

Andy Warhol's mature abstract works

By Ariella Budick

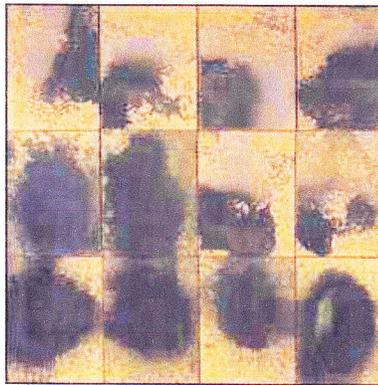
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By the 1970s, Andy Warhol was known as much as a professional partier as he was as an artist. He schmoozed with glitterati under twinkling disco lights and funded his acquisitive passions by churning out glam portraits. He co-founded the magazine *Interview* to launch aspiring A-listers on their 15 minutes while he basked in his own more durable fame.

His artistic reputation rested on the iconic works of the 1960s – the Campbells soup cans, the Brillo boxes, the Marilyns, Elvises and Jackies, the silkscreened car crashes. Having announced his official retirement from painting in 1965, Warhol disengaged his creativity from canvas altogether, focusing on film, business ventures, gossip, fashion and nightlife. Ric Burns's recent documentary, *Andy Warhol* (in the American Masters series), more or less ends with the artist's almost-death at the hands of Valerie Solanas, a disgruntled misfit who showed up at his studio with a gun one day in 1968. The film, echoing conventional wisdom, suggests that Warhol never fully recovered his spark.

But between 1978, when the 51-year-old Warhol confided to his diary that "I wasn't creative since I was shot", and his death eight years later, something must have happened to reignite Warhol's curiosity. In the Brooklyn Museum's surprisingly captivating survey of those years, his work erupts with inventiveness. *Andy Warhol: The Last Decade* brings together 45 paintings by a passionate artist furiously churning out new ideas. A rising tide of self-disgust and an opportune trip to the galleries of Paris seem to have shoved Warhol towards new insight. "I wanted to rush home and paint and stop doing society portraits," he told his diary.

The first thing he did was pee, right on to the canvas, in looping drips and blobs. The "Piss Paintings", now more decorously called the "Oxidation Paintings", were Warhol's part-insult, part-homage to Jackson Pollock. Warhol came of age when the abstract expressionists ruled, and though he spurned their macho posturing and spiritual pretensions, he defined himself, at least in part, in opposition. He answered their furrowed brows by lifting his own in ironic detachment. Where they branded mass culture as kitsch, he embraced its cheerful mundanity.



But he continued to see abstract painting as a heroic force to be reckoned with and playfully set out to meet the challenge.

Andy Warhol's 'Oxidation Painting (in 12 parts)' (1978), acrylic and urine on linen

He gave each canvas a metallic copper glaze that reacted to the acid in his urine, generating gorgeous glowing splatters and ominous dark voids. It's hard to reconcile the paintings' ethereal exquisiteness with the baseness of their origins, but it's that clash of spirituality and physicality that Warhol wanted to evoke, likening the melty drips in his paintings to "holy pictures that cry all the time". He saw those same contradictions in the work of Pollock, the Jungian spiritualist and uncouth rube who relieved himself in Peggy Guggenheim's fireplace.

Not that there was anything casual about Warhol's creations. Warhol emphasised in an interview how demanding the technique was: "If I asked someone to do an 'Oxidation' painting, and they just didn't think about it, it would just be a mess. You try to figure out a good design."

Even at his most abstract, Warhol never let go of the world entirely. In the eerie "Shadows" of 1979, a series of black shapes and voids strobe-lit by itinerant bursts of colour were screened from photographs of shadows cast by random objects. The results are ghostly: the absence of light acquires an almost palpable bulk, while the visible world dematerialises.

Warhol evokes ambiguity on the grandest scale in the monumental Rorschach paintings, inspired by the inkblots used in psychological tests to unlock a patient's pathologies. He took evident pleasure in the ways Rorschach cards were simultaneously abstract and representational, industrial and organic, mass-produced yet attuned to individual psyches. Rather than merely magnify the standard diagnostic patterns he designed his own, idiosyncratic splotches, coating one side of a huge canvas in ink, folding it in half to produce the mirror image. Viewers see masks or trees, bones or butterflies. Black linear areas speak to some, while others read figures in the negative space.



Andy Warhol's 'Camouflage' (1986), acrylic and silkscreen ink on linen

It's tempting to believe that, in his maturity, an artist who had always gloried in surfaces suddenly discovered psychic depths. But, ever enigmatic, Warhol claimed that the inkblot paintings said nothing about him because he actually had no inner life. "I was going to hire somebody to read into them, to pretend it was me, so that they'd be a little more ... interesting," he said. "Because all I would see would be a dog's face or something like a tree or a bird or a flower. Somebody else could see a lot more."

Perhaps the more revealing series was the "Camouflage Paintings", in which a pattern made for hiding disappeared into a design signifying Warhol's favourite kind of content: nothing at all.

In the last year of his life, he began a series of religious paintings based on Leonardo's "Last Supper". In the best and grandest of these, objects and symbols float about amid Christ's revelation of an apostle's disloyalty. A couple of motorcycles defy gravity, alluding, perhaps, to the Hell's Angels. The eye of the owl from the Wise brand potato chip logo hovers at the right hand of Christ. Words spelling out "The Big C" (clipped from a newspaper article about cancer) hover in the foreground. At the centre is a red price tag with yellow numerals reading \$6.99. Warhol is profligate with suggestion but stingy with explanation, and a torrent of contradictory messages flow from this enigmatic work: religion has become just another consumer product; there is salvation in buying things, divinity in doing 100 miles an hour down the open road; Americans enjoy a prosperity bestowed by God; Prosperity is America's Last Supper, the feast before the final torment. The puzzle is the point. Warhol ended his career as he began it, with a beatific poker face.

'Andy Warhol: The Last Decade', Brooklyn Museum, New York, until September 12.
www.brooklynmuseum.org