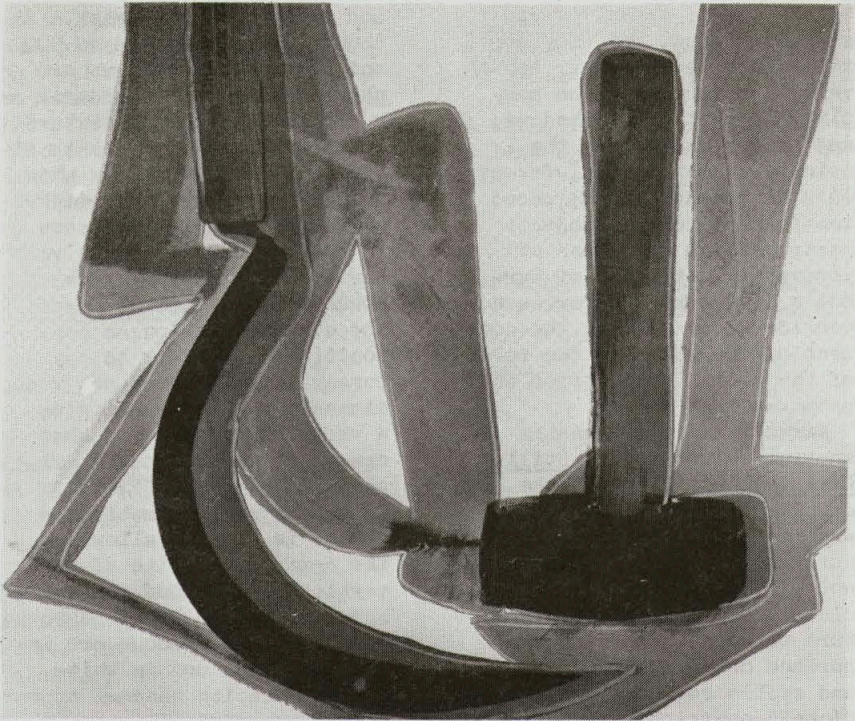


Still Life 1976, 1976



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"A, you've been into Politics since the day I met you."

From The Philosophy of Andy Warhol

Like Andy Warhol's earlier work the Still Life 1976 paintings present an elaborately balanced play between obsessive objects flatly and photographically represented and purely painterly concerns of color and surface. The juxtaposed hammer and sickle may be teasingly suggestive of the iconic symbol of Russian Communism, but they are at another level merely convenient objects for the complicated pattern of shadows and shapes which give the paintings their visual force. This deliberate and balanced tension between the objects portrayed and the means of portrayal is typical of Warhol's best work and forces a consideration of both the content of the work and the role of the artist as observer and propagandist.

Warhol carefully creates spatial volume in the Still Life 1976 paintings by the complex play of shadows against what must be read as background surfaces. In most, although not all, of the paintings he clearly delineates the juncture between the horizontal surface on which the hammer and sickle rest and the immediately abutting vertical surface. Warhol further clarifies this spatial container by bending the shadows at the line where the two planes meet. Despite the fact that the images of the hammer and sickle and their attendant shadows derive from a photograph the forms are sometimes not centered and are arbitrarily sliced off at the edge of the canvas, thus calling attention to the frame of the picture and consequently to its sur-

face. On occasion the line demarcating horizontal and vertical surfaces within the painting is broken by one of the objects and its right and left sections are not precisely aligned. Here, as in Warhol's earlier paintings, such compositional devices underscore the artist's manipulative skills and his intervention in the mechanical process of the screening of a supposedly straight photographic image.

Yet Still Life 1976 takes Warhol's earlier work to a new level of painterly complexity and iconographic meaning. Although the hammer and sickle and some of the shadows are photographically reproduced on a richly painted and textured surface there is no way to objectify all the shadows which the objects cast. Warhol has used multiple light sources in each of the paintings with the result that the repeated shadows of the hammer or of the sickle function as compositional, that is to say purely painterly and not real, elements in the painting as a whole. Moreover the shadows are sometimes black (as all shadows "should be"?) and sometimes red. Sometimes a shadow is broken, allowing the continuous white of the vertical background surface to show through to the foreground. Sometimes the shadows are inexplicably haloed in white. And on occasion shadows appear which have virtually no relationship to the forms which supposedly create them.

Warhol's constant inventiveness in the manipulation and reduplication of these shadows re-enforces the objective/non-objective ambivalence which is part of the image itself. For Warhol relentlessly asserts the specificity of the objects by consistently screening them black and grainy, much like enlarged newspaper photos which supposedly record fact. He

also carefully preserves the labels on the wooden handle of the sickle, which read "CHAMPION No. 15" and "True Temper". As model designation and brand name, these labels re-inforce the sickle as a specific rather than a symbolic sign. Could "True" be a reference to the journalistic representation or the photographic accuracy of the objects or to the space in which they exist? "True" to form, of course, Warhol provides a carefully planned system which prohibits any finite or exclusive answer to the question.

The complexities of pictorial representation which characterize the Still Life 1976 paintings mark a definitive step in Warhol's acknowledgment of the history of twentieth century painting and of his role in that history. Unlike Warhol's earlier work the Still Life 1976 paintings do not repeatedly reproduce the same image (or screen) from canvas to canvas. Rather Warhol constantly alters the positioning of the hammer and sickle and consequently of the shadows, so that, unlike the Marilyns or the Soup Cans, for example, no two paintings in the Still Life 1976 series have the same configuration of forms. Instead of the media processed imagery of Warhol's earlier painting and the imitative media gloss of his more recent portraits, these Still Life paintings are each different, unique and individually composed studio pieces. The titles may all be the same, but each does insist that the painting is a traditional, time-honored painterly set piece.

Such a marked departure from Warhol's usual operating procedures is present in the surface style of the works as well, where the noticeable brush work, laid down before the screening

of the image, is deliberately referential to New York School painting, in particular to the style of painters such as Franz Kline and William De Kooning, a painter whom Warhol himself has referred to as a model. Such explicit references to the heroic period of modern American painting comes at a time of intense scholarly and critical reassessment of that style of painting, a decade and a half after Warhol's own earlier works had helped to eclipse the movement, at least in the critical press. However, through the thinness of his application of the acrylic paint Warhol has characteristically drained the broad brush strokes of any distinctive personality, thus flying in the face of earlier critical and popular appraisals of abstract expressionism as a record of the psyche of the artist. Warhol himself remains anonymous in these paintings as he does in all his work.

The Still Life 1976 paintings also include other references to twentieth century art. The selection of still-life as a subject, the intersecting and interpenetration of forms and shadows, the shifting alternation between background and foreground derive from cubism, while the strong formal properties of negative shapes and the long, irregularly broken lines and patterned decoration of the drawings reflect the work of Matisse whose draughtsmanship had provided inspiration for Warhol's earlier work.

Warhol seems to be reinvesting not only the New York School, but, like Lichtenstein as well, the masters of early twentieth century art in a search for recognition as part of the modernist pictorial tradition. With the Still Life 1976 paintings and, even more transparently, in the recent Shadows of 1978, Warhol does fix himself within that painterly tra-

dition much to the confusion of modernist critical formulae which read the blatancy of earlier pop imagery as non-painterly.

As an extension of figurative and compositional devices Warhol limits his use of color in the Still Life 1976 series. In part such a restriction allows more intense investigation of formal relationships between one pictorial form and another, but more importantly, the red, white and black are iconographically suggestive. During the period just before and just after the Russian Revolution El Lissitzky, Malevich and other Russian artists used these same colors in their paintings and their prints to assert an ideological position in support of the Bolsheviks (the Reds) against the counter-revolutionaries (the Whites). The Russian artists of the Revolutionary period and the Futurists before them (also motivated by political ideals) used words and numerals much like "CHAMPION No. 15" in their paintings and especially in their prints. Warhol's retention of "CHAMPION" in his painted images results not just from the fact that it appears on the photographic screen, since the word is also hand lettered in the drawings. Although the word may be a simple record of the accidental aspects of the sickle which Warhol chose to represent, there is a nagging possibility that "CHAMPION" comments on the political system called up by the hammer and sickle and by the red, white and black coloration.

Ultimately we must confront the political implications of Warhol's Still Life 1976 paintings, the artist's protestations that he paints merely for fun notwithstanding. Although the paintings are certainly not a political manifesto (though they may, in their variety and style be an artistic one), the paintings are comments, and wry ones at that, on the

world which Warhol has always seen so unblinkingly around him. Like his earlier work, the iconography of the Still Life 1976 canvasses is provocative. Political issues have appeared throughout Warhol's work in such images as the electric chair paintings (1963-1967), the race riots (1963), the atomic bomb (1965), the Mao portraits (1972), the Vote McGovern poster (1974), and the American Indian paintings (1976). Yet none of these images focuses on the symbolic generality of a social, economic and political system with such incisiveness and clarity as the Still Life 1976 paintings.

Considering Warhol's position in the world of patron-gallery-museum which he so consciously orchestrates from his offices overlooking Union Square, the political implications of the Still Life 1976 paintings assume more powerful meaning. In a very real way any artist is dependent upon a gallery system to market his product. Yet Warhol presents a symbol antithetic to the entire capitalist marketing system upon which he so obviously depends and to which the name of his studio/office--the Factory--so consciously refers. Ironically, of course, only those private collectors, corporations or museums who particularly benefit from the capitalist system can afford to purchase these pictures. Warhol thus establishes an equivocal situation in which the capitalist elite display a referent symbol of a competing and antagonistic economic system in their homes, corporate offices and museum galleries. American consumerism thus advertises communism. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that Warhol produced these hammer and sickle (and

the American Indian) paintings in 1976, the year of the Bicentennial. Significantly Warhol includes the year as a part of the title in the Still Life 1976 images, again suggesting a confrontation between the American and Russian revolutionary political ideologies. Warhol's images provided a visual antidote to, if not a dark comment on, the jingoism and historical provincialism of the bicentennial year.

In his early career Warhol forced the cultural establishment to integrate signs of crass consumerism (the Soup Cans) and commercial exploitation (the Marilyns) into the world of high art, thus helping to destroy the very distinction between high and low art. Now Warhol presents hammers and sickles (and paintings of Mao, American Indians and black transvestites with the Ladies and Gentlemen), all more lusciously and seductively painted, for the same integration. Perhaps more than ever before in history, politics is life and there is no other artist who previews and records that life as perceptively and unflinchingly as Warhol.

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PLEASE NOTE:

Mr. Paoletti will deliver a MATRIX Evening Lecture at the Wadsworth Atheneum on Thursday, May 17, 1979 at 8:00 p.m. This event is free and the public is cordially invited to attend.

Works in MATRIX:

Still Life 1976, 1976, acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 72" x 86" (LC #1170).

Still Life 1976, 1976, acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 72" x 86" (LC #1173).

Still Life 1976, 1976, acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 72" x 86" (LC #1176).

Still Life 1976, 1976, pencil and watercolor on paper, 28 3/8" x 41 1/4" (LC #D-88).

Still Life 1976, 1976, pencil and watercolor on paper, 41 1/4" x 28 3/8" (LC #D-94).

All works in this exhibition are lent by the Leo Castelli Gallery, New York City.

Other works by Warhol currently on exhibition in the Atheneum's Gallery G301:

Marilyn Monroe Diptych, 1962, oil on canvas (colored), two panels, 82" x 57" each. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine.

Triple Silver Disaster, 1963, enamel and silkscreen on canvas, 63 1/2" x 83 1/2". The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection, Wadsworth Atheneum.

Selected one-man exhibitions:
Bodley Gallery, NYC '56, '57,
'58, '59; Ferus Gallery, LA
'62, '63, '66; Stable Gallery,
NYC '62, '64; Leo Castelli
Gallery, NYC '64, '66, '69,
'77; Institute of Contemporary
Art, University of Pennsylvania,
Philadelphia '65; Stedelijk Mu-
seum, Amsterdam '68; Moderna
Museet, Stockholm '68; Neue
Nationalgalerie der Staatlichen
Museen Preussischer Kultur-
besitz, Berlin '69;
Museum of Art, Rhode Island School
of Design, Providence, Raid the
Icebox '70; Pasadena Art Museum '70;
Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC,
'71; Tate Gallery, London '71;
Baltimore Museum of Art '75;
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and list of exhibitions prior
to 1970 please see Rainer
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year listed above.