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Michigan News

Warhol Gets More Than '15 Minutes' at GRAM

Kaomi Goetz

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The work of artist Andy Warhol (Courtesy of the Grand Rapids Art Museum)

number two," Axsom explains.

Rick Axsom is organizing curator of the Warhol exhibit. He stands in front of a set of the iconic "Campbell's Soup II." The soup can is duplicated in larger-than-life size and presented as a series of multiple images. The piece is both whimsical and powerful.

Axsom says the contradictions in Warhol's images stir up complicated feelings about mass media, consumerism, and society. He says that tension stems from Warhol's own religious upbringing.

"Warhol was a Byzantine Catholic who grew up very poor in Pittsburgh. And his mom was at mass many times in the week and we know what that church looks like. And when you look at the icons that he saw hours and hours each week, you can't help but think the way Marilyn is presented, the way a soup can is presented, it has a kind of Byzantine iconic strength."

The exhibition was put together specifically for the Grand Rapids Art Museum. It brings together about a 100 paintings and screen prints of Warhol's work, with most on loan from the Warhol Museum. Warhol was interested in the country's fascination with celebrity and the effect of the rising power of mass media. Images of Chairman Mao, Marilyn Monroe, a set of prints on endangered species, and even Warhol's own untimely death in the late 1980s, seem to speak to the impermanence of celebrity.

It's that darker side Warhol's close associates say contribute to the complexity of his work. New York-based art historian Roberta Bernstein worked as Warhol's assistant at his studio space called "The Factory". She says Warhol was very interested in the wider social changes of the 1960s.

"Some of his subject matter of the 1960s, including the Jackies, the portfolio about the Kennedy assassination, his paintings of race riots as he called them, and electric chairs; you know he was very much aware of a range of things that were important issues of the time, most of which remain important issues, interestingly."

And that's perhaps why Warhol's work remains relevant today. Bernstein says Warhol seemed to quite enjoy his own success and,

GRAND RAPIDS (2008-03-14)
Work by one of the 20th century's most celebrated pop artists is coming to West Michigan. Andy Warhol: Rapid Exposure opens today at the Grand Rapids Art Museum.

Even if you don't remember the artist's name, you've seen the images of the Campbell's soup cans. It's arguably Andy Warhol's most famous work of art, whether you think it's art or not.

"This is a print portfolio, there are two portfolios, this is

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"...what the American dream was about. But at the same time be offering a critique. And I think that was unique about him."

The fact that a Warhol exhibition of this scale is being presented by the Grand Rapids Art Museum can't be overlooked. It's only the second temporary show for the museum since opening at its new downtown location. Museum staff won't disclose how much it cost to bring the Warhol show to Michigan. Henry Matthews is director of the galleries and collections at Grand Valley State University. He says the show could have cost upwards of \$100,000 and shows what the museum is capable of doing.

"It is a coup from that perspective and it will be exciting to see how well this artist has aged and continues to look fresh."

Andy Warhol: Rapid Exposure opens today and runs through June 15 at the Grand Rapids Art Museum.

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