



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

## Wham! The World Takes On American Pop

PHILADELPHIA — “Remember how insane the 1960s felt, every day?” someone asked me at a preview of the traveling exhibition “International Pop,” which is making its final stop here at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Absolutely I remember, and the show — brash, manic and acid-tinged — took me right back there.

Maybe because the name sounds snappy, Pop Art has a reputation for being light and bright, and some of it is: Roy Lichtenstein’s lark comic-strip outtakes, Andy Warhol’s “Silver Clouds.” But a lot of its images are grim: electric chairs, police dogs, fighter planes, body parts. Under Pop’s sleek veneer lay traces of the social and political pathogens that made the ’60s in America so jumpy. From day to day

**International Pop** Tadanori Yokoo’s “Kiss Kiss Kiss,” from 1964, in this show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

you never knew what disaster you’d wake up to.

Less familiar is Pop’s status internationally. And it did get around. It flourished, sometimes under other names, in Britain, France and Germany. It

cropped up, at once embraced and mistrusted, in Argentina and Brazil, countries under the thumb of dictatorships; and in an Eastern Europe penned in by Soviet Communism; and in Japan, where memories of Hiroshima and the material rewards of Western occupation made for intensely conflicted art.

Introducing the histories of these far-flung versions of Pop is what the

show — originally organized at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis by Darsie Alexander and Bartholomew Ryan, and in Philadelphia by Erica F. Battle — is primarily, and most interestingly, about. And that telling of those stories produces one visual surprise after another. For every classic, textbook item — a Jasper Johns flag painting, a Warhol Brillo box — there are

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SLIP IT TO ME

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dozens you've never laid eyes on. Collectively, they distill an era's distinctive mix of earned paranoia and skeptical utopianism.

Although Pop is often thought of as American in origin, the earliest recorded use of the name was in Britain. According to the catalog, the British artist Richard Hamilton coined the term in 1957, by which time his fellow countryman Eduardo Paolozzi had been making the kind of art it described — in this case collages of daily news clips, magazine advertisements and soft porn — for more than 10 years. In 1958, the curator Lawrence Alloway, a transplant from London to New York, officially put Pop Art on the art historical record.

Pop marked a radical change in that record. It interrupted the trans-Atlantic dominance of moody, high-minded Abstract Expression with an unmetaphysical art of the everyday world. In 1960 the young Ed Ruscha, barely out of art-school in Los Angeles, nailed the transition in a painting called "Felix," in which the cartoon character Felix the Cat, inserted as crisp black-and-white photostat, grins broadly as he prepares to leap clear of confining bands of brushy red, white and blue paint.

Many viewers, in and beyond the United States, have assumed that Pop was meant to advertise, even promote, consumer culture, though a lot of the art leaves that purpose in doubt. Tom Wesselmann's "Still Life #35," from 1963, is a succulently colored, billboard-scale panorama of white bread, soft drinks and cigarettes. Whether it celebrates feel-good consumption or casts a cool eye on potential addictions to carbs and smoke is a question.

American Pop routinely rides an ambiguous line, though there's no doubt that one way or another it's almost always, aggressively, an art about appetite: about eating, drinking, lust, getting, having. This is the way it looked to Europe in 1964 when Robert Rauschenberg, who had arrived at that year's Venice Biennale as part of a Pop package organized by the New York art dealer Leo Castelli, took the grand prize for best of show.

Talk about waking up to a threat. In the eyes of many Italian artists, American art, until then known mostly from afar through magazines, was suddenly an invading force fueled by money and the news media. The invasion wasn't just into the Biennale but into the traditions and power structures of European culture. The impact was, many perceived, saturating and irreversible, setting rules for a new international art game.

A few young Italians who had been heading in a Popish direction, like Tano Festa and Mario Schifano, persevered, at least for a while. Others, in discouragement or disgust, dropped away. Meanwhile, a group of critically minded German painters gathered under the label Capitalist Realism — Manfred Kuttner, Konrad Lueg, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter — had begun playing satirically and productively with Pop's consumerist model. And a few long-distance visitors to the Biennale, among them Waldemar Cordeiro and Marta Minujin from Argentina, grasped the political potential of Pop and took news of it home.

Ms. Minujin, versatile and irrepress-

"International Pop" runs through May 15 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art; 215-763-8100; philamuseum.org.



Above left, Richard Hamilton's "Epiphany" (1964-89); and, above, an untitled collage by Pauline Boty (1960-61) on a sequin-spangled gold ground.

ible, a pioneer in every form she has tackled, is one of the show's most engaging figures, someone you know you'd like to know. Another is the short-lived Pauline Boty (1938-1966), represented by a single small collage that consists of cutout portraits of some of her heroes (Rimbaud, Marilyn Monroe, Proust) fixed like Byzantine saints on a sequin-spangled gold ground.

Ms. Boty was the only female member of the early British Pop Art movement that also included Peter Blake, Derek Boshier and David Hockney, though she rarely figures in an account of it. (She is mentioned only twice, and fleetingly — as "the Wimbledon Bar-

dot" — in Christopher Simon Sykes's two-volume Hockney biography.) Pop Art, everywhere, was a mostly male preserve. And while the show makes moves toward inclusiveness, it still only goes so far.

From all of Eastern Europe there is just one woman here, though a remarkable one, the Slovakian artist Jana Zelibská, whose 1967 "Venus" — an elegant folding screen in the form of a reclining nude with a peek-through vagina — takes up a lot of well-deserved space. Yayoi Kusama and Yoko Ono (Ms. Ono paired with John Lennon) are minority figures in a contingent of Japanese male artists, who

seem bent on injecting American Pop with a psychosis-inducing serum. In 1964, Ushio Shinohara recreated Rauschenberg's 1958 sculpture "Coca-Cola Plan" as dripping, off-kilter ruin. (He was working from a magazine photo.) In Tadanori Yokoo's animated "Kiss Kiss Kiss," a mild-mannered Lichtensteinian love scene becomes a stabbing erotic attack.

Of the American Pop painters selected, only three are women — Rosalyn Drexler, Jann Haworth and Marjorie Strider, who died in 2014. We know, however, from exhibitions like "Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists 1958-1968," organized by the Rosenwald-

Wall Gallery at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia five years ago, there were, and are, many more.

The erotically forthright work by women feels particularly bold, coming as it did when postwar codes of gender "normality" were still widely held and before an organized feminism movement could give support. It was dangerous to be a rebellious woman in the 1960s. And under military regimes like those in Argentina and Brazil, it was risky to be a rebel of any kind. It would have taken guts, and fury, for Hélio Oiticica to carry his banner reading "Be an Outlaw, Be a Hero" through Brazilian streets, and for León Ferrari to display his still-shocking 1965 sculpture "The Western, Christian Civilization," with its off-the-shelf plaster figure of the crucified Jesus fixed to a 6-foot-tall model of a United States fighter plane.

Mr. Ferrari, who died in 2013, was attacking the United States on two counts: for its bombing of North Vietnam (Operation Rolling Thunder began that year) and for its support of reactionary governments in Argentina, another of which would take power the next year. (No wonder Pop Art, when perceived as an American export, was eyed by many artists with distrust, even as they adopted some of its materials and tactics.)

Those were realities of the times, everywhere. War was escalating. Racial and class conflicts were intensifying. Protest was growing more violent. Pop Art, adaptable to polemic, was tuned into all of this. It was, or could be, angry and tough. So what did the art market do with it? It withdrew support and gave a push to Minimalism, blank and abstract enough to block out bad news. Look at one of Carl Andre's stacks of bricks, or at a Dan Flavin sculpture made from industrial light tubes, or at a big, ultra-plain Donald Judd box and you'd think that 1960s insanity never happened. This show lets you know it did.



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Tom Wesselmann's "Still Life #35" (1963), a billboard-scale work, may be about more than feel-good consumption.

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