

Women in Pop Art

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Art 6

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July 24, 2009

Art movements and art culture are known to be inspired and very likely represent the feelings and views of the artists and society. The 1960s was no exception. After the victory of the Second World War, the American lifestyle and the American way were pushed into high gear through an abundance of advertisement through television, radio and billboards. Popular culture itself was a changing culture. The social changes being demanded by the public included the fight for women's and minority's equal rights, the battle to end social and economical injustices and the endless efforts to cease racial discrimination (Marzona 26). These social ideologies were almost part of everyday life in the 1960s. The art culture just like the social movements demanded to be liberated. Artist wanted to be released from the guidelines established by self proclaimed art critics such as Clement Greenberg. The artist of the 1960s detached themselves from the idea that art was for the high culture society and wanted to make it available for the mass culture (Marzona 25). With this idea in mind, Pop Art was developed. This type of art took the ordinary, the everyday type of objects, the advertisement that surrounded society in those days and turned it into art. The mass produced imagery of advertisement and consumer goods that were once classified as "kitsch" – or tasteless trash, were now the very form of expression of the Pop Art movement.

Detaching itself from the Abstract Expressionist movement that preceded it, according to Steven Henry Maddoff author of Pop Art – A Critical History, Pop Art "...wasn't fazed by the pictures of Pollock and de Kooning, all densely packed and psychologically charged. In fact, this new art did not seem to advertize anything in the least bit worried...a world of plain and sharply colored objects of Brillo boxes and

billboards...” Pop Art took the youthful of the times and represented it with “ready-made” articles. Richard Hamilton a member of the Independent Group of young artists who in 1952 began discussing through lectures the avant-garde artistic movement of Pop Art said that Pop Art “represented the sexy, the witty, the glamorous and the big business.”

The creativity of Pop Art was much diversified, however it was a very well male dominated territory (Madoff 18). Very few women were typically recognized as Pop Artist. Although not widely accepted Marisol Escobar (known just as “Marisol”), was one of the few women artist whose works were exhibited in Pop Art shows in the 1960s (Madoff 19). An example of her work is her sculpture of *Playboy* magazine empire owner Hugh Hefner titled Hugh Hefner 1967. This polychrome wood sculpture, measures 73x 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 78. She uses a Pop icon, and uses him to represent the glamour, the sexuality, and the voyeurism that *Playboy* magazine represented to the culture. Hefner himself, as an icon of the American Dream, is a representation of “big business” (McCarthy 49). The bright red used on Hefner’s jacket and the bright blue background are very intense. His face is sketch like with a sensuous carved nose that extends out of the wooden surface, along with his famous tobacco pipe.

Marisol’s Love 1962, is also a good example of Pop Art. Love, is a half white plaster head whose nose points upwards. Inserted in its mouth is a bottle of Coke. Coca Cola is a classic example of an American icon. The way the bottle is inserted in the mouth of the eye-less half head sculpture, could be a representation of how society

blindly takes in or “drinks” the pop culture and by what the title suggest, society loves it.

Niki de Saint Phalle, although not necessarily labeled a Pop artist, was a very prominent and influential artist in this era. Niki de Saint Phalle was notorious for her avid creation of sculptures made out of chicken wire frames, lined with fabric and yarn. She named these sculptures “Nanas.” The Nanas are voluptuous women’s bodies, usually very large in size (Chadwick 337). They are beautifully decorated with bright colors and images of items ranging from hearts to flowers to different patterns. In 1966 Saint Phalle created a monument to the woman’s body. She titled this eighty two feet long masterpiece Hon. According to Whitney Chadwick author of Women, Art and Society, “the viewers could enter Hon through the vagina opening and walk through it finding themselves in a female body, amusement park, shelter and pleasure palace.” Saint Phalle’s Hon took the woman’s body and turned it into something more than just an object of sexuality. The woman’s body became a playground of the senses. With a milk bar fixated in one of the breast and a film starting Greta Garbo, a Pop icon of the silent film years, the female body was viewed as a comfortable place, where all life begins (Chadwick 337).

Rosalyn Drexler has been recognized as an innovative artist in the Pop Art era. She introduced proto-feminist critique of mass media images. Her paintings such as Love and Violence 1964 use film noir and tabloid reporting as sources (Francis 131). Drexler’s painting continuously portrayed women as subjects of abuse and submission. She was not trying to glorify these ideas. On the contrary, she may have been trying to

build social conscience about the forced submission that women had typically experienced in many films and television. Her painting technique began initially by cutting from different sources and pasting the images to the canvas. She would then paint over them with only primary and secondary colors (Francis 131). Her paintings may have been intended to be eye openers for the general public to the mass media produced violence against women that society was subjected to.

In the 1960s, black artists were representing the social and cultural differences between “the American dream and the black reality” (Chadwick 342). Even though ideologically America was a free country in which its citizens were constitutionally given the rights to life, liberty and property, the struggle for equal rights was an uprising battle. Artists like Elizabeth Catlett used their art to portray themes of unity, equal rights, and civil rights. Her works emotionally involve the viewer, and she deeply believed in the idea of reaching the masses through visual arts (Wye 218). Her linoleum cut composition of Malcolm X Speaks for Us 1969 commemorates black leader Malcolm X and his demand for social equality. Betye Saar created The Liberation of Aunt Jemima 1972. A sculpture in a box in which Saar takes the stereotypical images of blacks often used in white culture and Pop Art culture. Saar takes the commonly used stereotypical images of a black woman, such as the big lips, voluptuous body, head band, aloof expression, her body anchored to household cleaning tools and white baby in hand. The inside of this box is lined with a mirror. The reflection of the pancake box character reflecting on the mirror asking the viewer if this is a reflection of what we see black women as.

The study of Pop Art as a liberation movement was very interesting. It became clear after browsing through endless pictures of Andy Warhol, James Rosenquist and Peter Blake images that this movement was pretty obviously male dominated. Many women artist in this era were avant-guard artist which didn't necessarily fall into the plains of Pop Art or Minimalism movements of the times. Regardless of what movement Niki de Saint Phalle, Marisol or Catlett may fall into, their art is undeniably socially conscientious and represent the 1960s its liberation ideals, and the everyday life and politically charged movements of that era.

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