

Art | March 22 2022 | By Harriet Lloyd-Smith

The Andy Warhol Diaries on Netflix reveals his enduring impact on contemporary art

We review the new documentary, and showcase Warhol's impact on modern culture through three artists: Deborah Kass, Jeff Koons and Glenn Ligon



Andy Warhol pictured with Miles Davis. Courtesy of Netflix

Andy Warhol is one of the most disseminated, duplicated, misinterpreted, fridge-magnetized artists of all time. We've all heard many of the stories ad nauseam: The Factory, the 15 minutes, the Brillo, the Campbells, the Marylins and the Elvises. Andy Warhol is everywhere. Well, the Andy Warhol we think is Andy Warhol.

Almost exactly 35 years since the famed pop artist died, Netflix has released *The Andy Warhol Diaries*, a new documentary that scratches beneath the surface of the artist's enigmatic life and work. Ryan Murphy's six-part series is steered by the best-selling book of the same name, compiled by editor Pat Hackett via a series of transcribed calls with the artist over more than a decade.



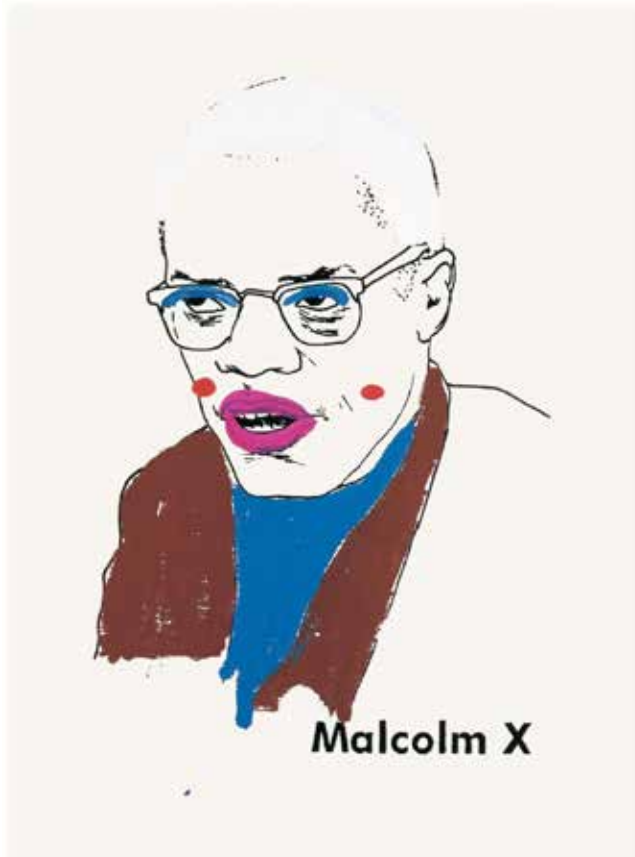
Images courtesy of Netflix

Warhol had a vision of the world that ended up fashioning an entirely new one, where celebrities were icons, profundity masqueraded as shallowness and mass-produced consumerism was high art. Andy Warhol was misunderstood. But this misunderstanding was engineered, perpetuated by the artist through artfully deployed red herrings surrounding his sexuality, approach to work and depth of thought – this is the Warhol mystique, and it remains insatiable.

The Andy Warhol Diaries – tender and mesmerising – lifts the curtain on Warhol’s ever-fascinating (and indistinguishable) life, work and loves, told in his own voice (well, a specially-programmed AI version – it seems the artist finally got his wish ‘to be a machine’).

Through interviews with friends such as Debbie Harry and Rob Lowe, and artists Glenn Ligon, Jamie Wyeth and Julian Schnabel, it highlights Warhol’s prophetic view of culture as we now know it, drenched in celebrity, self-obsession and image-saturation, but also increasingly fluid views on sexuality and creative collaboration.

Glenn Ligon



Glenn Ligon, *Malcolm X (Version 1) #1*, 2000, Vinyl-based paint, silkscreen ink and gesso on canvas. © Glenn Ligon; Courtesy of the artist, Hauser & Wirth, New York, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, Thomas Dane Gallery, London and Chantal Crousel, Paris

American conceptual artist Glenn Ligon first saw Warhol's work on a high school trip to Soho, New York. Although now one of the leading voices of his generation, at 16, becoming an artist wasn't yet on the cards. 'I don't think I knew what that work was about, but somehow I knew it was important. It seemed fun in a way. It was glamorous too,' Ligon says in *The Andy Warhol Diaries*. 'Seeing Warhol somehow triggered some desire. So even in my 16-year-old brain, I knew I was seeing something that was hugely powerful. A kind of way forward.'

Ligon's much-cited essay *Pay It No Mind*, appears in the catalogue for the 2018 Whitney Museum show '*Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again*'. It's a critical examination of Warhol's 1975 series *Ladies and Gentlemen*, which features almost two hundred portraits of transgender women of colour. 'Did Warhol know any ordinary Black people?' Ligon asks, going on to question the liberties Warhol took in depicting these individuals. In spite of his criticism, Ligon has noted his appreciation for Warhol's work, partly in deceptive depth as an artist, and his 'genius' use of colour. In 2000, he explored the force of colour to staggering effect in the series *Colouring*, for which children were asked to colour pictures of Black icons in 1970s-era colouring books. Without understanding their historical gravity, the children deployed colour freely. In *Malcolm X*, the Civil Rights leader is depicted with a white face and wearing lipstick, blusher and blue eye shadow.

Deborah Kass



Deborah Kass, Blue Deb, 2000, silkscreen and acrylic on canvas © 2022 Deborah Kass / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York Kavi Gupta Gallery

The flat, pop-coloured shapes, the grids of familiar faces, the variations on a colour scheme; Deborah Kass' early work has Warhol's visual language running through its veins. But there's a twist, an important one. Kass focused on the deft appropriating and reworking of signature styles of leading 20th-century male artists. Part searing critique, part homage, her interest was in confronting the glaring omission of leading women in art history, and in society more broadly.

In 1992, Kass began her 'Warhol Project', in which she subverted the pop artist's ubiquitous celebrity paintings, revising these groupings with self-portraits and images of her own heroines, such as Gertrude Stein, Barbra Streisand and Cindy Sherman.

Blue Deb, at first glance, resembles a piece from Warhol's 1960s series 'Liz' depicting the actress Elizabeth Taylor. But this painting, like many others, outwits the viewer's complacency towards Warhol's work – inimitable he may be, but he's not exempt from reinterpretation.

By drawing on, and rewording the visual language of the past, Kass asks us to consider an alternative storyline in 20th-century art, in which the work of female artists was iconised as much as men's, and the 'tragic muses' had autonomy. As she told filmmaker John Waters in 2007, 'It's always been my impulse to use art history as almost a ready-made.'

Jeff Koons



Jeff Koons, New Hoover Convertibles, 1984 © Jeff Koons

Koons has made a USP from hoovering up art history – executed in literal terms with his 1980s vacuum cleaner readymades, and in a Duchampian vein, revising it into something entirely new.

Through Koons' cut, pasted and reimagined motifs from pop culture and art history, we can identify the parallels between Warhol's time and ours; the mass-consumerist, voyeuristic, self-obsessed banality reflected in, and often on the surface of his work. Like Warhol, it's not so much about the artist, but about us.

On the face of it, the parallels between Koons and Warhol are easy to draw: they are both Pennsylvania natives, they both work in visual hyperbole, in liberal depictions of sex, flowers, celebrity, have mainstream appeal and mask profundity with banality. But Koons has only openly referenced Warhol in one piece: Hulk Elvis I (2007), in which the Marvel character Hulk is positioned in the same stance as Warhol's Double Elvis (1963), itself a riff on a publicity still for the 1960 film Flaming Star. §

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