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A La Recherché Du Shoe Purdu

Andy Warhol, Before the Factory

The Woodward Gallery is obsessed with Warhol's early watercolor

By Simcha Whitehill
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If you were fashionable enough to shop at Bloomingdale's in 1957, you would have seen a display of one-of-a-kind coffee table books handmade by an acclaimed, yet still obscure, illustrator: Andy Warhol. Fifty years later, everyone knows his name. But his early work is not what you'd expect, guaranteed.

"Anyone for Shoes?" Warhol beckons in cursive letters under a decorative pink high heel. Originally drawn for *the New York Times*, the title "A La Recherché Du Shoe Purdu," is a clever twist on Proust's "In Search of Lost Time." It is the beginning of Warhol's hallmark: accessible existentialism.

Located between the hip restaurants and the old tenements on Eldridge Street in New York's Lower East Side, is the newly opened Woodward Gallery—a sleek shrine to contemporary art. But rather than hanging more Marilyn Monroe and Soup Can clichés, *Andy Warhol: The Fabulous Fifties* gives you a rare look at the man emerging as an artist and beginning to work with the images and production techniques that made him a celebrity.

The curvaceous curator, Kristine Woodward, is as colorful as a Warhol icon. She is followed by collectors around the world, plus her two Chinese Shar-peis, Lucy and Ethel. This past May, she and her husband, gallery co-owner John Woodward, reopened their treasury in what used to be a musty stage prop warehouse. After thirteen years in Soho, she felt inspired to make a move because, "All of the major artists, de Kooning and Kline, had their beginnings on the Lower East Side."

Kristine, who began her career selling paintings out of her 400 square foot apartment, has an office plastered in Warhol masterpieces: a screen printed page of *the Daily News*, an electric chair from his sketch book, and a neon Venus. She put together this show with the artist's estate, and the goal is to take a tour of Andy Warhol's wild side.

Kristine points to a Matisse-esque portrait and through red lips says, "Even the most Warhol savvy collectors haven't seen this material." She resembles the woman he has sketched with a pen, the strokes thick like black eyeliner.



In this showcase of Warhol's mid-century work, you can see the seeds of what grew into the legend. At the time, he was hand-painting lithographs of blossoms so compulsively you can almost hear what he will whisper to Lou Reed over a decade later: "Vicious, I hit you with a flower." Pop was taking shape, and so was Andy Warhol.

He was instantly successful as a commercial graphic designer with stylish clientele at Bergdorf's and *Harper's Bazaar*. As this small town boy, a first generation American, was starting to make it in the big city, things were shifting in the culture. Everything became consumable and disposable. McDonald's was a new chain and Warhol was eating it up. His personal artwork mass-produced the finer things in life, from shoes to elaborate recipes he dreamed up with a socialite. His "Roast Iguana Andalusian," scripted in the fantastical cookbook, *Wild Raspberries*, could only be found at "better gourmet shops on the Galapagos Island." While the adorned "Omelet Greta Garbo" requires "pink ice" and must be eaten "alone in a candlelit

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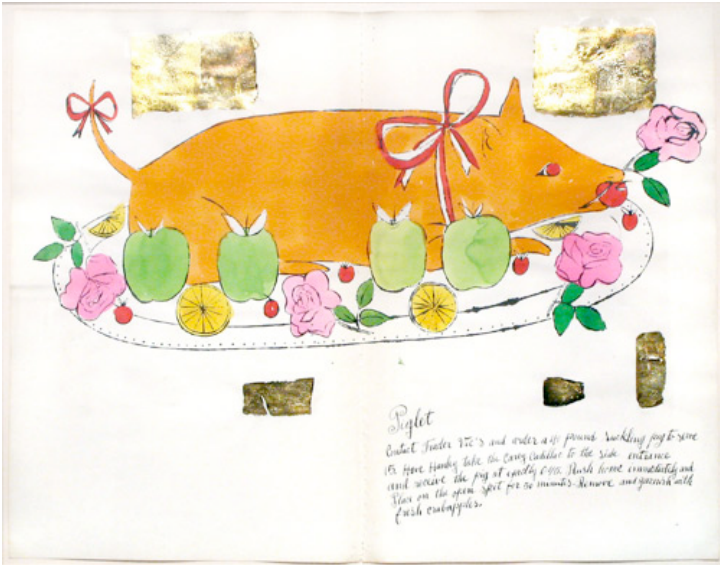
room."

Inspired and irreverent, Warhol was infatuated with the unique and the chic. And he was also obsessed with celebrities. At his first show in 1952, Andy Warhol presented *Fifteen Drawings Based on the Writings of Truman Capote*. He was a devoted fan of the New York art scene figurehead, and the Woodward Gallery exhibit features an interesting drawing of Central Park from the author's apartment. Eventually the two would become friends. Kristine says, "He always wanted to feel important, so

he surrounded himself with important people."

Also included in this fabulous fifties sampling is a golden portrait of the reigning celluloid king of the day, James Dean. This gem was found in Warhol's personal collection with a still life of pears on the back, but who's looking at fruit when there's a hunk huddled in the corner, effortlessly sexy, in a pose Warhol would reuse in many of his later pieces. This painting was a left over, a gift he never sent to an art director.

Now, nothing of Warhol's is being overlooked, and paintings like the ones here are selling like hotcakes. Just this month, one of Warhol's Self-portraits, "Green Camouflage," brought 12 million dollars, while a Liz Taylor owned by actor Hugh Grant garnished over 20 million at auction. Luckily, you can still see some of the best for a \$2 subway ride.



Andy Warhol: The Fabulous Fifties
Woodward Gallery
www.woodwardgallery.net
133 Eldridge Street (between Broome and Delancey)
November 10th to December 29th, 2007

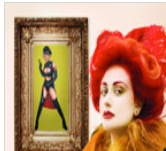
Simcha Whitehill moved to New York City as a teenager to fulfill her dreams of becoming a modern day Edie Sedgwick...and to attend NYU. She has since hosted charity, art, and burlesque events around town, been in the style section of the Sunday New York Times, amassed a closet full of black cocktail dresses, and is still looking for her Andy Warhol.

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