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Warhol and Mapplethorpe: Exploring Gender as Disguise and Identity



"Andy Warhol," Robert Mapplethorpe Credit Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

On a small wall in "Warhol & Mapplethorpe: Guise & Dolls," at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, a photographic portrait of Andy Warhol by Robert Mapplethorpe hangs beside a silk-screened portrait of Robert Mapplethorpe by Andy Warhol. Both are head shots; both men gaze directly at the viewer. Mapplethorpe placed Warhol's face in the center of a cruciform frame and encircled his head with a saintly glow, while Warhol saturated Mapplethorpe's image in a deep, devilish red.

This pairing embodies the theme of "Guise & Dolls," in which juxtaposed portraits and self-portraits by the two artists explore identity, gender and the nature of disguise. The 101 objects on view, which include photographs, prints, paintings, videos and ephemera, were created from 1973 to 1988, an era of sexual freedom bracketed by the Stonewall rebellion in 1969 and the growing menace of AIDS. The exhibition reveals parallels and divergences in the ways that Warhol and Mapplethorpe responded to the period, and expressed their shared fascination with the complexities of sexuality and self.

"They were both gay portrait artists who lived in this world of gender fluidity," Patricia Hickson, the Wadsworth's curator of contemporary art and the show's organizer, said. "They were very different people, but they were mining a lot of the same subjects, and they each had significant bodies of work in those areas."

Among the bodies of work represented in "Guise & Dolls" is Warhol's "Ladies and Gentlemen," a rarely exhibited group of prints and paintings of anonymous (and intentionally unconvincing) drag queens. The series began as a commission by an Italian art dealer for 105 paintings and 10 prints. "Warhol was so

taken with the subject that he created another 163 paintings," Ms. Hickson said. "He kept them in his studio where they were discovered after his death."

"Guise & Dolls" presents the full portfolio of prints alongside 10 corresponding Polaroid test shots of the models, who were plucked from a bar in Hell's Kitchen in Manhattan. In the prints, each subject is animated by irregular fragments of color. "You can see how he manipulates the images and creates something completely different," Ms. Hickson said.

Nearby hang 14 of the paintings. In a large one, which greets visitors emerging from an elevator, the model is in profile, hair wrapped in a scarf, earring glistening. She presses a hand to her neck and turns one long-lashed eye toward the viewer. Matching the drama of her pose is Warhol's saturated palette: the neon green of the scarf, the cinnamon skin against a cobalt background, a fiery slash outlining a broad smile.

Accompanying these works are two entries from Warhol's "Factory Diaries," video recordings of goings-on at the Factory, Warhol's famed art studio. In one, Bob Colacello, who was then the editor of Interview magazine, which Warhol founded in 1969, grudgingly poses for preliminary tests. The second captures Warhol at work on one of the paintings. "They really bring the process to life," Ms. Hickson said.

In the next section of the exhibition, Warhol himself is in drag. A selection of photographic portraits from the series "Altered Image" features a heavily made-up Warhol wearing an assortment of women's wigs and his signature blank stare. Produced in 1981, "Altered Image" was a collaboration between Warhol and his friend Christopher Makos, a photographer. The series was inspired by the photographs that Man Ray shot in the 1920s of Marcel Duchamp's female alter ego, Rrose Sélavy. Five of the photographs in the show are color Polaroid self-portraits; the rest are black-and-white prints by Mr. Makos. In the second of the "Factory Diaries" videos, Warhol chats about his outfit as he is being made up. "He is talking freely," Ms. Hickson said as she stood beside the monitor. "It's a side of him you never see."

Evasiveness pervades Warhol's artwork in "Guise & Dolls." His subjects are deliberately masked, as if to deny the inner self in favor of the superficial. In two paintings, a self-portrait and a portrait of Mapplethorpe displayed side by side, each man's face is replicated and overlaid to the point of near abstraction.

In contrast, Mapplethorpe's portraits and self-portraits convey a sense of frankness and depth, regardless of his subjects' gender ambiguity or physical adornments.

Mapplethorpe's penetrating images of Patti Smith, at that time his muse, depict her variously as androgynous, defiant and beatific. In the cover photograph for her 1975 album, "Horses," she trades conventional symbols of femininity for dark pants, a white shirt and ennui. Four years later, she looks coy in a diaphanous white dress on the cover of her album "Wave," with a dove perched on each hand. In a 1986 portrait, she is transcendent, her long hair crimped, her countenance serene, her fingers resting on her chest.

Lisa Lyon, an international female bodybuilding champion, was another Mapplethorpe muse. For Mapplethorpe, Ms. Lyon's physique epitomized the masculine-feminine duality. From 1980 to '83, the two collaborated on approximately 200 photographs that became Mapplethorpe's book "Lady: Lisa Lyon."

In one shot, Ms. Lyon's sleeves are rolled above her elbows, her hair is in a pompadour and her face is bisected by the shadow of her raised hand. In an essay for the exhibition catalog, Ms. Hickson poses a question about the image: "Is she a butch lesbian or a femme homosexual?"

Mapplethorpe played with that question in several self-portraits from 1980. One pair presents opposing expressions of his masculine and feminine sides: the tough guy, complete with a leather jacket, pompadour and cigarette, and the "femme" version, with makeup and fluffy hair. Those two shots became the front and back covers of his 1985 book, "Certain People: A Book of Portraits."

For another pair of photographs, Mapplethorpe draped a fur around his neck, applied makeup and styled his hair in a curly coif. “This is his Rose Sélavy,” Ms. Hickson said, “right down to the fur collar.”

Warhol and Mapplethorpe have roots at the Wadsworth. Both were subjects of the museum’s Matrix series of solo exhibitions, now finishing its 40th year. In 1989, the museum hosted Mapplethorpe’s controversial touring exhibition “Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment.” Ten years later, it organized the show “About Face: Andy Warhol Portraits.”

At “Guise & Dolls,” museum visitors taking advantage of the smartphone tour will hear commentary from, among others, people who worked with Warhol and Mapplethorpe. In the audio tour, Vincent Fremont, the videographer who filmed the “Factory Diaries,” recalls the day Warhol photographed Mr. Colacello for “Ladies and Gentlemen.” Mr. Makos discusses the making of the “Altered Image” series. Robert Mapplethorpe’s brother Edward, seen in Robert’s photograph “Edward Maxey and Melody Danielson,” describes caring for his brother with Ms. Danielson as Robert was dying of AIDS.

While these voices may transport visitors back to earlier decades, the content of “Guise & Dolls” is resonant today. Citing the public emergence of Caitlyn Jenner, the Amazon television series “Transparent” and the film “The Danish Girl,” Ms. Hickson said that in the three years she worked on the exhibition, “all these gender issues have come to the fore.”

“Guise & Dolls” offers earlier reference points, including “precedents from 40 years ago, and even before that with Rose Sélavy,” she said. “It may be more in the public eye, but it is not new.”



“Self-Portrait,” Mapplethorpe Credit Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation



"Camouflage Self-Portrait," Warhol Credit The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc., via Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York