

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

IBTIMES

Avedon Warhol: Elvis Presley meets Marilyn Monroe at Gagosian's celebrity parade

Bolaji Babafemi



Audrey Hepburn in multiple black and white exposures, New York, January 20, 1967 © The Richard Avedon Foundation

For the first time in a major exhibition, Larry Gagosian has juxtaposed the works of two giants of mid-to-late-20th century art: Richard Avedon (1923–2004) and Andy Warhol (1928–1987). And when two giants of the visual arts world collide, not only do sparks fly, words of wisdom are sprinkled all around the spectacle too.

To Warhol's immortal words: "In the future everyone will be famous for 15 minutes," please add: "Who wants the truth? That's what show business is for – to prove that it's not what you are that counts, it's what they think you are." Avedon weighs in supremely: "My camera and I, together we have the power to confer, or to take away." No wonder everyone is busy scribbling away as the kernels of wisdom from Avedon and Warhol earn their place on the walls.

All the usual suspects are here: Mao, Dollar sign, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Liza Minnelli, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Samuel Beckett, Francis Bacon and Jackie O. And the inevitable selfies. Warhol looms large in one gigantic silkscreen brooding in blue and Avedon looks dandy in different exercises in self-promotion.

Icons of the 20th century

Highlights from the exhibition include Avedon's ambitious portraits of 69 individuals at the epicentre of US politics in the 1970s, The Family, his mural of Andy Warhol and members of the Warhol Factory, and a rare portrait of Jackie O in inaugural dress. There is also a series of some of Warhol's most striking screenprint portraits, including Mao (1972), Jean-Michel Basquiat

(1984) and Liza Minnelli (1979). Conspicuous absentees are Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans and Avedon's iconic Dovima with the Elephants but there is still enough on show for culture vultures to munch on.

Cult of celebrity

Portraiture was a constantly shared focus between both artists. Avedon through the medium of photography and his distinctive gelatin-silver prints and Warhol in his trademark boldly coloured silkscreens. Together they recorded the same recognisable faces, including Marella Agnelli, Louis Armstrong, Bianca Jagger, Jacqueline Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe and Rudolf Nureyev.

The works in the exhibition, which date from the 1950s to the 1990s, centre around common themes in the two artists' work, including social and political power, mortality, and the glamour and despair of celebrity.

Both artists rose to prominence in post-war America with parallel creative outputs which sometimes overlapped. Strange then that no one has ever thought about this pairing before.

But the only fear is that one might overshadow the other; you could clearly envisage punters' gazes lingering much longer on the Warhols than the Avedons or vice versa, perhaps a dose of their own egomaniac medicine. Should you suffer this fate, just ruminate on this parting shot from Warhol: "Sometimes something can look beautiful just because it's different in some way from the other things around it."

Avedon Warhol is on until 23 April 2016 at the Gagosian Gallery, 6-24 Britannia Street, London WC1X 9JD.