

As seen in:

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Baby, you can drive his car

Warhol didn't drive, but his works returned again and again to the symbol of the American dream

In 1998, the Montclair Art Museum acquired a canvas called "Twelve Cadillacs" (1962) by Andy Warhol, a lino screen (that is, a mechanically reproduced drawing) of the front end of a gas-guzzler of that era, reprinted 12 times, in four rows of three each.

The picture was done as part of a project for Harper's Bazaar, so it blurs the line between fine and commercial art in every way. But it also differs from so many of Warhol's later images by not being photo-based. Warhol, or someone he employed, must have done the original drawing.

Though it's reproduced here over and over, that distinction in itself blurs Warhol's ultimately standard practice of never exhibiting anything that might show his own hand in a work, instead showing photos, image transfers, screenprints, or some other mechanical thing. But don't be fooled: Some Warhols are more Warhol-y than others.

"Twelve Cadillacs" is at the center of "Warhol and Cars: American Icons," which brings 35 paintings, drawings and maquettes by the artist, along with photos of him at work, to Montclair into June. It is the first exhibition we know of devoted exclusively to Warhol's imagery of automobiles, which was a considerable focus of his career. After all, one of his car pictures, "Green Car Crash (Green Burning Car I)," printed just one year after "Twelve Cadillacs," set the record high price for a Warhol in 2007 when a Greek shipping scion bought it for \$71.7 million at Christie's in New York.

The closest we come to "Green Burning Car" in Montclair is the luridly red "5 Deaths" (also 1963), a small screenprint with acrylic additions that is based on an Associated Press photo, which is also handily here in Montclair. From the Associated Press, we learn that the source picture documents just two deaths,

but hey, who's counting — Warhol is always hyping things, perhaps in honor of his source materials, almost exclusively newspapers in this, his best era. "5 Deaths" is a Ben-Day dot smear, prurient and hard to read, like much of what went into newspapers in their heyday, and all the more vivid for that.

"5 Deaths," like many of the other objects here, is on loan from the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, which cooperated with curator Gail Stavitsky in setting up this show. Like all the recent Montclair exhibits, there's an element of set design to "Warhol and Cars," this time a tin foil-covered entrance (Warhol's famous Factory walls were coated with tin foil, too) to a video documenting the artist's practice, with a side room filled with the silvery mylar "pillows" or "clouds" filled with helium, just like back in the day.

Everything else here is about cars of one sort or another. But the most interesting drawing is a very early one Warhol did in the summer he was on probation from the Carnegie school for poor performance, a drawing of his brother's fruit and vegetable truck and the ladies who came buying ("Women and Produce Truck," 1947). It's a wonderful drawing, based on his summer job which might well have become permanent, with the curious device of showing the women's bodies as if they were nude through their dresses. Warhol used a portfolio of these drawings to gain re-entry to the school, so everything worked out, but this and a handful of early commercial drawings show Warhol's line was burglarized from Ben Shahn. How the cool once learned from the hot is a revelation.

On the deeper, philosophical question of what cars meant to Andy Warhol, "Warhol and Cars" is appropriately silent, except to note at one point that his family, all Czech immigrants, didn't own a talisman of American freedom. They did have his brother's truck, but that's not the same. The Chryslers and Cadillacs that fill the walls in Montclair have some of the unreachable force of the American Dream in them, but they don't look like the sort of cars Warhol would himself drive (if he'd known how).

In the foyer, though, there's a photo of Warhol with Keith Haring and Tony Shafrazi and his wife and daughter, sitting in the car Shafrazi decorated with his trademark Flintstone- and Jetsons-styled paintings.



Warhol, in the passenger seat with a toy soldier or something stuck in his wig, looks profoundly uncomfortable and a little lost, as he often did.

But not out of place. Tony and Keith look delighted to just be in the frame with him, as they should, hung in a museum against a wall covered in wallpaper made out of "Twelve Cadillacs." But the only car Warhol could possibly look like he belonged in was a joke by another artist.

Warhol has come to represent something very American, something about consumption and selfishness and celebrity, but he was in himself none of those things, and those of us who try to understand his art as a projection of himself need to remember that. As Stavitsky quotes him in the catalog, his secret to being original was in finding ways to distinguish himself from his contemporaries, uncovering techniques "where I could come out first — like quantity and repetition."

Many of the car crash paintings repeat the scene or its details in different sizes on the same canvas. That hints at the ceaseless reproduction in a mass society, just as the slipped registers and blurry printing remind us of newspaper processes. Of course, he always said he liked it that way, but the trashy materials and casual choice of subject matter demean the seriousness of his approval.

The real subject of the car paintings is the endless generation of faux individuality in the emerging consumer culture. Remember, when Warhol was turning these things out, car companies were the biggest corporations in America, paying for all the most popular TV shows and sponsoring much of what would become American culture in the post-war years. Their ads almost always featured a pretty girl draped over the hood, like an accessory you could buy (never mind that Warhol wasn't in the market). And they offered it all to you, at a reasonable price, each, as Devo later put it, "in your own individualized color."

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Warhol and Cars: American Icons

Where: Montclair Art Museum, 3 South Mountain Ave., Montclair

When: Through June 19. Open Wednesdays to Sundays, noon to 5 p.m.


How much: \$12; \$10 for seniors and students; free for children younger than 12. Also free the first Friday of every month. Call (973) 746-5555 or visit montclair-art.com.



Andy Warhol's 1962 silk screen "Twelve Cadillacs" is part of the exhibit "Warhol and Cars: American Icons" at Montclair Art Museum. Above, a 1985 photo of Warhol in a car with fellow artists Kenny Scharf, driving, and Keith Haring, as well as Scharf's wife and daughter.



Warhol's "Volkswagen" (1985) was done in acrylic and silkscreen on linen.

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