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Roll Over, Warhol: Taking the ’60s Beyond Pop Art

A thrillingly revisionist history of the era at the Whitney Museum uncovers a current of art that sprang from eros and the uncensored minds of R. Crumb, Martha Edelheit and others.

By Deborah Solomon
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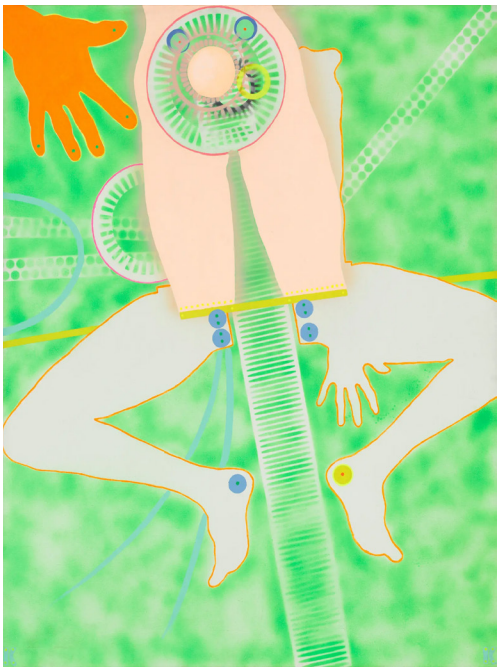


Kiki Kogelnik’s “Gee Baby - I’m Sorry” (1965), part of “Sixties Surreal,” at the Whitney Museum of American Art. It was named for a 1964 hit song and reveals her preoccupation for the female body in space.

The 1960s was one of the most visually distinct decades in history, and you don’t have to be a specialist to look at a photograph from that era and guess the approximate date. Everything seemed to break with the past, from Freedom Marches and antiwar protests to bell-bottoms and miniskirts, which allowed women to bare their knees in polite society for the first time.

Yet, curiously, the art that became emblematic of the ’60s did not reflect the social unrest of the era. Pop Art rose to icy peaks of impersonality and cool. There was no way to read an Andy Warhol painting of a Campbell’s soup can as a critique of the Vietnam War. By the end of the decade, Conceptualism and Minimalism, as exemplified by Sol

Lewitt's modular white cubes or Donald Judd's gleaming rectangles, emptied art of any hint of the jangly dramas of everyday life.

But what if there was a missing layer, a lost generation of artists whose work ran hot-to-feverish in temperature and was driven by a Whitmanesque love of the human body and its longings? This is the question raised with appropriate hippie optimism in "Sixties Surreal," an ambitiously revisionist exhibition opening on Sept. 24 at the Whitney Museum of American Art. It brings together about 150 works by 111 painters, sculptors, photographers, collagists, cartoonists, junk assemblage-ists, and at least one Kabballah-ist, most of whom were pushed to the sidelines of the '60s art scene for various unkind reasons. Some simply lived in "the wrong" cities — i.e., lands west of the Hudson River — and were dismissed by New York gallerists as local yokels, while others found their art careers stymied when they took up public struggles against sexism, segregation or homophobia.

Christina Ramberg, "Shadow Panel," 1972. The artist's work evokes a pre-feminist world in which women were saddled with constraints.

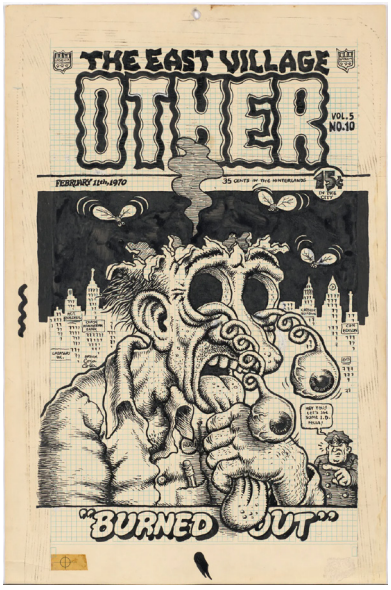
That promises to make "Sixties Surreal" a socially relevant and ethically concerned exhibition. Many of its artists, such as Jack Whitten, the Alabama-born abstract painter who described his grittily physical canvases as an antidote against racism, have been justly rehabilitated in the past few years. On the other hand, the show is probably controversy-proof, not only because the art on view is roughly 60 years old, but also because it comes wrapped in a narrow theory. It argues that the '60s counterculture was an outgrowth of Surrealism, the historic Freud-shaped movement that emerged in Paris in 1924 and gave us Salvador Dalí's melting watches, René Magritte's bowler-hatted men, and a generation of artists who sought to represent the less rational realms of the brain.

Which is not to say that "Sixties Surreal" tumbles back in time to Europe before World War II. Rather, the show's title refers to lowercase surrealism — to the uncensored, often psychosexual paintings and sculptures that thwacked conventional standards of beauty in this country in postwar America.

"Weird for me is Donald Judd, who made art about spatial relationships and geometric objects," Dan Nadel, one of the show's four curators, said recently, taking a jab at mainstream taste. "Weird for me is not Christina Ramberg, who made art about having a body and an interior life."

Ramberg (1946-1995), an under-known painter from Chicago, specialized in intimate paintings of retro hairdos and tight corsets, of female flesh pressed flat against muted backgrounds. Her work evokes a pre-feminist world in which women were saddled with constraints. She has lately gained new visibility on the East Coast as part of a gifted contingent of figurative painters from Chicago known as the Chicago Imagists; they also include Jim Nutt, Gladys Nillson and Suellen Rocca, of the piquantly named Hairy Who.

Their presence in the Whitney exhibition reveals the rising influence of Nadel, the museum's new curator of drawings and prints. A 49-year-old scholar of alternative art movements that owe as much to the legacy of Matisse as to Mad Magazine, he wrote the first group history of the Hairy Who in 2003. Last spring, he published a much-acclaimed biography of R. Crumb,



R. Crumb's "Burned Out," appeared as the cover for the underground newspaper "The East Village Other," in 1970

the randy cartoonist who urged the readers of Zap Comix to "Keep on Truckin.'" The slogan, along with an accompanying drawing of hipsters with rubbery legs and humongous shoes strutting through cities, became an icon of the '60s counterculture, a development that Crumb has described as "the curse of my life."

At the Whitney, Crumb, now 81, will be represented by two works that straddle the Grand Canyon-like divide between virtuoso drawings and commercially printed memorabilia from a decade that produced a deluge of zines and psychedelic posters. "We wanted to push against certain edges," Scott Rothkopf, the Whitney's director, and one of the curators of the show, said of Crumb's inclusion.

"But ultimately, we wanted to keep to artists working within an art discourse," Rothkopf added, rather than just show every Jefferson Airplane album cover.

ROTHKOPF WAS SEATED in the museum's seventh-floor conference room with Laura Phipps,

an associate curator who had prepared a PowerPoint presentation. Looking at her laptop screen, I noted a startling image. At the entry to the show, in a gallery painted road-sign orange, viewers will be greeted by the craggy, humped silhouettes of three camels. “Camels are naturally occurring Surrealist objects,” Phipps observed.

Nancy Graves’s “Camel VI,” “Camel VII” and “Camel VIII,” 1968-1969, were seen as a radical assault on Minimalist sculpture when they first were exhibited in 1969.

The artworks, titled “Camel VI,” “Camel VII” and “Camel VIII,” are by Nancy Graves (1939-1995), who made them when she was still in her 20s and married to the formidable sculptor Richard Serra; her supporters claimed she was later excised from his biography. She and Serra were both post-Minimalists, but her camels, with their bulges and mangy hair, are the opposite of his virile walls of Cor-Ten steel. He found a way forward through industrial materials, whereas she looked to nature, and her camels, which she stuffed with foam and covered with patches of actual skin (sheep and goat skin only), replace the chill of abstraction with a monument to animal warmth.

The three camels were first exhibited at the Whitney in 1969, and were soon acquired by the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, which is returning them to New York for the show. In this regard, “Sixties Surreal” might seem like a mea culpa on the part of the Whitney, an attempt to apologize for and repair the many reputations (that of Graves included) that have fizzled some over the years. If “Sixties Surreal” highlights artists who have been excluded from the triumphal narrative of postwar art, wasn’t it the Whitney that wrote the narrative in the first place?

Faced with this question, Elisabeth Sussman, a veteran Whitney curator, now 84, replied in the negative. She said that she felt accountable only for the reputations she had nurtured, such as those of Eva Hesse and Diane Arbus, both of whom have works in the upcoming show. “I like artists who are complicated,” she said, “and maybe had a bit of shyness to them.”

She mentioned that she had never worked on a Warhol show and had little regard for his work. I asked her why she thought Warhol came to loom so large on the ’60s scene. “I want to say Leo Castelli,” she replied. “His artists became something else.”

The four curators of "Sixties Surreal," standing in a storage room at the Whitney Museum, left to right: Scott Rothkopf, director of the Whitney; Laura Phipps, associate curator; Dan Nadel, curator of drawings and prints; and Elisabeth Sussman, with Peter Saul's painting "Saigon" (1967).

She was referring to the legendary art dealer who, together with his first wife, Ileana Sonnabend, fervently pursued the new. The couple was certainly influential, although few would attribute the success of an art star purely to economic factors. It's artists, after all, who make the objects.

Rothkopf, who does not share Sussman's feelings about Warhol, decided at the 11th hour — after the sizable catalog for "Sixties Surreal" had gone to press — to add a Warhol to the show. He selected "Marilyn" (1967), a darkly glittering, black-hued silk-screen of the actress. He also added Jasper Johns's "Flags" (1965), a much-loved painting that appeared in the artist's Whitney retrospective four autumns ago. "We want to build bridges of recognizable figures," Rothkopf said, explaining that the general public was more likely to see a group show at the Whitney if at least a few names were familiar.

OF THE 111 ARTISTS in the show, 47 are women — an impressive number, even if most of them are no longer around to savor the recognition. On a recent afternoon, I visited the studio of Martha Edelheit, a little-known, twice-widowed Manhattanite, now 94, who is about to make her Whitney debut. Dressed in a hot-pink T-shirt and jeans, she cheerfully recounted the ordeals of her career. A figurative painter when abstract art was in vogue, she sinned by

Martha Edelheit, 94, in her Manhattan studio with a work in progress. She will be making her Whitney debut.

rendering “the things I saw in front of me,” as she says, referring to the human body. She was part of a generation of proto-feminists who painted explicit nudes.

In 1965, she recalled, she had a show at the Byron Gallery in Manhattan. The New York Times critic John Canaday came in to look, only to politely explain to the gallery owner that he couldn’t review “that obscene woman.”

By today’s standards, the paintings that Canaday saw, including “Flesh Wall With Table” (1965) — which will be one of the largest works in the Whitney show — seem lushly decorative. Stretching 16 feet wide, across three panels, the painting is set indoors, in the artist’s studio, and embeds a group of female nudes in the space surrounding her drawing table. Languid bodies sprawl from edge to edge of the canvas, snoozing comfortably, their flesh graced with a rainbow of color that progresses from delicate ivories and pinks to dense ceruleans and purples.

Asked if she was glad to be tapped for the Whitney show, Edelheit exclaimed: “I don’t know why I was asked to be in it. The title of the show bewildered me because I don’t think of anything I do as Surreal. My dialogue has always been with Titian and Rubens.” She was referring to two old masters celebrated for capturing the dewy sensuality of flesh.

I reminded her that the show’s title, somewhat confusingly, refers less to the Surrealist movement than to a general embrace of psychosexual imagery in American art. Some viewers will invariably be disappointed to arrive at the Whitney and find nothing by Dalí or Magritte,

Edelheit’s three-paneled, 16-feet-wide “Flesh Wall With Table” (1965). The work is set in the artist’s studio, and embeds a group of nudes in the space surrounding her drawing table.

who were still alive in the 1960s, or by their best-known American acolytes, such as Joseph Cornell, who made poetic shadow boxes, and William Copley, a pioneer of sexy cartoon-based figuration.

But European Surrealism had its limitations, one of which was its cliquishness. Despite the existence of many outstanding female Surrealists, André Breton, the poet and so-called pope of the movement, was fond of arranging group photographs that featured male artists only, wearing ties and jackets and looking as somber as physics professors.

The Whitney show, by contrast, is admirably inclusive. If not quite a Be-In, to borrow a ’60s phrase, it seems likely to be a see-in.