shoulders hunched between a stoop and a shrug, Andy Warhol offers the camera a scar-threaded torso, seamed by stitches to resemble a piece of patched canvas. His body sag like a rag doll’s; pale flesh is offset by a shiny black leather jacket. The poet Stephen Spender unkindly called this intense portrait of Warhol soon after he had been shot in 1968 “the Ecce Homo of modern exhibitionism,” though its iconographic allusions range broadly, from a pieta and St Sebastian to Watteau’s hapless white-suited dawn Pierrot.
The photographer was Richard Avedon, and a monumental version of this image of the artist as martyr introduces a smart, glamorous exhibition, Avedon Warhol, launching next week at London’s Gagosian Gallery.

Never jettisoned before, the two make an obvious, compelling pairing. Both were born in the 1920s to immigrant parents of modest backgrounds, had star-struck childhoods through the Depression, became commercial artists in the 1950s, then evolved styles distinctly embodying how postwar America replaced religious tradition with celebrity, while also chronicling the dark underside to that glowering pageant.

No artist created fame more than Warhol, and his key insight, that celebrities are commodities like soap cans or Coca-Cola bottles, only made him more desperate to become such a product himself. That story is told in an exciting new show of some hundred privately owned, little-seen works, Andy Warhol: Works from the Whitney Collection, at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

It opens with a youthful turquoise silkscreen “Self-portrait” (1967), a profile head coolly poised yet heartbreakingly innocent and eager, and closes with a late “Fright-Wig self-portrait” (1986—also turquiose), the features transformed by age and fear into grotoqueous hollowed cheeks, this razing month, piecing stars, confrontational yet ghastly.

Standing in the two exhibitions refresh our response to an artist known so widely through mechanical reproductions — the crux of his practice — that a close-up encounter is pipitan. That is particularly so with the Hall collection’s early pieces, made as Warhol was hitting his stride: ink drawings of a repeated motif “Kerry” (1959); a first black-and-white silkscreen of a car, “Avanti!” (1962); four coloured images, spontaneous, laconomic, by terms daring, reflective, gristly, smooth, like a movie sequence, from his first commissioned silkscreen portrait, “Etel’l Scull” (1965).

“I expected to see Avedon,” Scull recalled. “Instead we went to one of those places on 42nd Street where you put a quarter in a machine and take three pictures. We kept two booths going for an hour.”

These works link with the excitement of discovering a new medium, one perfect for the times: democratic, mending high-low references, its casual imitations and manipulations echoing the advertising formats in which Warhol had honed his skills as an illustrator.

“With silkscreening, you pick a photograph, blow it up, transfer it to go onto silk, and then roll ink across it so the ink goes through the silk but not through the glue. That way you get the same image, slightly different each time,” Warhol said. “It was all so simple — quick and easy. I was thrilled with it.”

The range of examples in Oxford and London shows how inventively, ambivalently, he played the aesthetic of sameness in those years. Are the Ashmolean’s bland, beige serial portraits of Des Moines insurance executive Watson Powell, “The American Man” (1963), a homage to success and confidence, or a mockery of corporate stupidity?

From the same year, Gagosian’s shimmering, silver-painted life-size “Double Elvis” portrays a supercharged western gunslinger: does that doubled image evoke the singer’s swaying movements, celebrate male bodies touching, or interrogate American assembly-line celebrity and mythology?

Collector Andy Hall, whose foundation is based in Vermont, calls Warhol “the greatest portraitist of the century.” Portraits are the core of his collection, and they persuasively demonstrate how radical Warhol’s concept of figuration was in the early 1960s, outstripping even Gerhard Richter in his appropriation of photography, rivalling the affectless, hard-contoured portraits from that decade by David Hockney or Alex Katz.

But then — and this is where comparisons with these painters’ evolving careers emphasize the point — Warhol’s edginess disappears.

The Ashmolean’s central parade of identikit 1970s-80s portraits — pitiful mask-faces, bright red lips, violet eye shadow, soft-focus gazes of Iranian empress Farah Pahlavi, actress Pia Zadora, duty-free shopping heiress Marie-Chantal Miller, Martha de Henriquez — is garish, slapdash, without interest. Concurrent experiments answering neo-expressionism — the “Shadows” and “Irritation” series, made by pinning on canvas — are feeble.

Warhol said he wanted to be a machine: after the 1960s, his painting with rare exceptions does not survive his pessimistic insistence that mass-media repetition is the overwhelming visual experience in a banalised, information-saturated society. Warhol’s songlong, then, is not as a painter but as a conceptualist, working through the implications of the collapse of the avant-garde into social parody. Gagosian’s show neatly sets fashion photographer Avedon’s formal yet intimate approach — studio portraits on white backgrounds, isolating subjects graphically and psychologically — alongside Warhol’s aura of power and influence.

Warhol’s golden “Marily,” remote as a Byzantine icon, competes with Avedon’s 1957 portrait of the photographs, bejewelled actress, public facade down. Among Avedon’s penetrating old-age depictions — a freckled, furrowed Erna Fisch, just released from prison; a gaunt, quizzical Francis Bacon — hang Warhol’s impersonal heroes of death: silkscreens of Nazis and gagans.

Among Gagosian’s other highlights are the two uneasy collaborations between the photographer of romantic engagement and the deadpan artist: the image of wounded towns that seems to peel back Warhol’s skin, and its pendant, also from 1969, a diptych representing the members of Warhol’s Factory, loosely grouped across white space. Five stand naked, in a mannered, recumbent pose.

Warhol’s Marilyn, remote as a Byzantine icon, competes with Avedon’s portrait of the bejewelled actress.

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57 varieties of sameness

Warhol | Two UK shows display the artist’s inventive aesthetic — and his failures. By Jackie Wulfsberger

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