

Artist displays her Warhol roots

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Deborah Kass 'Before and Happily Ever After' 1991

Many artists strive to replicate the success of Andy Warhol, but few have replicated his art like Deborah Kass. The New York City-based artist spent eight years working in the vein of the Pop Art king, only to create something uniquely her own.

“There’s no artist of my generation for whom Andy is not an influence. I mean, he was huge in everyone’s consciousness,” says Kass, a 1974 graduate of Carnegie Mellon University’s art department.

Kass, who was born and raised in Long Island, says Warhol was a big reason she chose to attend Carnegie Mellon. But it wouldn’t be until nearly 20 years later that she would mine the artist’s oeuvre for ideas and inspiration.

Now, the artist and her influence meet again, but in a different way. Just last weekend, Kass, 60, was in town for the opening of her first retrospective, “Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After.” And it’s on display at, where else, The Andy Warhol Museum.

At first glance, you might be hard pressed to tell a Warhol from a Kass, especially on the fourth floor of the museum where no fewer than 10 Warhol-inspired portraits by Kass of her friends hang alongside nearly as many by Warhol. There’s Warhol’s portrait of his friend, Victor Hugo, next to Kass’ friend, Norman Kleeblatt, fine-arts curator at the Jewish Museum in New York. Warhol’s version of Liza Minnelli is next to Kass’ depiction of Cindy Sherman; and, well, you get the idea.

Not all of the approximately 75 works on display offer such similar comparisons in style and technique. This is a retrospective after all, so the exhibit showcases Kass’ achievements over the course of her three-decade career, beginning with large landscape paintings from the mid-1980s.

The exhibit swiftly moves from there into her “Art History Paintings,” begun in the late 1980s. Here, in massive bifurcated canvases, Kass has combined imagery appropriated from works by such famous artists as Pablo Picasso, Jasper Johns and Jackson Pollock with frames lifted from Disney cartoons and DC Comics, among other pop-culture references.

For example, in one work inspired by late 1960s neon work by Bruce Nauman, Kass has combined a famous quote by sculptor Louise Bourgeois, “A woman has no place in the art world unless she proves over and over again she won’t be eliminated.”

It was these “Art History Paintings” that led to her work on the Warhol project.

“These ‘Art History Paintings’ are really mining art history and pop culture for all kinds of stuff. But at a certain point, they led to Andy,” Kass says.

Pointing to the painting that is the show’s namesake work, “Before and Happily Ever After,” which combines imagery from an iconic Warhol painting with a scene from Disney’s Cinderella, Kass says, “You can see how that led to Barbra Streisand’s profile.”

Kass says that, in many ways, Streisand was to her what Jackie Onassis was to Warhol. “I understand there are imaginative leaps. But to me, it’s a perfectly straight line,” she says of the comparison.

Her “Jewish Jackies” series treats the star with all the glitz and glam Warhol did with Jackie Onassis as his subject. The paintings of Streisand as seen in “Yentl” draw obvious comparisons to Warhol’s iconic work “Elvis (Eleven Times),” a 1962 silkscreen variation on the artist’s Elvis image taken from the film “Flaming Star.”

As for her painting “Quadruple Yentl (My Elvis)” (1997), she says, “Once I made the Jewish Jackies, I felt I needed another twist.”

“It wasn’t that Barbra was my Elvis. It was that Barbra as Yentl made such an interesting comparison to Elvis as a gunslinger,” Kass says. “It’s not just a substitution, it’s a twist. She’s carrying a book. He’s carrying a gun. She’s dressed as a man. He actually is a man. He’s a rock star. She’s Barbra Streisand who is making her first movie with complete control that she ever got to make, and this is the story she chose to tell in 1982 before ideas of drag and queer theory were ever introduced anywhere.”

For Kass, the Streisand paintings also meant something more. “My work is coming out of the multicultural discourse of the 1980s and early ’90s. There was just a huge gaping hole in the middle of it for me; it happened to be about Jewish-ness. Not Judaism. Jewish-ness, and ethnicity. ... It’s really about this ethnicity that I am a part of that I wasn’t seeing represented in the discourse of multiculturalism.”

The Warhol project culminated with Kass making portraits of herself impersonating both Warhol and Elizabeth Taylor, the latter in a group of work she calls “Debs.”

“Me as Liz. I thought that was a great way to go out,” she says.

The remaining works are from her recent series, “feel-good paintings for feel-bad times.” And here again, Kass combines art history with pop culture, especially lyrics from Sondheim and “Glee.”

“I was always interested in using art history as a ready-made, basically,” Kass says. And she continues to do so wonderfully.

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