

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

# VOGUE

### Roy Lichtenstein Goes Big at the Gagosian

Julia Felsenthal



Roy Lichtenstein in front of *Green Street Mural* © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein  
Photo: Michael Abramson / Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

“It wasn’t widely documented,” says Leta Grzan, a curator at the Gagosian Gallery, by phone. “There’s a whole generation of viewers at this point that never even *knew* about it.”

She’s referring to the centerpiece of a show that she’s just co-organized at Gagosian’s West 24th Street space in Manhattan: an 18-foot-high, 96-and-a-half-foot-long replica of a mural that the Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein created for Leo Castelli’s Greene Street gallery in December 1983, to accompany a simultaneous show of smaller-scale works nearby at Castelli’s West Broadway location.

“People have been quoted as saying that he created it as kind of a Christmas gift to Leo and his friends and the people who would be visiting the gallery during that time,” Grzan tells me. “It was a playful thing. I think that was Roy’s personality: being generous and playful.”

But it was never intended to be a permanent installation. In early 1984, six weeks after it went up, the West Broadway show came down, and with it went *Greene Street Mural*, which was covered over in drywall and eventually completely destroyed. “They finally took it down when the gallery was closing, when Leo left the space,” says Rob McKeever, one of Lichtenstein’s studio assistants, whose first task when he went to work for the artist was to help paint the mural. “I’m sure it had been nailed through many times before that. I stopped by to see what the mess was, and the painted sheetrock was being taken away to be destroyed.”

Shortly after Lichtenstein died in 1997, McKeever went to work as an archivist at Gagosian. Over the years, he says, his colleagues at the gallery, in conversation with the Lichtenstein Foundation, occasionally batted around the idea of re-creating the lost mural. Eventually, after Lichtenstein’s widow, Dorothy, gave her blessing, they went for it.

“We decided it should be a replica, not a re-creation,” McKeever explains. “We had sign painters come in to do it.” McKeever oversaw the process, double-checking that colors came out correctly, that “straight lines were done absolutely straight,” but he didn’t do any painting himself. “It’s 30 years later,” he says, laughing. “I’m not quite as up to climbing around on scaffolds as I used to be.”

The replica differs from the original in several ways: the wall at the Castelli gallery had insets and angles that aren’t present at Gagosian. The ceiling at Castelli was painted black. There were columns that ran the length of the room. “They used commercial paint,” McKeever says about the replica. “We”—Lichtenstein and his assistants—“used artist’s paints. They’re going to look different.” Certain colors didn’t come out perfectly: The blue, I’m told by Allison Smith, a director of exhibitions at the gallery, was particularly troublesome. They were able to match the value but not the finish.

These are differences that will be lost on most of us. At Gagosian, the mural takes up an entire sweeping wall of the back room. The experience of viewing it—which I did yesterday, a day ahead of the official opening tonight—is staggering. It’s monumental in scale, vibrantly colorful, and cartoonishly chaotic. The composition resembles what might happen if a tornado whipped through an office building, upending file folders and folding chairs, sending envelopes and extension cords flying.

Also on display in a separate room are small paper studies that Lichtenstein made while designing the mural, as well as schematics that map out the colors and how to apply them, and the artist’s notebooks, flipped open to reveal magazine clippings of imagery that inspired the piece. Another room reassembles the work from 1982 and 1983 that made up the West Broadway Castelli show. But most interestingly, sharing space with the mural are works by Lichtenstein that feature similar motifs—a juxtaposition that vividly illustrates the artist’s enchantment with certain forms. A looming, gigantic wedge of Swiss cheese on the back wall is mirrored in a portrait of a suited man with a block of cheese for his head that hangs on the front wall (*Portrait*, 1977). Two-dimensional yellow pyramids perfectly line up with three-dimensional doppelgängers (*Pyramid*, 1968), displayed on a table. A painting of a composition notebook (*Composition III*, 1965) appears across the room from a much larger sliver of one in the mural.

“It’s self-referential,” Grzan tells me. “It’s almost like this retrospective of Roy’s career. He uses iconic images from the ’60s and ’70s and early ’80s that he re-created in the mural. And—this is speculation because Roy’s not here to answer this question—it appears he was working through new imagery that later became series in the late ’80s and ’90s. It’s fascinating.”

Run, don’t walk, to check it out: Like its predecessor, Gagosian’s replica of *Greene Street Mural* is not long for this world. The show closes on October 17, and when it does, the mural will again be destroyed. “By contract, it’s gone again,” Smith tells me. “But there’s something great about that.”