasso himself. In one panel, a slice of Swiss cheese is painted bright primary yellow; next to it is half of a white folding chair, a black-and-white speckled composition book, a roll of toilet paper, an envelope, funnel, is that a noose?—the more you look, the more you get caught up playing Eye Spy. But within a few weeks of its conception,

faster than most New Yorkers get around to dragging their Christmas trees to the curb, Lichtenstein would paint over it and *wham!*—it was gone.

It was also a memoir of sorts, Lichtenstein, already 60, airing out past motifs that had become so indelible that they could exist freely outside their original context, or not, as if he had opened the tap to his mind and let his consciousness fill the tub for awhile.

Thirty years on, the Gagosian Gallery has decided to re-create the mural with the guidance of Lichtenstein's former studio assistant Rob McKeever, opening this week at the gallery's 24th Street outpost, along with works from the original companion exhibit, studies, and assorted documentary pieces. The replica is based on documentation from Lichtenstein's studio and photographs from Bob Adelman and Michael Abramson, two photographers who documented the original. True to the evanescent spirit of the original, (Lichtenstein said he had created it "for the pleasure of the dance") it will be painted over five weeks later.

"If you knew Roy you knew his dry sense of humor, and putting up a big piece of work that would disappear was in-line with that," says McKeever, who was 35 when he began working as Lichtenstein's assistant in his new studio on 29th Street, and remembers helping him get the studies projected on the wall and drawing them out. "He liked to put up stuff that people would see."

Mounting art of this pedigree and stamping it with an expiration date is a loaded proposition in 2015, when the questions of ownership and auction sales are even more acute than they were in the go-go 80s. For their part, Gagosian frames the replica as a "historical image."

"It becomes a retrospective mural, this kind of compendium of Roy's images and body of work," says Gagosian's Leta Grzan. "We felt it important to re-create it for a new generation."

And what would Lichtenstein say were he here, seeing something he had destroyed live again?

"I think he would like it," McKeever says with a laugh. "He liked doing things for New York."