

Sheila Finnigan's Ambivalent Tribute to the King of Pop

In the early 1970s, as one of the original contributing editors of Andy Warhol's then fledgling magazine *Interview*, I spent time in Andy's company at The Factory and various restaurants and parties, but I can't claim that I really knew him; nor have I ever known anyone who honestly could.

I knew that he was an inveterate gossip, a master manipulator, and a man who did not like to part with money (which made working with him kind of dicey, at times). But as close as Andy ever came to candor was when, as we chatted casually about art over lunch at Brownie's health food restaurant one afternoon, he referred to de Kooning and the other Abstract Expressionists, almost wistfully, as "real artists who paint." This I took to be rather telling, a confession that he considered their work somehow more authentic than his own.

Sheila Finnigan, a real artist from Chicago who paints, never met Andy Warhol. Yet Finnigan put a unique spin on Warhol's public persona in her recent solo show "One-Stop POP!" at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea.

Finnigan, who has exhibited widely in venues ranging from the Chicago Arts Club, to the Hunter Museum of American Art Center, in Chattanooga, Tennessee, to ABC No Rio, in New York, likes to say that she "picked up the gauntlet from the German Expressionists." And, indeed, her work has inherited some of their fierce emotiveness and frenzied brushwork, as well as some of the nutty vernacular qualities of fellow Chicagoans like June Leaf and the Hairy Who School.

Finnigan's innovation, however, is that she merges painting with installation in a peculiarly organic manner, turning the gallery into a total environment where one encounters a delightfully skewed view of the Warhol phenomenon—a kind of Andyland Amusement Arcade replete with a game called "Andy Marbleous" (played with marbles, naturally), Andy t-shirts dangling from a clothesline, an old fashioned washtub that plays fellow Pop icon John Lennon's "Imagine" when you crank its handle and sundry other attractions that reference Andy's odd juxtaposition of the campy and the banal.

The installation piece that struck a personal chord, reminding me of a surreal dinner that my wife and I attended with Andy and his entourage of Superstars, society folk and dragqueens at the Algonquin Hotel, was punningly called "Andy's Last Souper." It consisted of a large picnic table littered with



"Homage (after David's 'Death of Marat')" 48" x 60"

empty Campbell's Soup cans, party balloons with the word "Pop" painted on them, and dinner plates splashed stridently with a red hue that resembled both tomato soup and blood. The latter touch seemed especially apt in terms of the social vampirism that Andy trafficked in, as he trotted his traveling circus of transvestites and other flaming creatures into the drawing rooms of the rich and famous, trawling for portrait commissions.

There was also a companion painting of the same title, featuring thirteen Andys seated at a long table before thirteen bowls of Campbell's tomato soup painted the same visceral shade of scarlet. Here, instead of party balloons there were comicstrip speech balloons containing characteristically Andyish monosyllabic utterances such as "What?", "Oh," and "Nothing."

The identical figures seemed to reference Warholian repetitiveness, aping mass production. However, Finnigan did not appropriate the garish dayglo-like colors that we normally associate with Warhol paintings. Rather, her own distinctive palette of black, white, and red lent the image a more grisly Goya-esque mood. These were ghostly Andys, even paler than he was in life, their granny glasses black as the sockets in skulls.

Just as powerfully ghastly was another work, combining a large canvas with an

installation, called "Homage (After David's 'Death of Marat')". The painting showed Andy slumped like the Raggedy Ann doll's boyfriend Raggedy Andy (a character he actually resembled with his dilly dally languidness and wig of silvery straw) on a wheelbarrow, about to be "wheeled offstage," as the saying goes. He wore a glittering shroud—symbolizing, perhaps, all the glitz of his public persona and career—and clutched a red-dripping brush in one lifeless but presumably rigor mortised hand, below which an equally bloody knife suggested both the surgical incompetence that caused his demise and the back-stabbing social milieu in which he thrived. Near the painting, a real wheelbarrow stood, draped with a real sequined shroud and real sunglasses.

Like the other paintings and objects in Finnigan's brilliant exhibition, "Homage" was an ambivalent tribute to a subversive genius who became an artistic icon by dealing "real painting" an almost fatal Oedipal blow. The good news is that real painting survived Andy, and that Sheila Finnigan is around not only to exemplify it but to tell the tale.

—Ed McCormack

GALLERY&STUDIO

An International Art Journal

PUBLISHED BY

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SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2004