

Andy Warhol may be in heaven but his art has a hellish darkness

A new Norman Rosenthal-curated exhibition at the Ashmolean is a haunting collection of the artist's work across a range of techniques and subjects

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Looking at Andy Warhol's painting of a bright pink penis caressed by deep black shadows from his series *Torsos/Sex Parts*, veteran curator Norman Rosenthal becomes nostalgic. When Rosenthal used to visit Warhol's studio in the 1980s, he remembers, the artist offered to portray him naked. Sadly, he was not willing to remove his clothes.

Turning from sex parts to the faces that stare from the walls, caught in flashbulb lightning, it hits me that everyone is naked in Warhol's art. The nudity is not that of the bedroom. It is the nakedness of the grave. Under every bright smear of lipstick lies a skull. In every camera-struck eye is the foreshadow of an empty socket. Or as TS Eliot, who Rosenthal thinks has a lot in common with Warhol, wrote: "Between the motion / And the act / Falls the Shadow."

There are shadows everywhere in the sensitive and haunting exhibition of Warhol's work that Rosenthal, former exhibitions secretary of the Royal Academy and responsible for some of the most influential exhibitions of modern times, has curated at Oxford's Ashmolean Museum. Shadows in the eyes of a cheap Jesus figure of which Warhol made an eerie painting only about a year before he died; shadows creeping over his self-portrait; shadows on their own in his *Shadow* paintings from the late 1970s.

Warhol's art has a shattering and mysterious authority. Even pictures that must have seemed slight when they were made possess, nearly 30 years after the 1987 gallbladder operation that killed him (succeeding where would-be assassin Valerie Solanas had failed), an uncanny power. Warhol's most savage critic in his lifetime, Robert Hughes, denounced him in the 1970s for playing courtier to the art-collecting royal family of Iran. Yet Warhol had an eye for impending disaster. His portraits of Ashraf Pahlavi, Princess of Iran, in this exhibition are strange relics of a lost age, a doomed empire, a Persian counterfactual: they were painted on the eve of the Shah's downfall. Pahlavi herself, twin sister of the Shah, died earlier this month, a 96-year-old exile from what is now the Islamic Republic of Iran.

One way to understand Warhol is as a history painter. His wish for his "society" portraits of the 1970s and 80s - the Princess of Iran hangs on a dazzling wall of them that also

includes such faces of their time as Paul Anka and Pia Zadora - was, Rosenthal reminds me, to all hang together in a huge display at New York's Museum of Modern Art. It was an ambition worthy of a Victorian artist like GF Watts - to create a complete portrait of his times. He wasn't only interested in princesses and pop stars either: there's a portrait here of the German politician Willy Brandt, as well as a painted map of every nuclear missile site in the USSR in 1985.

Warhol's morbid map of all those missiles aimed at America is yet another memento mori: not a political statement at all, but a map of death. It's tempting to believe he had a premonition of his own mortality, for his late work - represented by choice examples at the Ashmolean - is preoccupied with what comes after life. Warhol was a practicing Catholic, so when he painted the phrase "Heaven and hell are just one breath away!" he was not being in the least bit ironic. As the art historian John Richardson revealed in his eulogy at Warhol's funeral, this artist who feigned indifference and said that "frigid people always make it" secretly worked at a soup kitchen every Sunday.

"666 - Mark of the Beast" says another of his late paintings. Warhol may be in heaven but his art has a hellish darkness. That gothic quality comes out in a new way in the collection of Andy Hall, from which this exhibition of works that have never been seen before has been created. Hall, an Oxford graduate and eminent collector, has a lot of unexpected and unusual works by Warhol. As well as those curious portraits of an Iranian princess, he has a lot of smaller works, including small versions of paintings that Warhol also did on a much bigger scale. Their compressed scale and black frames add to their intensity and power. It is like the cabinet of curiosities of some European ruler, where portraits jostle with strange things.

Warhol's Oxidation paintings are some of the strangest. Warhol and his helpers at the Factory made them by urinating on copper paint. The resulting patterns of blue and green have the casual beauty of a Whistler nocturne. Hall's Oxidation paintings are cabinet-sized curios that make you wonder where the gutter ends and the stars begin. They look ethereal but are made in the most corporeal of ways. To paraphrase the Victorian critic John Ruskin's condemnation of Whistler, these pictures are a pot of piss flung in the face of the public.

Warhol's portraits of his fellow artists are perhaps his most cunning works. When he portrayed fellow pop artists such as James Rosenquist and Roy Lichtenstein in the 1960s, they were his peers: yet in his shadowed images they become Warhols, deathly and frozen, preserved in his museum of the remembered and the forgotten. His most potent portraits of an artist are his pictures of the great German sculptor Joseph Beuys. His face dominates one wall of the exhibition, looking, as Rosenthal observes, like a "ghost" from a German story.

Ghosts are everywhere in this perfect microcosm of Warhol's world. The thing about Warhol is that every original by him is different - in spite of his obsession with the reproduced image - and everyone he painted is a unique presence: the soul flitting off the photograph. Here are some of his portraits of New York socialite Ethel Scull, who was amazed when Warhol took her to a passport photo machine to have her picture taken.

The paintings he made from silkscreens of her passport snaps reveal her ghost in the machine.

Heaven and hell really are, you feel, in Warhol's memory palace, just one breath away.

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