ROY LICHTENSTEIN
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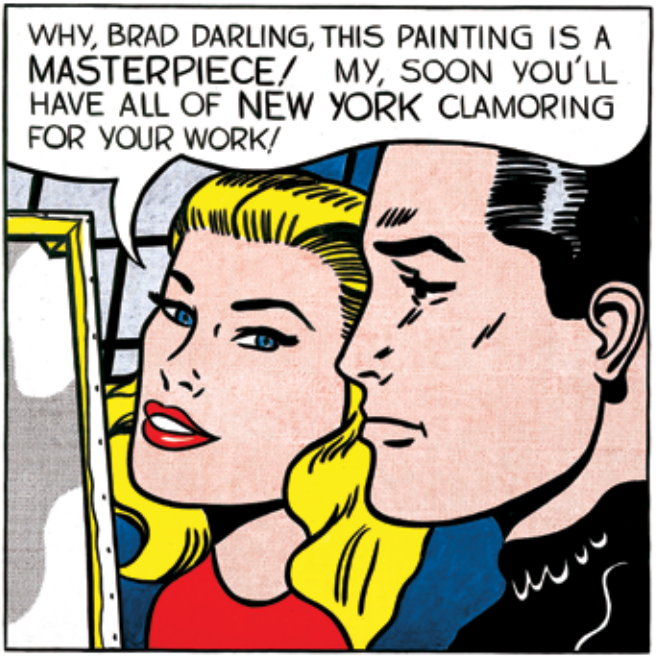
essay by
Kenneth E. Silver

September 15 – October 30, 2010

LEO CASTELLI

WHAT ABOUT BRAD? LICHTENSTEIN'S MEN

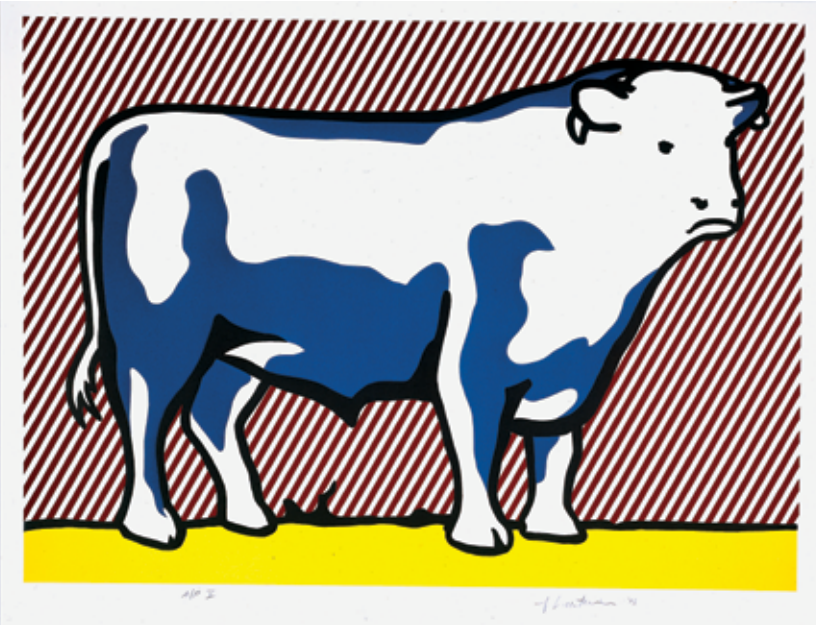
Kenneth E. Silver



In *Masterpiece* (1962), the painting in which these now famous words are uttered by a blond beauty with coyly tilted head and admiring gaze, the handsome artist in question presents to the viewer a granite-like profile that dominates the right-hand side of the picture. What *about* Brad?

Masterpiece, 1962
Oil on canvas, 54 x 54 inches

Was he really so stoic? Did his dark good looks disguise artistic anguish? Were his companion's words painful reminders of dashed hopes and years of artistic obscurity? Or was Brad as dumb as he looks? We can't even say that what he's painted on the canvas at the left is any good, since we only glimpse

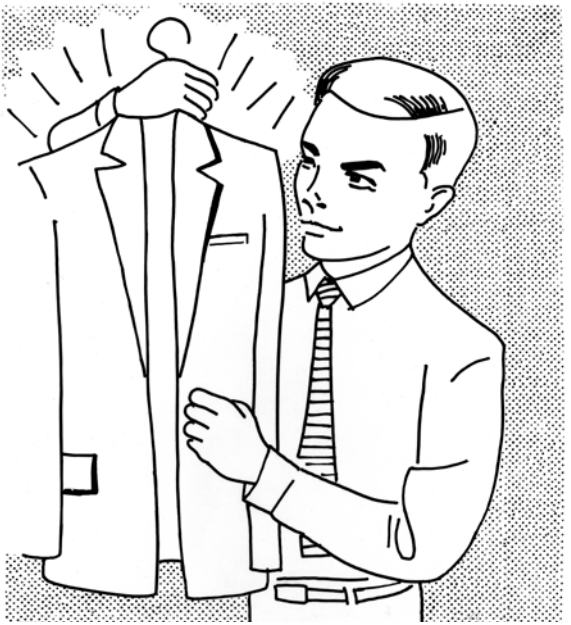


it from behind. "If the feminine in Lichtenstein's work is consistently assigned the qualities of *surface,* whether as surfaces exposed to the viewer's gaze or for the inscription of graphic notation," Michael Lobel has observed, "the masculine is repeatedly represented (or precisely *not* visually represented)

Bull VII, 1973
Lithograph, screenprint and line cut on Arjomari paper, 27 x 35 inches, Edition of 26 with 9 APs

as an unseen or hidden presence, refused to the viewer."[1] Although, as we shall see, things are a bit more complicated than this, the recognition that the men and women in Roy Lichtenstein's art inhabit, or *embody,* distinctly different spheres of experience is a good point of departure.

[1] Michael Lobel, Image Duplicator: *Roy Lichtenstein and the Emergence of Pop Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 156.



It was inevitable, given how submerged all identifiable subject matter was in Abstract Expressionism, that gendered imagery, and sexual imagery, would come rushing back with a vengeance once the postwar American art movement had run its course: Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley in the art of Warhol;

Man with Coat, 1961
Pochoir, brush, pen and India ink, 22⅝ x 20 inches

Wesselman's Great American Nudes; wet lips, painted fingernails, and wisps of hair from Rosenquist. In contrast to De Kooning's Women (ferocious, vital, or debased, depending on your point of view) – the one great exception to the rule of Action Painting's non-specificity – Roy Lichtenstein's comic-strip girls were, like so much of Pop Art's subject matter, unthreatening. His usually unnamed blonds, redheads, and occasional brunettes were clearly ideas of femininity first and only living, breathing entities afterwards, if one could believe in the overwrought emotional lives of his cartoon drama queens. As Cécile Whiting has pointed out,[2] Lichtenstein's depicted females mostly suffer: waiting, pining, resigning themselves to the whims of their male counterparts. Or they dream, offer emotional support to their men, or live vicariously through them. This is high-art avant-

[2] Cécile Whiting, *A Taste for Pop: Pop Art, Gender, and Consumer Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 113-115.

Portrait of Allan Kaprow, 1961
Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches

garde female imagery before the advent of the women's movement of the early 1970s.

When Jeff Koons interviewed Lichtenstein's widow, Dorothy, in 2008, she pointed out that, "Towards the end of the sixties, [Roy] was already working on something else. If he had tried to make the same paintings during the rise of feminism," she astutely observed, "I think there would have been a backlash – perhaps people would have thought that he was using women as objects."[3] For nearly a decade, from 1966 through 1976, images of women disappaer almost completely from Lichtenstein's work. Male images of one kind or another were somewhat more prevalent during these years, like his lithographic portrait of Mao (1971), his Bull series (1973), ironic takes on the cows of Andy Warhol and of Theo van Doesburg, and two Futurist painted self-portraits

[3] Dorothy Lichtenstein and Jeff Koons (Florent Restaurant, Gansevoort Street, April 11, 2008), in *Lichtenstein: Girls*, exh. cat. (New York: Gagosian Gallery and Yale University Press, 2008), p. 15.

Portrait of Ivan Karp, 1961
Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches

(1976). Not that picturing men was new to the artist. Lichtenstein's comic-strip fighter pilots were nearly as well-known as his Pop heroines, their lives of ac-

tion in such striking contrast to the *vita contemplativa* of his females. In works like *Okay, Hot-Shot* (1963), he produces a distinctly male *son et lumière* extravaganza by means of a highly activated composi-

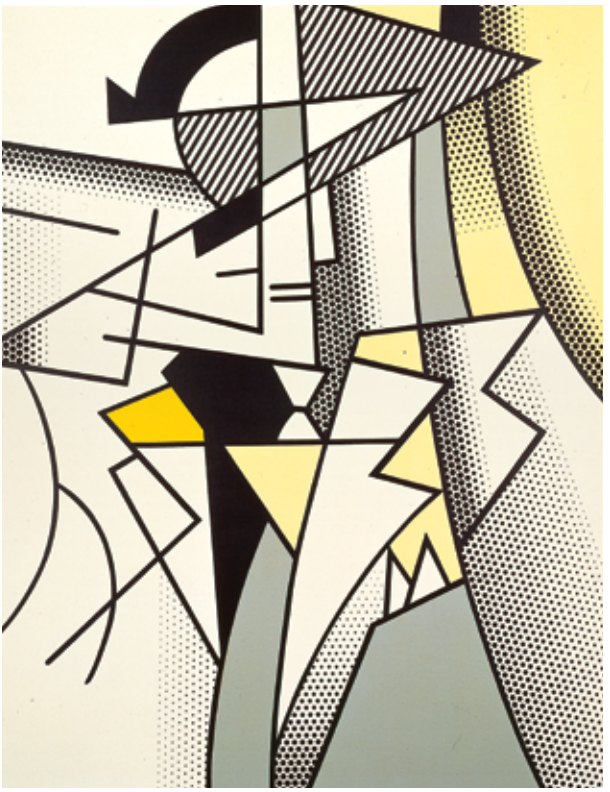
Portrait, 1977
Oil and Magna on canvas, 60 x 50 inches

tion, aggressive dialogue ("Okay, hot-shot. Okay! I'm pouring!"), and an onomatopoeic evocation of battle –"VOOMP!" Nonetheless, Lichtenstein's tendency to stereotype men is commensurate with his stereotyping of women, sometimes to the point of making men literally interchangeable. In a brilliant send-up of the notion of artistic originality–and of Abstract Expressionism's cult of individuality–he painted identical portraits, in 1961, of his friend from the Rutgers art department, artist Allan Kaprow, and of the director of Leo Castelli's gallery, Ivan Karp. Less extreme but exemplary of this tendency to homogenize human physical traits are his pre-Pop, early-1950s pictures of knights-in-multicolored-armor and Native Americans males, like the oil painting *Indian* (1951) and *Two Dancing Indians* (1952), a woodblock print, in which the intertwined figures are composed of a similar network of lines. And there are many other men in Lichtenstein's art, usually fictive or archetypal, including gas station attendants, standard-issue businessmen, Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Popeye, and Bluto.[4]

[4] See Bradford Collins's astute mapping of Lichtenstein's male and female imagery on his biography in "Modern Romance: Lichtenstein's Comic Book Paintings," *American Art*, vol. 17, no. 2 (Summer, 2003), pp. 60-85.

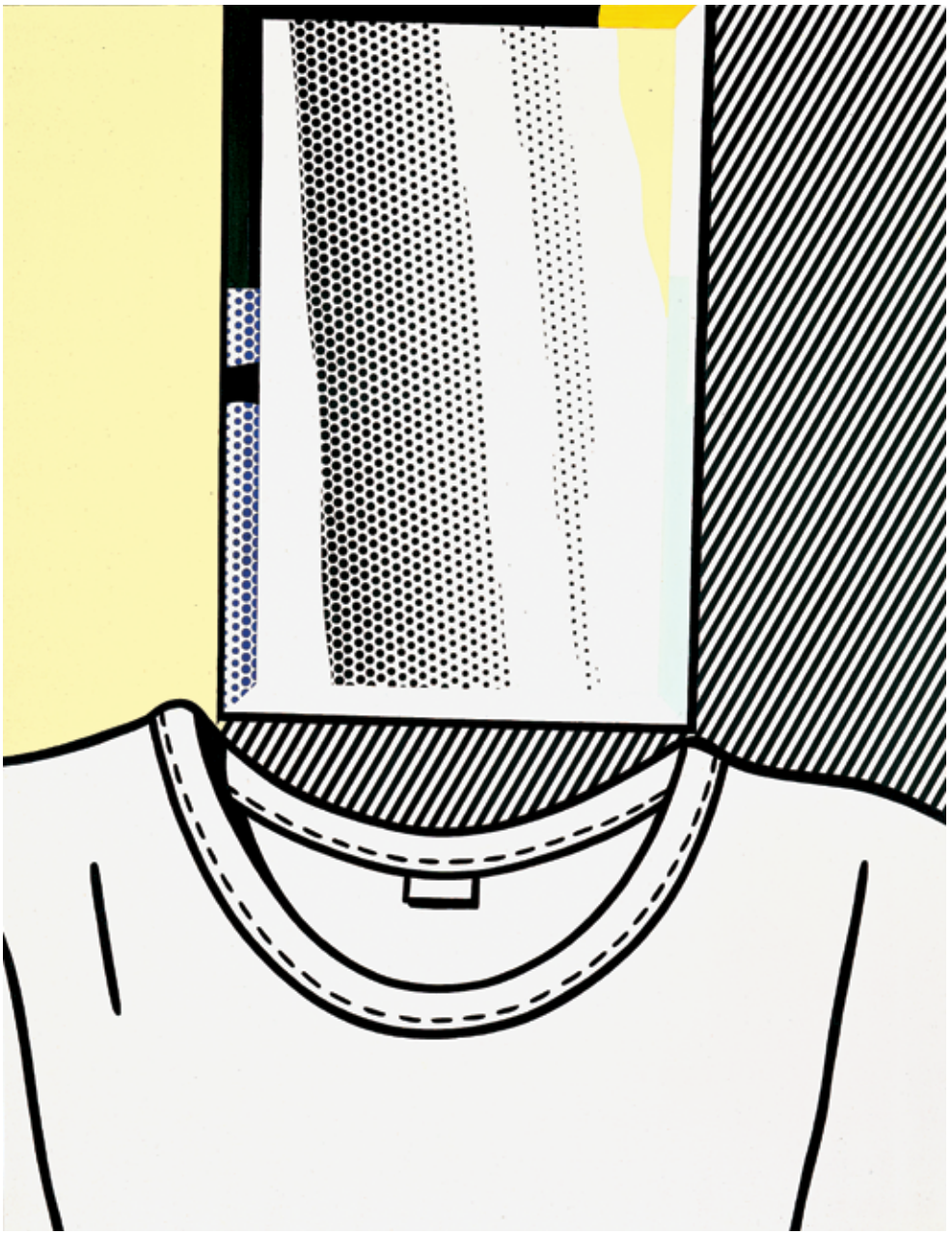
Two Dancing Indians, 1952
Woodcut on Beverly Ingres paper, 19 x 14 3/8 inches, Edition of 11

That Roy Lichtenstein tended to depict men and women as distinctly different entities, each partaking of a set of associations rendered in visual terms, is

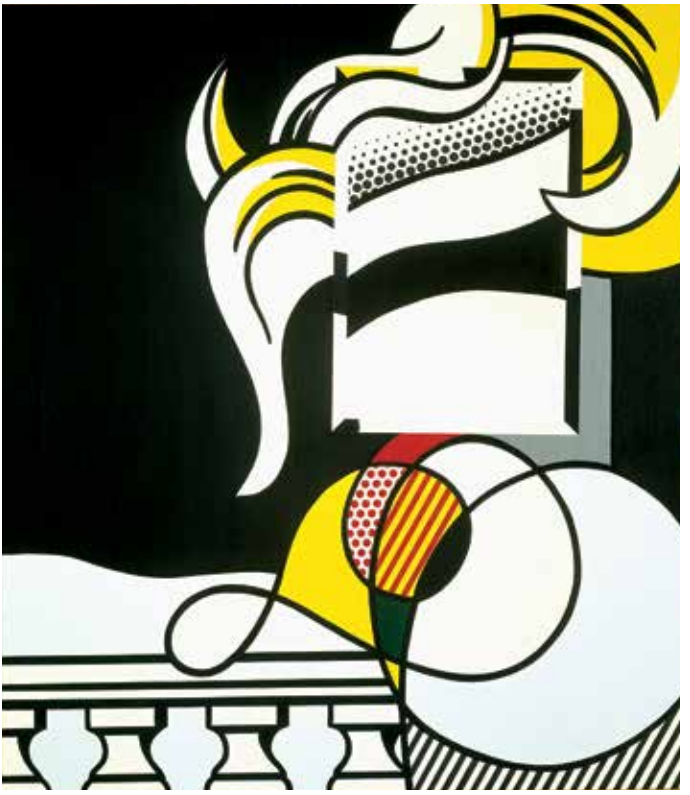


not altogether surprising, given the time and place of his upbringing. His childhood, youth, and early adult years were marked by a separation of the sexes that typified American bourgeois life, and American life more broadly, for generations. He attended the all-boys Franklin School on Manhattan's Upper West

Self-Portrait II, 1976
Oil and Magna on canvas, 70 x 54 inches



Self-Portrait, 1978
Oil and Magna on canvas, 70 x 54 inches



Side and all-boys summer camps in upstate New York (Sagamore) and Maine (Belgrade); he pledged Phi Sigma Delta fraternity at Ohio State University and lived for a period in the fraternity house; and in 1943 he was inducted into the U.S. Army, where he served for the next two years, in stateside training and European combat. Although there were exceptions, of course, including that of Lichtenstein's own first marriage to Isabel Wilson, whom he met when

Portrait, 1977
Oil and Magna on canvas, 48 x 42 inches

she was a gallery assistant and later became an interior decorator, up the 1960s men tended to go to work and women to raise children and look after the home. This basic division of labor, which typified the life of the working classes, blue-and-white-collar alike, found its way into the worldview of Roy Lichtenstein as surely as it did the national psyche.

As Dorothy Lichtenstein noted, Roy had moved on to other things than comic-book males and females by the time the women's movement was in the news, typified by Germaine Greer's feminist

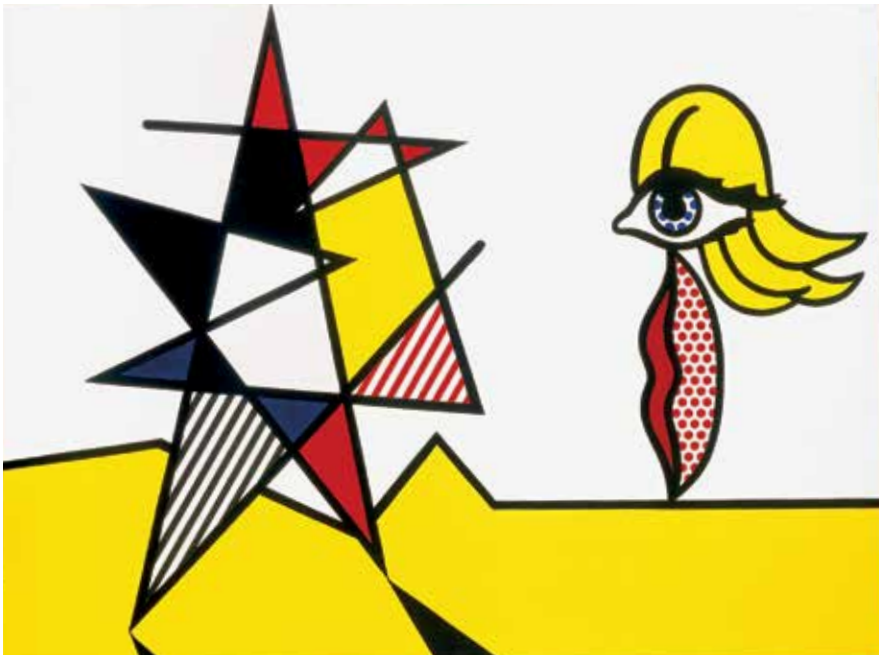
This Figure is Pursued by That Figure, 1978
Oil and Magna on canvas, 40 x 36 inches

tract, *The Female Eunuch,* which in 1970 became an international best-seller. Yet, if one looks attentively, as has Jack Cowart, it becomes apparent that by the second half of the decade a substrate of sexualized signs, male and female, makes its appearance in Lichtenstein's art, highly coded and quite consistent.[5] One of the jump-off points for the artist's reengagement with sex-and-gender imagery was Futurism, or rather Lichtenstein's recycling of Futurist art in his inimitable, cartoon-strip, Benday dot signature style, specifically his self-portraits of 1975-6, pictures based on a 1912-13 self-portrait by Paris-based Italian Futurist Gino Severini. These methodically fractured modernist heads bear no resemblance to the artist, unsurprising in that none of his men or women are mimetic. But Lichtenstein does establish here what was about to be for him a principle of visual maleness: the acute angle. A network of multicolored angular forms, all Futurist-and-Cubist derived, are descendants of the star shapes he used for his early pictures of Indians, and transmutations of the explosive male imagery of his Pop Art period. These, as we shall see shortly, would be half of his gendered vocabulary.

Meanwhile, Lichtenstein devised several other formulas for men, variations on the "unseen or hidden" maleness that Lobel alerted us to, really multi-

[5] "What are here called conversation paintings begin with *Nude on Beach,* 1977, where a biomorphic perforated shape is contrasted with an angular perforated block (Swiss cheese). This initiates almost a dozen works where the artist, in a nonerotic way, responds to notions of stereotyped sex forms," in Jack Cowart, *Roy Lichtenstein 1970-1980,* exh. cat. (New York: Hudson Hills Press and St. Louis Art Museum, 1981), p. 115.

Interior, 1977
Oil and Magna on canvas, 90 x 60 inches

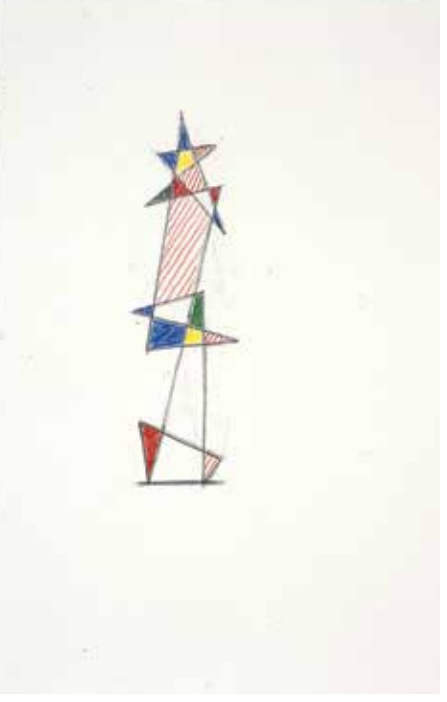


ple displacements for the masculine image, all funny and even ridiculous, like *Portrait* (1977), in which a huge piece of bright yellow "Swiss" cheese takes the place of the head, floating above the suit and tie of a nattily turned out, highly conventional man. This nonsensical juxtaposition of human image and object, this frustration of expectation, is Surrealist in derivation, probably based on related displacements in the art of René Magritte, like his painting *The Great War* (1964), where a large green apple floats before the face of one of the Belgian artist's ubiquitous male figures in a bowler hat (Magritte's

Two Figures, 1977
Oil and Magna on canvas, 36 x 48 inches

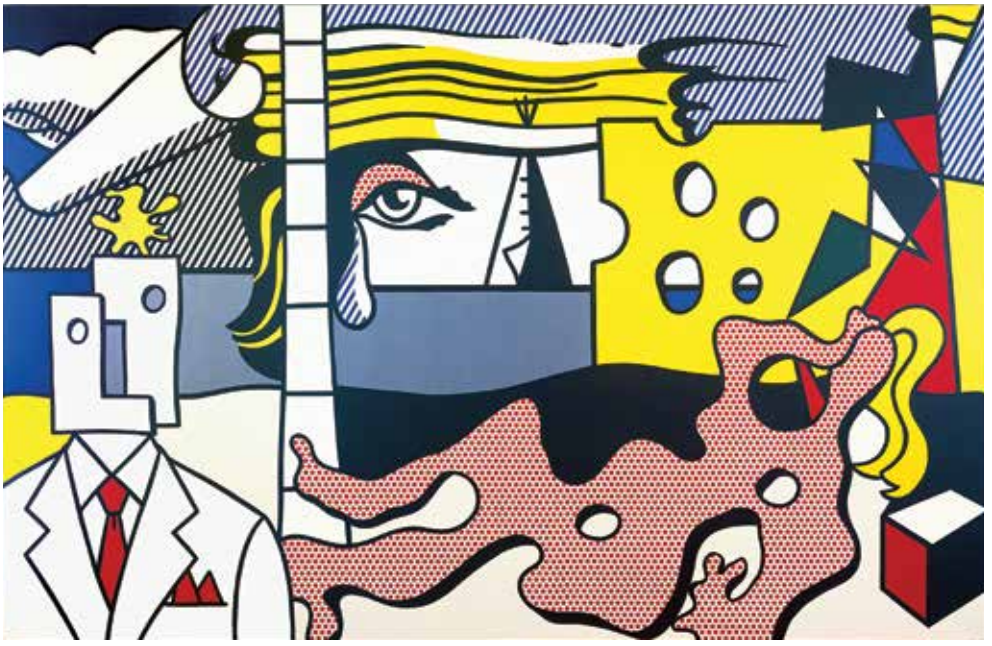
art was much discussed and collected by the post-Abstract Expressionist artists, as exemplified by Jasper Johns' acquisition of Magritte's great painting, *The Key of Dreams,* 1930). At the same time, this self-deprecating male image was appropriately modest, good form for a well brought-up American male of Lichtenstein's background, and should probably not to be taken too seriously as an accurate evaluation of the artist's self-regard.

Closely akin is *Self-Portrait* (1978), in which a large mirror now assumes the place of the missing head, here mounted atop a man's white t-shirt. Obviously more "literary" in its implications than a hunk of cheese, the mirror is an apt symbol for any and all representational art-making, especially for the art of Roy Lichtenstein, which was often held up, rightly or wrongly, as a reflection of post-war American consumer society and popular culture. Mirroring the spectator, as opposed to revealing the inner workings of the artist's psyche, or soul, is also a way to preserve power, a variation on the idea of the masculine "strong



Study for Imperfect Figure, 1987
Graphite and colored pencils on paper, 11 x 7 ½ inches

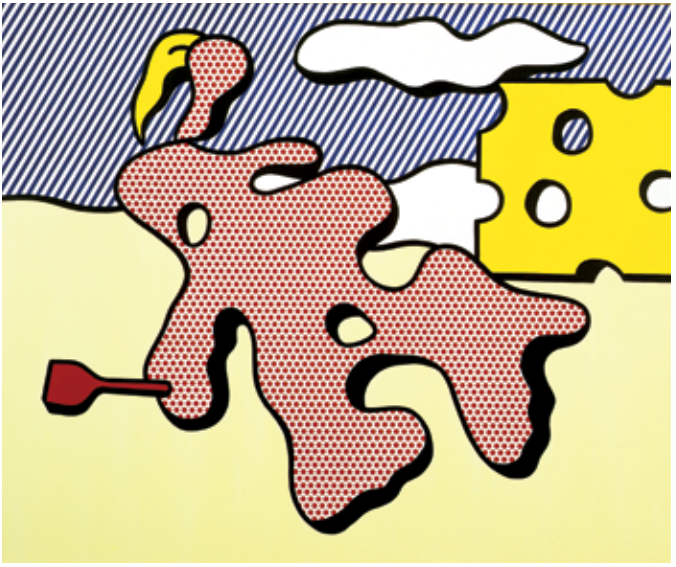
silent type" or "man of few words." Interestingly, the mirror in the visual arts has more typically been associated with women than it has with men, and with the



notion of vanity, and this is even true for Lichtenstein. The year before he chose to represent himself as a mirror, he painted a female version, *Portrait* (1977), in which the woman's face is replaced by a rectangular mirror, atop which grows luxuriant wavy tresses, with her upper body composed of several arabesques, poised before a balustrade (an architectural form carried over from his Entablature series of 1971-2). That Lichtenstein was thinking specifically about the

Landscape with Figures, 1977
Oil and Magna on canvas, 64 x 100 inches

traditional image of female vanity at this moment is evident in *Interior* (1977), from his Abstraction series, where woman is represented by a literal vanity, or dressing table with mirror, composed primarily of curvilinear shapes (above and below a rectangular table-top) and man is symbolized by a modernist construction of acute angles, piled high like a late-Cubist sculpture (and inspired by an image of Kid Flash trying to make contact, by "vibrating" at tremendous speed, with the heroine Ryla, in the comic book, *The Flash,* of March 1963). This, then, is Lichtenstein's full-blown gendered twosome: the organic, curvilinear, alluring female construction and the sharp, angled, active male.



Nude on Beach, 1977
Oil and Magna on canvas, 50 x 60 inches

As is often the case for Lichtenstein, Picasso's example was crucial here. Two works on paper of 1933 seem especially relevant for this gendered confrontation, played out in a nearly abstract mode: the etching *Model and Surrealist Figure,* from the Vollard Suite, where a garlanded, classical female nude contemplates and gently touches a Surrealist construction of found objects with "diverse sexual possibilities"[6] and a pen-and-ink drawing, *Two Figures on a Beach,* acquired by The Museum of Modern Art in 1972, in which two Surrealist constructions confront each other, the seemingly male pile-up of found objects, at the left,

holding aloft a small plaster bust of a woman, its reflection readable in a mirror held before the face of the Surreal female pile-up, at the right. We might think of

[6] Riva Castelman, catalogue entry for *Model and Surrealist Figure,* in William Rubin, *Picasso in the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: MoMA and the New York Graphic Society, 1972), p. 142.

Drawing for Figures, 1977
Graphite and colored pencils on paper, 6 x 7 13/16 inches

this inward-turning art as Post-Modernist Surrealism, an important precedent for Lichtenstein's Post-Modernist Pop, in which the signifiers of the artist's invented language play among themselves, unbeholden (seemingly) to naturalistic antecedent. Picasso was not the only model for this sort of gendered invention from whole cloth. Modern art has consistently returned to the psychodrama of sexual difference as a sign of difference more broadly. In Duchamp's *Large Glass* (1915-23, The Philadelphia Museum), the Bachelor Machine and the Bride confront each other as pure, untethered desire, and in the collage, *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* (1956, Kunsthalle, Tübingen), the answer to the rhetorical question of Richard Hamilton's title is: what distinguishes modernity from the past, and makes us peculiarly free, is the utterly manufactured and inauthentic nature of nature itself, with sex roles determined by media and mass-marketing.

Drawings for Figure in Landscape and The Conversation, 1977
Graphite and colored pencils on paper, 12 x 9 inches

Once launched, Lichtenstein's new Adam and Eve of the late-1970s—coded, low-keyed, unrelentingly ironic--were subject to the nuanced and continuous development so distinctive of the artist's modus operandi. In *Two Figures* (1977), an obviously feminine "sculpture" (a giant Surrealist eye balanced on Man Ray-like freestanding red lips, topped off with a great wave of blond hair) appears to turn her back to the now familiar male in the landscape, the abstract construction that seems to point its acute angles at her. It becomes obvious, the next year, that our supposition of a cold-shouldered female response to a male proposition was correct, for in the painting *This Figure Pursued by that Figure* (1978), Mr. Angle is in hot pursuit of Ms. Curves (who, like a performing seal, balances a beach ball on her head!), in an updating of activated Baroque works like Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne*. Wondering how else he might fashion sexual difference for his late-1970s repertory company of form, Lichtenstein saw several other possibilities on the

Drawing for Stepping Out, 1978
Pencil and colored pencils on paper, 12 1/2 x 6 3/4 inches

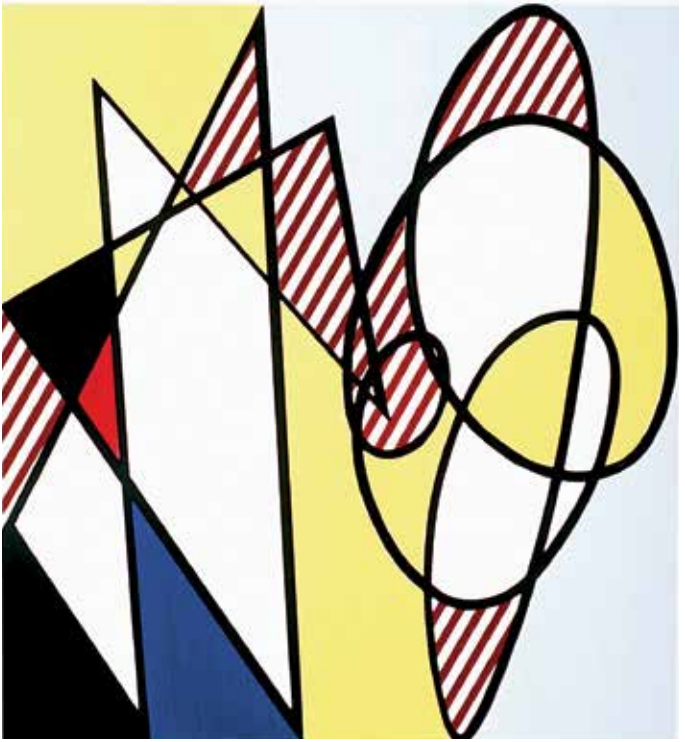
horizon. In *Drawing for Figures* (1977) an Arp-like biomorphic female blob with a big hole in (her) center is surrounded by male surrogates: a dangerous-looking mirror fragment (now returned to its male identity), along with Mr. Angle, and a major new male

player, the plywood cut-out, distinctly reminiscent of a David Smith sculpture in its profile, but surely also derived from Magritte's *The Conquerer* (1925, Private Collection), in which a wooden plank, thrust

The Conversation, 1984
Painted and patinated bronze, 48 1/2 x 41 x 11 3/4 inches, Edition of 6

up from the collar of formal attire, replaces a man's head and asserts his masculine prerogatives (at the same time that it betrays his typical male "thickness": Roy Lichtenstein told Jack Cowart that he felt like a "blockhead").[7] In a variation of this scene, drawn below on the same sheet, a female form was erased and replaced by a red snake, the Garden of Eden idea clearly on the artist's mind.

The year 1977 was a veritable orgy of these abstract sexual surrogates in Lichtenstein's art.



Collage for Best Buddies, 1990
Tape, painted and printed paper on board, 35 1/2 x 31 3/4 inches

[7] Jack Cowart to the author, May 13, 2010.

Numerous studies and major paintings resulted, a few of which combined the gendered symbols that we can now readily decode: the male hunk of

Swiss cheese, the notched male wooden plank, the masculine angled Cubist construction, and the female surrogates—multicolored arabesques, Arp-inspired biomorphic blobs, freestanding, vertically-oriented female lips, eyes, and blond waves of hair. Sometimes Lichtenstein creates a vast Surrealist landscape space onto which these forms are projected and where they interact in surprising, unpredictable combinations. Elsewhere, and in the years

Collage for Study of Hands, 1980
Tape, painted and printed paper on board, 26 x 26 3/8 inches

to come, he hones in on one or two of these invented "characters," creating portraits, or man-and-woman scenarios, like *The Conversation* (1984), in which a rather naturalistic blond female, all curvilinear vulnerability, appears to listen to a darkly silhouetted male

blockhead, the notched "David Smith" kind we know so well, whose rigid, open mouth looks as if it could talk, or lecture her, in perpetuity. We also now recognize *Imperfect Sculpture* (1995), which we might formerly have considered a mere abstract bibelot (with its Mondrian-derived primaries and black-and-

Imperfect Sculpture, 1995
Stained cast iron and painted stainless steel plates, 30 3/4 x 34 3/4 x 5 inches, Edition of 6 with 2 APs

white), as a male portrait, none other than Mr. Angle himself, or Mr. Imperfect, usually in hopeless hot pursuit of Ms. Alluring Curves, but here presented in splendid modernist isolation. Yet, sexual difference was not always a precondition for visual confrontation in Lichtenstein's art. In at least one case, *Collage for Best Buddies* (1991), his male-and-female surrogates are allied in friendship. Indeed, they appear to hold hands, as one of the sharp points of the angular male abstract field at the left rests in one of the rounded precincts of the female configuration at the right, their different-ness united by a shared pattern of diagonal red stripes. This, then, is how Roy Lichtenstein, the master ironist of late-20th-century art, could create an image bordering on the sentimental. In the purely formal "marriage" of manly and feminine abstraction, the great Pop artist—who had spent his entire career proving that there was no such thing as a non-allusive art—finally allowed himself a moment of old-fashioned modernist romance. •

I am immensely grateful to Jack Cowart, Clare Bell, and Barbara Bertozzi Castelli, who generously shared with me their knowledge of Roy Lichtenstein's art and their memories of the artist.

exhibition checklist

Indian, 1951
Oil on canvas
24 x 18 inches

Two Dancing Indians, 1952
Woodcut on Beverly Ingres paper
19 x 14 3/8 inches
Edition of 11

Portrait of Allan Kaprow, 1961
Oil on canvas
24 x 20 inches

Portrait of Ivan Karp, 1961
Oil on canvas
24 x 20 inches

Drawing for Baseball Manager, c.1963
Graphite on paper
6 x 4 5/16 inches

Von Karp, 1963
Graphite and colored pencils on paper
5 3/4 x 5 5/8 inches

Drawing for Self Portrait, 1975
Graphite and colored pencils on paper
13 3/16 x 11 inches

Drawing for Self Portrait II, 1976
Graphite and colored pencils on paper
13 3/4 x 11 inches

Drawings for Figures in Landscape and The Conversation, 1977
Graphite and colored pencils on paper
12 x 9 inches

Drawing for Portrait, 1977
Graphite and colored pencils on paper
6 5/16 x 5 1/2 inches

Drawing for The Conversation, 1977
Graphite and colored pencils on paper
10 13/16 x 7 5/8 inches

Drawing for Two Figures, 1977
Graphite and colored pencils on paper
5 3/16 x 5 5/8 inches

Drawing for Two Figures and Untitled (Surrealist), 1977
Graphite and colored pencils on paper
5 3/4 x 3 3/4 inches

Drawing for Woman with Lollipop, Figures in Landscape and Untitled (Surrealist), 1977
Graphite and colored pencils on paper
2 1/4 x 4 15/16 inches

Interior, 1977
Oil and Magna on canvas
90 x 60 inches

Portrait, 1977
Oil and Magna on canvas
48 x 42 inches

Two Figures, 1977
Oil and Magna on canvas
36 x 48 inches
Collection of Simona and Jerome Chazen

This Figure is Pursued by That Figure, 1978
Oil and Magna on canvas
40 x 36 inches

Collage for Study of Hands, 1980
Tape, painted and printed paper on board
26 x 26 3/8 inches

The Conversation, 1984
Painted and patinated bronze
48 1/2 x 41 x 11 3/4 inches
Edition of 6

Study for Imperfect Figure, 1987
Graphite and colored pencils on paper
11 x 7 1/2 inches

Untitled (Man), 1988
Charcoal on paper
30 x 22 1/2 inches

Collage for Best Buddies, 1991
Tape, painted and printed paper on board
35 1/2 x 31 3/8 inches

Imperfect Sculpture, 1995
Stained cast iron and painted
stainless steel plates
30 3/4 x 34 3/4 x 5 inches
Edition of 6 with 2APs

Drawing for Coup de Chapeau,
(Self Portrait), 1995
Graphite and colored pencils on paper
5 5/8 x 8 1/4 inches (irregular)

Coup de Chapeau I, 1996
Painted and patinated bronze
26 1/2 x 26 5/8 x 7 inches
Edition of 6

Drawing for Still Life with
Reclining Nude, 1997
Graphite and colored pencils on paper
8 3/4 x 12 inches

Drawing for Interior with
Back of Man's Head, 1997
Graphite and colored pencils on paper
7 15/16 x 8 13/16 inches

I would like to thank Dorothy Lichtenstein, Jack Cowart and Cassandra Lozano for their continuous support and enthusiasm. Thanks to Natasha Sigmund, Clare Bell, Evan Ryer, Andrea Theil and Larry Levine at The Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, and to Shelley Lee at the Estate of Roy Lichtenstein.

BBC

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