

# Art in America

## RECONFIGURING POP

By Saul Ostrow



Marjorie Strider: *Green Triptych*, 1963, acrylic paint and laminated pine on Masonite, 72 by 105 inches.  
Collection Michael T. Chutko.

"Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists 1958-1968" is the rare show that encourages you to rethink an entire period. Curated by Sid Sachs of the Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery at University of the Arts in Philadelphia, where it premiered last winter, it is billed as the first-ever all-woman survey of Pop art. Affording us the opportunity to rediscover artists and see unfamiliar work, the show revisits the origins of Pop art and the influence wielded by popular culture internationally during the decade in question.<sup>1</sup> In subject matter, content and esthetics, the work on view departs in surprising and significant ways from what one might expect of Pop art, and in so doing challenges much received wisdom about the movement.

In the early '60s, the term "Pop" was generally applied to art that depicted mundane objects or banal commercial products, and whose imagery and style referenced advertising or graphic design. Pop's defining exhibitions—"New Painting of Common Objects," curated by Walter Hopps at the Pasadena Art Museum; "The New Realists," at Sidney Janis Gallery in New York (both 1962); and "Six Painters and the Object," organized by Lawrence Alloway at the Guggenheim Museum (1963)—were all-male affairs (though Marisol was included in the Janis show). Sachs reminds us that there is much more to Pop—to its artistic sources and objectives—than the critical and art historical canon would lead us to believe. Ideas about Pop art, right down to the roster of its principal proponents, have rarely strayed far from those set forth in Lucy R. Lippard's 1966 book *Pop Art*.

"Seductive Subversion" includes not only underknown Pop artists but also artists who are not typically identified with the movement. Marisol and Niki de Saint Phalle, both well

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known and associated with mainstream Pop, are present, but so is the Greek-born artist Chryssa, who is now fairly obscure but had a solo exhibition at the Guggenheim in 1961, when she was in her late 20s. (Having begun as a painter, she did pioneering work in neon in the '60s and '70s.) Other familiar figures in the exhibition are Yayoi Kusama, Martha Rosler, Vija Celmins and Faith Ringgold, who, while they are not identified with Pop today, were considered Pop-ish during the decade covered. Still others were (and are) better known abroad than in the U.S.: the Briton Pauline Boty (1938-1966), who was also an occasional model and actress of stage, film and TV; Jann Haworth, an American who participated in the British Pop art movement; the Swede Barbro Östlihn (1930-1995), who had a retrospective at the Art Museum of Norrköping in 2003; and, from Belgium, Evelyne Axell (1935-1972), a TV presenter, actress and scriptwriter turned artist.

The catalogue does a good job of documenting the systematic exclusions these artists experienced. They were treated as second-class citizens in the male-dominated art world of the period, and their work continues to be overlooked in most surveys of Pop. Yet neither the catalogue nor exhibition constitutes a feminist grudge-fest. While the timeframe covered coincides with the emergence of second-wave feminism, much of the work in "Seductive Subversion" seems at first to replicate the objectification of women, along with prevailing views of the feminine and domestic. As Sachs points out, the era's gender divisions, both in the domestic and public spheres, permeated the artistic and personal lives of the women surveyed. Nonetheless, we find in the representation of these themes an implicit proto-feminist attitude-though sometimes the work is more overt, as in the case of 10 photomontages by Martha Rosler focusing on what one might think of as the politicization of feminine domestic servitude and decorum. The women in Rosler's collages may go about doing their chores, sometimes in homes decorated with posters by famous Pop artists, but the world impinges in places as images of war taken from newspapers occupy windows or picture frames.

Helpfully, given the unfamiliar terrain covered, the catalogue is less a document of the exhibition than a stand-alone book [not yet issued as *A.i.A.* goes to press]. It provides information on the lives and careers of women artists identified with Pop and furnishes a context for both the period and the show. Essays by Sachs, Rosler, Linda Nochlin and Kalliopi Minioudaki address the issue of feminism, while individual case studies of some of the artists are supplied by Bradford Collins (on Rosalyn Drexler), Annika Ohrner (on Östlihn) and Sue Tate (on Boty and other women artists associated with British Pop). Patty Mucha gives a first-person account of her years of marriage to Claes Oldenburg during the beginnings of Pop; it was she who fabricated his early soft sculptures. (The essay is a reprint of an article first published in *A.i.A.*, Nov. '02.)

While this might seem petty, I find the title "Seductive Subversion" misleading, tinged more with chauvinism than irony. The term "seduction" can imply what were once considered feminine wiles-guile, coyness and even deceit.

The work in the show is, if anything, antithetical to seduction in this sense. In fact, the exhibition lives up to its original working title, "Beyond the Surface: Women and Pop Art, 1958-1968," which is now the title of Sachs's catalogue essay-a response to the famous comment by Warhol that if you want to know all about him or his work, all you need to do is look at the surface. Sachs's efforts, by contrast, go well beyond a superficial reading of the

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movement. The artists in "Seductive Subversion" employ Pop motifs and styles, but they do not adopt the cool industrial look normally associated with Pop. Nor do they emphasize product labels and logos, or the esthetics of mass reproduction. While social and cultural commentary might arise in art using commercial techniques, formats and styles, the established artists here often turned to more hand-made means to convey their messages. They also make little or no reference to celebrities, glamour, glitz or kitsch (though Joyce Wieland does incorporate into her 1964 construction *Young Woman's Blues* a cheap dime-store Valentine's Day heart and a plastic model of a jet plane). Sachs's account embraces Pop's sources in craft, folk art, gendered imagery (particularly the representation of women's bodies) and individual experience as well as other contemporary art. All combine to give expression to highly personal approaches and points of view.

In his seven years researching the show, Sachs culled a list of 65 names from periodicals, exhibition catalogues and checklists, books and articles. He also had conversations with artists Idelle Weber, Drexler, Marjorie Strider, Minioudaki, Östlihn and many others. Not all the artists whom Sachs uncovered are included in the exhibition. He hunted down works in storage facilities of museums and collectors, and in the holdings of inactive estates (nearly half the artists are deceased). Sometimes the works were in a state of disrepair; Dorothy Grebenak's woolen hooked rug *Tide Box* (1964) had fallen apart and had to be replicated for the show (by fiber artist Emily Peters). The sole surviving example of Laura Grisi's illuminated Plexiglas reliefs and boxes, owned by a German museum, is too fragile to travel. Only a small etching of a crossword puzzle (1964) by the late Letty Eisenhauer, originally an edition of 60, could be located; she had lost nearly the entirety of her oeuvre in recent years to floods. And some of the artists have actually gone missing: Sachs could find neither Gloria Graves nor any of her works. Not all the explanations of exclusions or near-exclusions are so bleak, however. Lee Lozano (who is represented by a single drawing on graph paper from 1958) and Haworth, for example, were the subjects of retrospectives at the time Sachs was organizing this exhibition; therefore key works by them were not available. "Seductive Subversion" (which in Philadelphia consisted of 56 works by 21 artists<sup>2</sup>) is obviously not comprehensive. Yet, while artists are often unevenly (though intriguingly) represented, the show as a whole gives us a compelling view of works that have long been unseen-if they were ever seen in the first place.

In its bold, aggressive imagery and grand scale-sometimes billboard-size-the work of Lichtenstein, Dine, Rosenquist, Rauschenberg et al. has often been characterized as the last bastion of the heroism and masculinity of Abstract Expressionism. Such traits are absent in "Seductive Subversion," though the women here were certainly not alone in presenting an alternative. They remind me of some male artists at times associated with Pop-though not among the defining stars-who similarly lacked a critical link to Ab-Ex: Joe Brainard, Allan d'Arcangelo, Alex Hay, Joe Goode, Alex Katz, Öyvind Fahlström, Wayne Thiebaud and John Wesley, among others. These artists also drew upon elements of popular culture (comics as well as mass-produced and common objects), but their work-by turns minimal, personal, conceptual or formalist-never entered the canon of Pop art as narrowly defined.

Of course there are parallels between the women artists and their better-known male counterparts. Chryssa created a number of Warhol-like works, such as her painted grids of repeating images (*Car Tires*, 1962) or newspaper advertisements (*Newspaper II*, 1961), and a Johns-like plaster relief of letterpress type (*Unmailed Letter*, 1960). Grebenak appropriated imagery from other Pop artists (Warhol and Lichtenstein), which she turned Ostrow, Saul. "Reconfiguring Pop," *Art in America*, September 1, 2010.

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into rugs. In so doing, she appears to have been less concerned with popular imagery per se than with addressing the difference between those artists' paintings (high art) and her own craft, which played with the idea of hobbyism. Other works, like her rugs depicting Bugatti cars (ca. 1964), had more personal associations; her dealer, Allan Stone, collected them. Marisol likewise incorporated elements of craft, though of the folk art variety. Her wooden sculpture *John Wayne* (1962-63) shows the cowboy star, gun drawn, astride a horse going at cartoonish full gallop (all four legs extending out from its body). Given its strong horizontal and vertical axes and pronounced silhouette, it is reminiscent of a whirligig or weathervane. (The work was commissioned to appear in a special issue of *Life* magazine devoted to film.)

Marisol's approach, in turn, is radically different from that of Drexler, whose works are more formalist. Drexler isolates her figures (pop singers, film characters and other subjects) within flat, geometric grounds. An example is *Twist Around the Clock* (1964), in which the figures of Chubby Checker and dancing couples were adapted from a poster for the eponymous film. Earlier, more collagelike paintings by Drexler similarly appropriated stereotypical imagery from film posters advertising damsel-in-distress movies, but in those she rearranged the elements to make the results more expressionistic (*King Kong aka The Dream*, 1963). Of a very different order are the mimetic paintings of Celmins and **Kay Kurt**, who rendered such objects as a pencil (Celmins) and a box of chocolates (**Kurt**) as deadpan as possible, strategically positioning their work in line with both the objectivity of Minimalism and the banality of Pop.

Sometimes mixed messages arise from combining socio-cultural critique and formalist esthetics. Strider's paintings of bathing beauties-kittenish, Colgate-smile, bikini-clad girls (*Green Triptych*, 1963)-differ decidedly from similar works by such male counterparts as Lichtenstein, Tom Wesselmann, and the British artists Gerald Laing and Tom Phillips. Executing their breasts and buttocks in relief, Strider not only metaphorically but physically objectifies them. A woman's appeal, she seems to say, is reducible to her protuberances; in accordance, she punningly "shapes" her canvases. Building masculine fantasy into her imagery, Strider at the same time transgresses the dictums of flatness associated with formalist and Minimalist hard-edge abstract painting, which were Pop's main competitors for critical attention at the time. Another approach to sexual appeal may be found in the work of Alina Szapocznikow (Polish/French), who is represented here by *Stele* (1968), a gothic-looking, surrealist-tinged, predominantly black polyester and urethane sculpture that at first appears to represent a shrouded, kneeling female figure with exposed breasts. On closer inspection one realizes that the breasts are actually knees, as the sculptor turns the erotic into the grotesque.

Despite many differences among the works in the exhibition, a general theme that runs throughout is a critique of the emotional conformity and anonymity of Cold War society. Searching for a means of formulating a fresh, more effective representation of seismic shifts in their world, the artists turned to discrete objects, cheap goods, readymades, shiny plastic and enamel surfaces, and commercial design to better convey the sense of dislocation they were experiencing. The works in this show are devoid of tired humanistic tropes, from Boty's painterly combinations of disparate personal and public images (*With Love to Jean Paul Belmondo*, 1962) to Axell's glossy, Pop-psychedelic paintings in enamel on Plexiglas (*Campus*, 1970); Drexler's cinema-derived practice (*Home Movies*, 1963); Mara McAfee's deliberately mannered references to fashion illustration (*Marvelous Modern Mechanical Men*, 1963); Weber's stark graphics (*Munchkins I, II & III*, 1964); and May Wilson's faux-

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documentary "Ridiculous Portrait" collages. Far more than a simple rediscovery of women Pop artists, this exhibition offers us unexpected insight into the artistic challenges, issues and ambitions that arose in a period of radical change.

1 The exhibition will vary slightly from venue to venue.

2 Evelyne Axell, Pauline Boty, Vija Celmins, Chryssa, Niki de Saint Phalle, Rosalyn Drexler, Letty Eisenhauer, Dorothy Grebenak, Kay Kurt, Yayoi Kusama, Lee Lozano, Marisol, Mara McAfee, Barbro Östlihn, Faith Ringgold, Martha Rosler, Marjorie Strider, Alina Szapocznikow, Idelle Weber, Joyce Wieland and May Wilson.

"Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists 1958-1968" opened at the Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery, University of the Arts, Philadelphia [Jan. 22-Mar. 15]. Currently on view at the Sheldon Museum of Art, Lincoln, Neb. [through Sept. 26], it travels to the Brooklyn Museum [Oct. 15, 2010-Jan. 9, 2011] and Tufts University Art Gallery, Medford, Mass. [Jan. 20-Apr. 3, 2011].

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**Currently On View "Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists 1958-1968," at the Sheldon Museum of Art, Lincoln, Neb., through Sept. 26, and opening at the Brooklyn Museum Oct. 15.**

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