

FROM WARHOL TO BANKSY



Introduction

by Christine May

Since the 1960s, Pop Art has been known for its ability to move the imagery of mass culture into high-art contexts. As an act of rebellion against the elitism of the fine art world, Pop artists across history have continued to challenge traditional views on what art should be.

This exhibition brings together works of art that define the Pop Art movement, highlighting the careers of some of the art world's most iconic figures. Artists Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselmann, Takashi Murakami, Banksy, and Mr. Brainwash underscore the cultural impact of Pop Art and how it continues to blur the boundaries between high and low art.

From Warhol to Banksy explores how their irreverent and subversive art practices extended to their materials and methods of production, as they used their artwork as a tool to critique society and consumer culture.

// *[These artists] used their artwork as a tool to critique society and consumer culture.* //

Through a selection of prints, paintings, sculpture, and ephemera, visitors will see first-hand how Pop Art continues to critique our world and challenges us to think about the issues that persist in our everyday life.



From Disneyland to Dismal Land

by Phil Smith

I. The Ghost of Disney

Hovering above the exhibition *From Warhol to Banksy* is the ghost of the most famous, and arguably most influential, artist of the twentieth century. Directly referenced in both Warhol's and Banksy's work herein and coursing through that of the others in the show, Walt Disney — both the artist and his art — provides an appropriate guiding spirit for the colourful fantasia bedecking the walls of the Kelowna Art Gallery. Exemplifying the tensions between what came to be known as “high art” (art in the traditional sense) and “low art” (popular culture), Disney, like Pop Art, studiously maintained a foot in both camps. Despite his often professed wariness of the strictures of the cultural elite, Disney was

nonetheless happy to plunder the vast storehouse of Art History for use in his animated features such as *Snow White* (as well as to lure actual artists from Europe to work at his studio), but late in life would bitingly proclaim, “I keep having the same nightmare: that one of my movies opens at an art-house theatre!”¹

“*This was a seminal decade for this kind of convergence as a new stream of collective myths was then pouring forth from the popular culture machine...*”

What Disney did not foresee was that the narratives and techniques of his work could and would become a new basis for high art, and so more surreptitiously enter the “art house”

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- ANDY WARHOL -



Walt Disney
1901-1966
Born in Chicago, Illinois
Died in Burbank, California



world of the gallery and museum. What he also did not foresee was the entire swath of emergent popular culture — from comics to movies to magazines to advertising — would be similarly appropriated by a generation of artists emerging in the late 1950s. This was a seminal decade for this kind of convergence as a new stream of collective myths was then pouring forth from the popular culture machine: movie stars in place of saints or messiahs, comic book superheroes taking over from Greek gods, supermarket aisles in place of Dante’s Inferno, and consumer products now positioned as the new sacred relics of day-to-day life — all new icons that Pop Art sought to directly harness.²

Disney’s early animated cartoons were but one of an explosion of popular culture forms from the 1920s and ’30s onward that would also later wend their way into Pop Art. Consider, for example, the transformation and transfiguration of another form from that decade’s popular culture “trash” pile: that of the lowly comic book. The KAG exhibition begins chronologically with a print of Roy Lichtenstein’s iconic 1963 painting *Whaam!*, based on

and extrapolated from a DC war comic from 1962. This image is a telling starting point: arriving in the late 1930s, the comic book was an intensely powerful new graphic medium (the first full “mass” merging of words and pictures). It was also the first genuine form of youth culture, that is, culture aimed directly at the young and affordable enough to be directly purchased by them. (Throughout the 1940s and ’50s, the comic book was as controversial with regard to its supposed negative impact on children and adolescents as video games and TikTok are today.) Again, like Disney, there can be seen to be a foot in two camps: Lichtenstein’s work here still often pivots between those two most fundamental human conditions and more traditional components of art: love (*Drowning Girl*, 1963) and war (the aforementioned *Whaam!*), even if their portrayal is now filtered and mediated through the lens of the romance or war comic book genres.³



above:
Roy Lichtenstein, *Drowning Girl*,
after original from 1963, offset
lithograph on paper. Courtesy of the
Paul and Tracy Mitchell Collection



above:
Andy Warhol, *Campbell's
Tomato Soup Can* (Sunday B
Morning Edition), after original
from 1968, screenprint on paper

left:
Andy Warhol, *Campbell's
Tomato Soup Shopping Bag*
(after), 1966, signed by artist
1967, screenprint on paper bag

Courtesy of the
Paul and Tracy Mitchell
Collection

II. From Warhol...

If Lichtenstein sets a popular culture-to-art transformation in motion, Andy Warhol's work quickly takes it to its first vertex, ranging wildly in both its subject matter and medium, from oversize sculptures of consumer goods (the *Brillo Boxes*, after original from 1963–64) to screen prints of the same as well as those of the ubiquitous Campbell's soup cans with which Warhol is still so strongly identified (here represented by *Campbell's Tomato Soup Can*, after original from 1968). Simultaneously, Warhol's process crystallizes the parallel fusion of mass production and high culture in both form and content: factory-

made art about factory-made food (the artist's New York studio in which these works were produced en masse having been named the Factory for very good reason). In a 1968 exhibition catalogue, Warhol described some of the reasoning behind this process for making artworks: "I tried doing them by hand, but I find it easier to use a screen. This way, I don't have to work on my objects at all. One of my assistants or anyone else, for that matter, can reproduce the design as well as I could."⁴

In these screen prints — mass-produced objects theoretically as infinitely reproducible as a can of Campbell's soup or a bottle of Coca-



Cola — one finds subject matter related to the same mass cultural processes, here ranging from movie stars (*Shot Blue Marilyn*, *Cowboys and Indians: John Wayne*) to pop music stars (*John Lennon*) and sports stars (*Wayne Gretzky* being one distinctly Canadian reference point). Warhol himself also

exemplifies another dualistic tenet of Pop Art: the brand as totem and the artist as brand, with this concept of branding extending to the artists themselves as both public personality and accompanying brand name, in this case a brand so strong that the artist could be reduced, like “Walt,” to a

single name, “Andy.” And nearly four decades after his death, the “Andy” debate continues: Genius? Fraudster? Both? Does it matter? ⁵

If the first wave of pop artists can be seen as referencing and interlocking directly with the popular culture

surrounding them, by the next wave the Pop Art form is sufficiently established to create its own tradition, which this next generation of artists then often reflects or echoes.

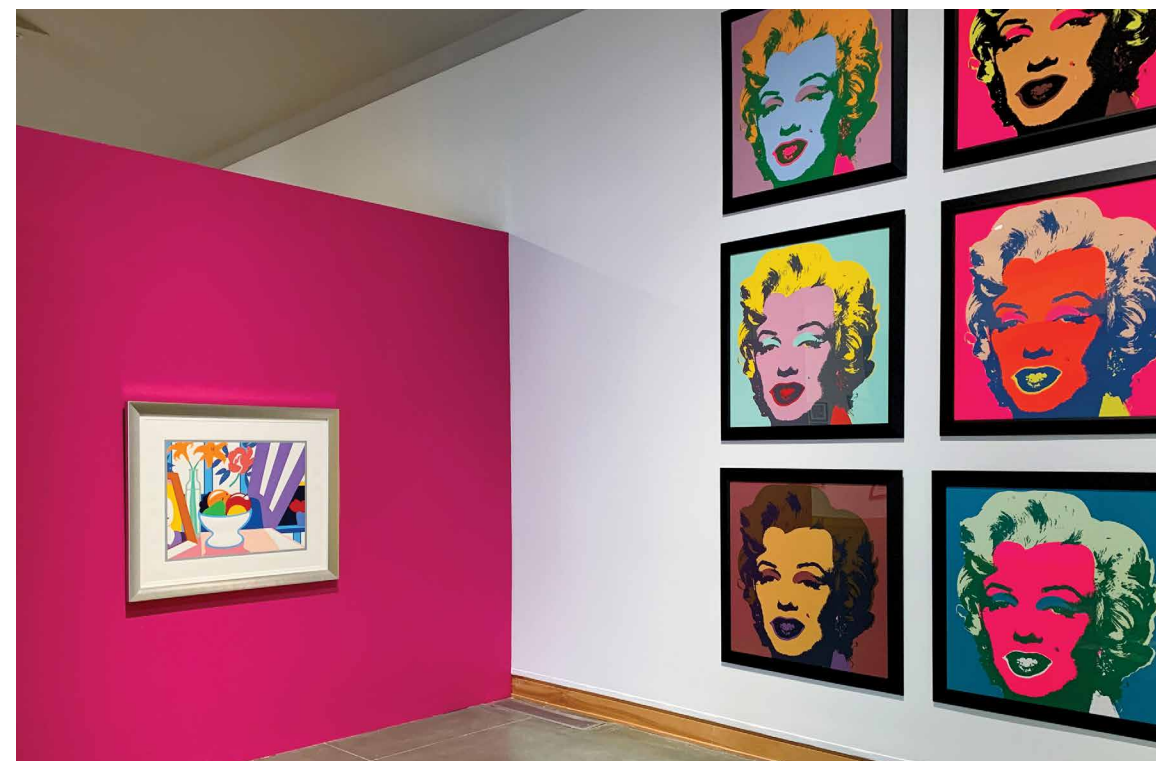




FROM
WARHOL
TO
BANKSY



MR. BRAINWASH



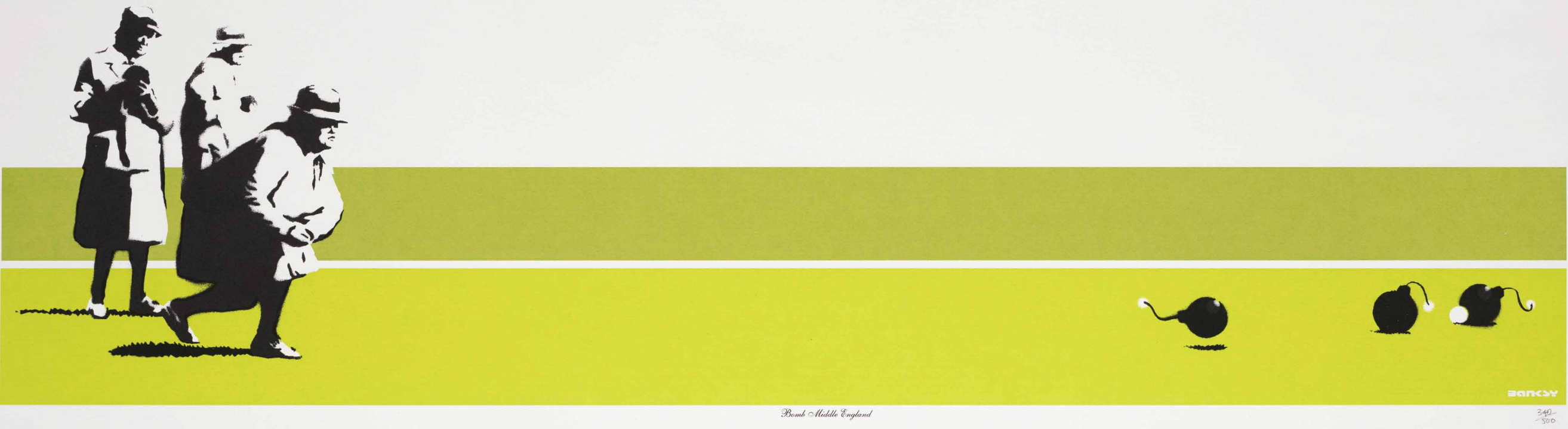
Tom Wesselmann's art presents a self-referential hailing of the new masters, as in *Still Life with Lichtenstein and Two Oranges*, 1993, but one encased in that most traditional of painting forms, the still life. Wesselmann's second work, *Still Life with Lilies and Mixed Fruit*, 1998, also reverts to the classic components of the still

life, flowers and fruit. And works by Takashi Murakami represent an internationalization of Pop Art and popular culture, while furthering obsessions with both the new subject matter such as brands and the old, again flowers and nature, both wrapped up in amplified explosions of colour and cosmic titling.

left:
Takashi Murakami, *Flower Ball 3D*, 2002, offset lithograph, cold stamp with silver and high gloss varnishing on paper, ed. 68/100

Takashi Murakami, *Posi Mushroom*, 2007, offset lithograph on foil, ed. 183/200

Courtesy of the Paul and Tracy Mitchell Collection



Banksy, *Bomb Middle England*, 2003, screen print on paper, ed. 340/500
Courtesy of the Paul and Tracy Mitchell Collection

III. ...to Banksy

The artist who also appears in the exhibition's title, the mysterious Banksy, is a natural culmination and current end point of the evolution of both Pop Art and the pop artist figure, taking Warhol's concept of the mystique of the artist one step beyond. Banksy's work itself has both a striking graphic quality and a striking ambivalence and ambiguity. Images of often solitary or isolated figures in barren or blank landscapes — a child couple in *Jack and Jill*, 2005, *The Flower Thrower*, 2015, the now

ubiquitous *Girl with Balloon*, 2015 — seem ostensibly simple but are also instantly memorable on initial viewing before splitting into a multitude of possible resonances, political or otherwise. But where Warhol the art star was everywhere, Banksy the *agent provocateur* is nowhere to be found, only reflectively visible via his/her/their Superman-like public persona while almost miraculously maintaining an impenetrable Clark Kent-like secret identity.⁶

Banksy solidifies one other key component and end result of the Pop Art movement by, following in



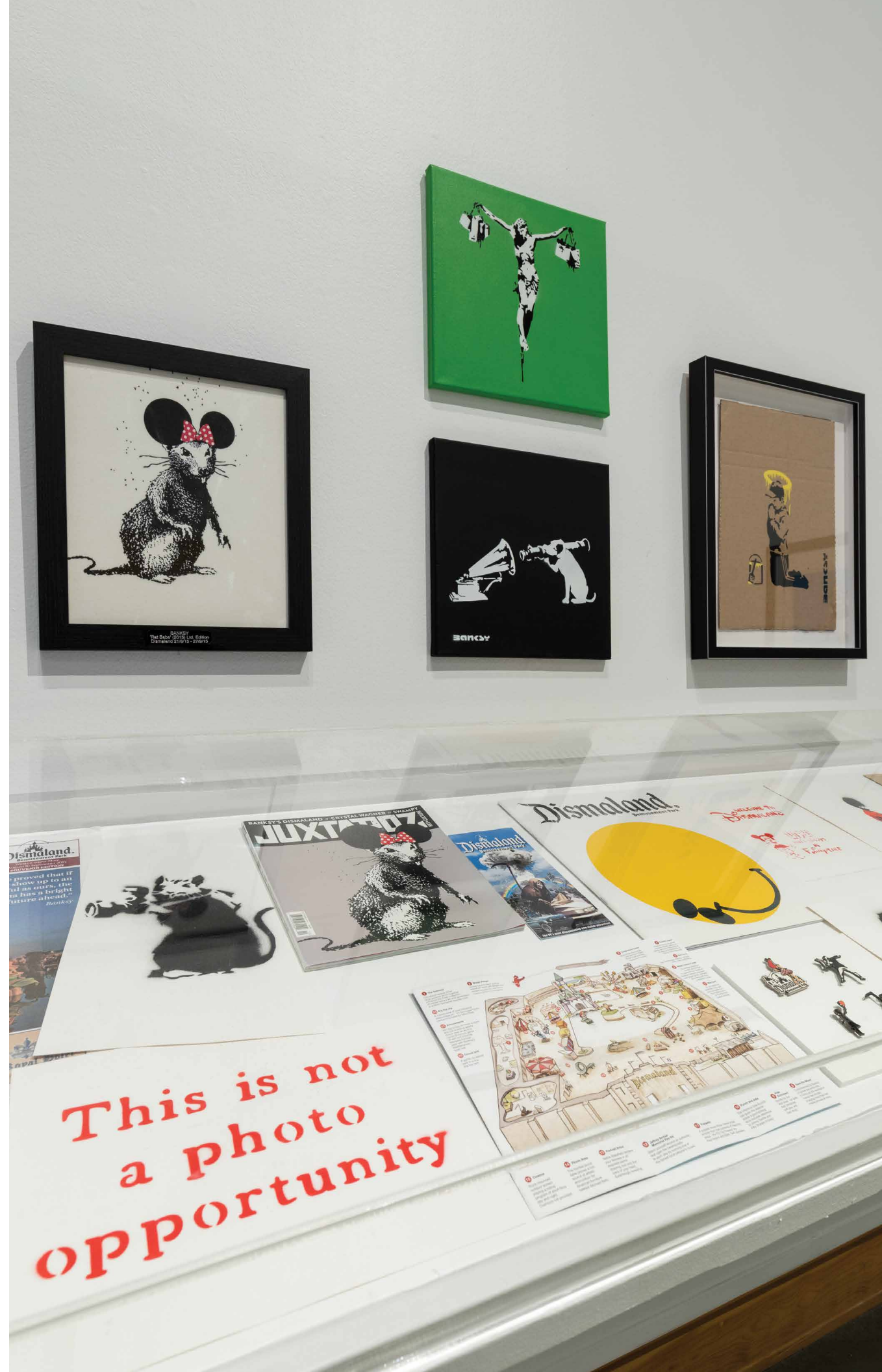
Banksy, *Grannies*, 2006, screen print on paper, ed. 496/500
Courtesy of the Paul and Tracy Mitchell Collection



the footsteps of the '80s taggers and graffiti artists, usually moving the work out of the gallery altogether and literally taking it to the streets.

*... taking Warhol's
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As is often the case in a Banksy-related exhibition, we are not seeing the original work *in situ*, but rather the remembrances and relics thereof via the screen prints, lithographs, and other assorted printed objects that adorn the gallery walls. This distinction is particularly germane in the works related to Banksy's massive 2015 installation *Dismaland*, in the already dilapidated seaside town of Weston-super-Mare, England. Once again we meet the ghost of Disney, but this time one more like Dickens's Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, a decayed, floundering, and ruined vision and version of Disney's "Happiest Place on Earth," here a replica of fairground ruins from a world gone wrong.





IV. Welcome to the Funhouse

One last reflection on and in this exhibition funhouse's Hall of Mirrors can be observed through the Banksy progeny/protégé Mr. Brainwash (focus of the 2010 documentary *Exit Through the Gift Shop*), with his Campbell's Tomato Spray Cans (3) combining Warhol's consumer brand obsessions and Banksy's means of creation to lend the perfect conceptual resolution to the exhibition as a whole. Collectively in this new funhouse, like a carnival barker's come-on, a call is sent forth: Art is fun! Art is for you! Art is for everyone! But just like the funhouse,

beneath the apparent accessibility and lightheartedness of many of these works, there lies a deeper and sometimes darker side. From Warhol's ongoing *Disaster Series* (here represented by *Birmingham Race Riot*) to Banksy's aforementioned *Dismaland*, the works can be viewed as fractured, warped, or shattered mutating mirrors of a world engorged by consumerism and with an attendant growing obsession with image and images, a concern that really begins to come into focus in the 1960s and is exponentially multiplied and omnipresent today.⁷

So while one can of course simply look at the recognizable references and brilliant colours of the works on display here and enjoy them purely on this level, it may also be worth taking a moment or two to listen to these artists as well, their voices neither shrill nor strident but rather those of whispering witnesses to the tempestuous world of changes around them.

About the author:

Phil Smith is a Vancouver-based writer-performer and a Lecturer Emeritus at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. His interests include the interplay between literature, art, and popular culture. He has written on these subjects for publications in Canada, the United States, and Germany; taken part in related interviews and features for CBC Radio; and has appeared as a pop culture analyst for VTV's *Vancouver Breakfast* show.



Expanded Footnotes

1. Quoted in *Il était une fois... Walt Disney* [Once upon a time... Walt Disney], directed by Samuel Doux (Paris: ARTE & Réunion des musées nationaux/Organa, 2008), DVD. The tremendous artistic/aesthetic repositioning and reconfiguring effect of Disney's early animated cartoons such as "Steamboat Willie" (1928) and "The Skeleton Dance" (1929) was quickly recognized by Old World critics, even if their counterparts in North America's cultural elite took substantially longer to catch up. Animation historian Gregory Waller notes the French critic Phillipe Lamour had proclaimed in 1934, "Mickey is, quite simply, *a new mode of human expression*" (quoted in Waller, 49), summarizing this effect in the following manner: "'Europe's Highbrows Hail Mickey Mouse,' announced *The Literary Digest* in 1931, and the phrase became something of a cliché for the rest of the decade" (49). Indeed, by the mid-1930s, the term "highbrow" was further defined by its opposite "lowbrow," terminology that then quickly became shortened to simply "high" and "low." The above quotations are from: Waller, Gregory A, "Mickey, Walt, and Film Criticism from *Steamboat Willie* to *Bambi*" in *The American Animated Cartoon: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Danny Peary and Gerald Peary (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1980), 49-57.

2. Although the essay will continue with the more widely used term "popular culture," technically "mass culture" is now the preferred critical designation, particularly as some very influential mass culture does not end up being up all that popular — see the Ramones. The "mass" descriptor also

seems to nicely encapsulate the processes cultural critic Gerald Early sees as essential to the form's existence: "mass production, mass consumption, and mass media" (146). The quotation is from: Gerald Early, "Mixed Messages: The Birth of Mass Culture," in *Our Times: The Illustrated History of the 20th Century*, ed. Lorraine Glennon (New York: Century Books, 1995), 146-51.

3. The other side of the question for the decades prior to the 1960s had been, as with animated cartoons, could comic books in any way be considered as art? But Lichtenstein's piece turns the question on its head, employing comic books as the basis for art in both content and form (and in the process raising some some new kinds of questions about cross-cultural appropriation).

4. Quoted in "Warhol in His Own Words," in *Andy Warhol: A Retrospective*, ed. Kynaston McShine (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1989), 459.

5. If the first wave of pop artists can be seen as referencing and interlocking directly with the popular culture surrounding them, by the next wave the Pop Art form is sufficiently established so as to create its own tradition, which this next generation of artists then often reflects or echoes.

6. I was asked during an interview by CTV News if I thought Banksy's work would be as popular without the mystery of the artist's identity running through it. While stressing that I thought the work definitely stood on

its own, my response was that the question was impossible to answer: as with Warhol, the fusion of art and artist is so inextricable that one cannot really speculate as to the effect of their separation.

7. For a further contemporary reflection on this condition, see the recent Netflix buzz movie *Don't Look Up* (2021), in which a torrent of memes, posts, broadcasts, and press all assist in the stupefying and stultification of reaction to Earth's impending annihilation by a massive meteor (in an all too clear allegory for the growing threat of climate change).



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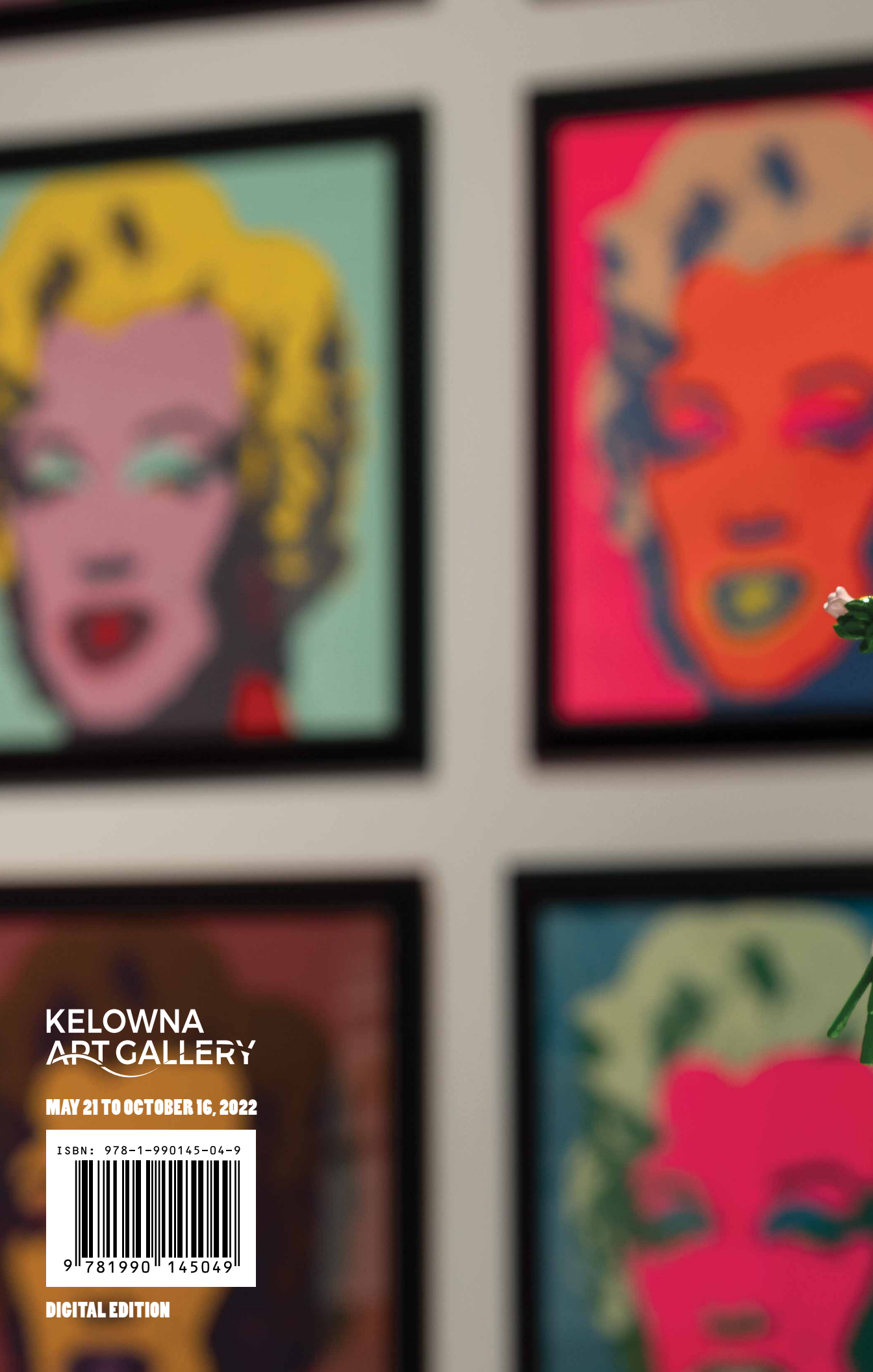
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