

**ROY LICHTENSTEIN**  
**RE-FIGURE**



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Essay by Kenneth E. Silver

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**CASTELLI**



## ROY LICHTENSTEIN, KEEPER OF THE FLAME

Kenneth E. Silver



It is nearly impossible to picture the 1960s without Roy Lichtenstein's iconic, comic-book heroines. Their primary-colored, Benday-dotted melodrama, raised to the level of high art, perfectly captured

Roy Lichtenstein  
*Hopeless*, 1963  
Oil on canvas  
44 x 44 inches

the instantly accessible, mass-produced, disposable reality of postwar America (and, by extension, the postwar world). Brenda Starr and Mary Worth had replaced Ophelia and Jane Eyre as representative females, and Pop artist Lichtenstein appeared to dance on the grave of inherited culture. Art history had vanished—psssst!—with what looked to be no more than the pressure of a manicured hand on an aerosol container, a key subject for the artist in 1962.



Roy Lichtenstein  
*Spray*, 1962  
Oil on canvas  
36 x 68 inches



1. Henri Matisse, "Notes of a Painter," 1908, in Jack D. Flam, *Matisse on Art* (New York: Phaidon, 1973), pp. 39–40.

Yet, this apparent “end of history” style—Lichtenstein’s *carpe diem* visual populism—was, like so much else in his extraordinary career, a feint. The Pop women and men of the early 1960s were not the end of anything; they were, rather, timely examples of the *timeless* principle of representation, the one expressed by Matisse, when, in 1908, he wrote: “All artists bear the imprint of their time, but the great artists are those in whom this is most profoundly marked.”<sup>1</sup> What’s more, if only that art which expresses its moment can ever achieve trans-historical significance, an insight that Lichtenstein grasped intuitively, the history of art is but a continuous series of proposals—a *chain* of propositions—as to what might best represent a given moment.

Barely a decade after the rise of Pop Art, it is the High Modernist chain of propositions that Lichtenstein shows us in his *Portrait Triptych (Study)*, 1974. He assumes we know, or hopes we know, where his idea came from: the series of drawings in the



collection of MoMA, made circa 1917, in which De Stijl artist Theo van Doesburg progressively distilled an abstract image from a realistic rendering of a cow, showing us, step-by-step, how he reduced the image of the living creature to its “essential,” underlying, geometric structure. This kind of thing was an old chestnut of modernist art theory, intended to prove that abstraction was more advanced and thus superior to mimesis, an argument of which Lichtenstein

Roy Lichtenstein  
*Portrait Triptych (Study)*, 1974  
Graphite pencil, colored pencil and cut paper  
with colored pencil on paper  
23  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 16  $\frac{3}{8}$  inches (each sheet)

2. Jack Cowart,  
*Roy Lichtenstein*  
1970–1980, exh. cat.  
(St. Louis: St. Louis Art  
Museum, 1981) p. 64.

was fully cognizant. On closer inspection, though, in *Portrait Triptych (Study)*, Lichtenstein does *not* rehearse Doesburg’s bovine demonstration of the unraveling of traditional representation, but offers instead a refutation of the Dutch artist’s modernist essentialism. Moving from left to right, in place of a quasi-photographic cow Lichtenstein gives us one of his own Pop heroines in a red-striped dress and pearls; in the central panel, a Cubist, Picasso-esque version of this woman emerges; and, at right, a third iteration reduces the sitter to what appears to be a wholly abstract paradigm, much as Van Doesburg might have rendered her. “[T]he artist’s final twist,” as Jack Cowart has noted of *Portrait Triptych*, “occurs when it is recognized that ... the initial image is, in reference to virtual reality, no less abstract than the nominally abstract image depicted at the end.”<sup>2</sup> Lichtenstein himself underlined his ironic intent: “The series *pretends* to be didactic; I’m giving you abstraction lessons. But nothing is more abstract than

anything else to me. The first one is abstract; they're all abstract."<sup>3</sup> This was his succinct way of saying that art does not "progress" towards an essential truth, as High Modernism had claimed, but always and ever offers us more-or-less convincing forms of artifice.

Indeed, in the wake of Lichtenstein's Pop breakthrough of the early 1960s (and the accompanying celebrity that must have been both a blessing and a curse), he went to great lengths to demonstrate just how thoroughgoing was his engagement with the history of modern art. His persistent return to the human figure, more often than not the female figure, but male ones as well,<sup>4</sup> were opportunities for Lichtenstein to reengage and come to terms with his modernist predecessors, all the while affirming his unique artistic identity. Just how alive the past had always been for Lichtenstein is evident from the text of his Master of Fine Arts thesis for Ohio State, of 1949, a prose-poem that accompanied twenty examples of his work:

3. Roy Lichtenstein, 1973, quoted at the National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.) website for the exhibition, *The Serial Impulse at Gemini G.E.L.* (October 4, 2015 – February 7, 2016), pp. 5–29.

4. See Kenneth E. Silver, "What About Brad? Lichtenstein's Men," *Roy Lichtenstein: Mostly Men* exh. cat. (New York: Leo Castelli Gallery, 2010), pp. 5–29.

5. Jack Cowart, ed.,  
*Paintings, Drawings, and  
 Pastels, A Thesis by Roy  
 Fox Lichtenstein*, exh.  
 cat., (Madrid: Fundación  
 Juan March, 2007),  
 pp. 31 and 33.

In awe, then, you must sing  
 An Ode to the Wonderful Wizards of Art:  
 Sing of Klee's secret glee  
 And of Picasso's electric expression  
 And, of Braque,  
 Bright, with even effort,  
 Neither so good nor so bad as Picasso,  
 And sing, too, of Rousseau's tigers brightly burning,  
 . . .  
 And sing of stolid Cézanne,  
 And praise the mad Van Gogh,  
 And sing of Gauguin's magic,  
 Though you'd rather be bewitched by Rousseau.<sup>5</sup>

Of these "Wonderful Wizards," Picasso was unquestionably the most important for Lichtenstein, not only as an artist who had devised a new vocabulary for re-imagining the human figure, but also, one suspects, as an artist who, like Lichtenstein himself, was capable of radical and continuous transformations of the visual

idiom. Although it seems unlikely that Lichtenstein could have known it, Picasso's painting of 1920, *Studies (Etudes)*,<sup>6</sup> affirms, in the aftermath of Cubism and the First World War, the Spaniard's postmodern stance; it is remarkably close to Lichtenstein's own assertion of postmodernity in the aftermath of Pop Art, his *Study of Hands*, 1980. In both works, stylistic discontinuity prevails: in Picasso's it is the striking difference between his Cubist still-life images and his neo-traditional figure studies (the conceit here is that we are looking at a wall in the artist's studio), and in Lichtenstein's it is the "tasting menu" of four distinct ways to delineate hands (reading clockwise from lower left: a Lichtenstein Pop Art hand; a "Cubist cartoony" hand; Mickey Mouse's

6. Picasso's *Studies*, which had remained in the artist's collection, was little known until the opening in 1985 of the Musée Picasso, Paris.



above:  
**Pablo Picasso**  
*Studies (Etudes)*, 1920  
 Oil on canvas  
 39 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 31 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches  
 Musée Picasso, Paris

right:  
**Roy Lichtenstein**  
*Study of Hands*, 1980  
 Oil and Magna on canvas  
 42 x 46 inches

gloved hand; and a brushy, expressionist, perhaps Abstract Expressionist, hand). Made sixty years apart, both works not only assert the equality of the figurative and the abstract, but, perhaps more important, insist on the artist's freedom to change his style at will, and even to employ, if he so chooses, more than one style in a given work. These, we might say, are basic tenets of the postmodern attitude, and violations of the High Modern credo of aesthetic purity.



Radical *impurity* might best describe Lichtenstein's oeuvre in the three decades following his Pop debut. His reformulating of the figure could stray surprisingly far afield from the low art mode that had secured his place in the contemporary scene: the rubbery, undulating, repositioned body parts of Salvador Dali's Surrealism placed amidst the scattered ruins of Neoromantic



painting (the upended classical columns, lonely pyramids, and fragmented arcades of Pavel Tchelitchew and Eugene Berman), for instance, characterize *Female with Comet*, of 1977. The curvilinear Surreal “woman” with beach ball who is chased by the rectilinear Cubist or Constructivist “man” of *This Figure is Pursued by that Figure*, 1978, reveals not only

above:

Roy Lichtenstein

*Female with Comet*, 1977

Graphite pencil and colored pencil on paper

23 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 19 <sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> inches

right:

Roy Lichtenstein

*This Figure is Pursued by that Figure*, 1978

Oil and Magna on canvas

40 x 36 inches





that Lichtenstein's art historical references may extend back beyond the modern period (in this case to Bernini's celebrated 17<sup>th</sup>-century sculptural group depicting Daphne pursued by Apollo), but that particular styles sometimes had gendered associations for Lichtenstein (i.e. woman=curves; man=angles).

The search for a visual language that might bridge the gap between figuration and abstraction, that would allow forms to "speak" without recourse to narrative, is nowhere more strikingly evident than in Lichtenstein's American Indian works of 1978–81. "They're just a mixture of every kind of Indian design from Northwest Indians to Plains Indians to Pueblo," the artist explained. "They are no particular tribe of Indians. It's just everything that people vaguely associated with Indians. ... Anything that I could think of that was 'Indian' got into them."<sup>7</sup> Additionally, for those who had followed Lichtenstein's practice from early on, these works had a special resonance. Although he readily admitted that the interest of European

7. Roy Lichtenstein cited in Gail Stavitsky and Twig Johnson, *Roy Lichtenstein: American Indian Encounters*, exh. cat. (Montclair, New Jersey: Monclair Art Museum, 2006), p. 25.

right:  
Roy Lichtenstein  
*Composition with Two Figures*, 1979  
Oil and Magna on linen  
80 x 70 inches





Surrealists in Native American art, of Max Ernst in particular, had been influential on him, here Lichtenstein was not so much looking at the history of modern art

Roy Lichtenstein  
*Face and Feather*, 1979  
Oil and Magna on linen  
36 x 36 inches

8. Stavitsky and Johnson, op. cit., p. 27.

9. Ibid.

as looking at his own artistic past, specifically to the scores of American Indian paintings he'd made in the early to mid-1950s. By the late 1970s, the abstract, painterly, and somewhat expressionist mode of that earlier series—which featured Indian men hunting, fighting, smoking peace pipes, and riding horseback, among other activities—had given way to a vocabulary of decorative motifs rendered in simplified cartoon version of Lichtenstein's own Pop style; although these works are devoid of recognizable human presence, the decorative motifs became actors in non-narrative pictorial dramas. In *Composition with Two Figures*, 1979, for example, a white “female” shape with a serpentine “arm,” an adaptation of the “Rain bird” motif from a Pueblo ceramic pot,<sup>8</sup> meets up with a wood-grained, “male” saw-toothed form. None of these works is more drastically distilled or enigmatic than *Face and Feather*, 1979, in which a yellow saw-tooth profile (equipped with an eye, and a mouth derived from a design on pottery from the prehistoric site of Tiahuanaco, Peru)<sup>9</sup>

confronts the most familiar object of Indian symbolic ornamentation, the feather, or perhaps the “fletching” of an arrow, against an intense blue background.

“The radicality of Roy’s approach to the problem of representing the new is that it *remembers* the old position, the old history,” David Salle has astutely observed. “Roy was the oldest of the Pop artists and the one who had the longest gestation period and the longest layover in Abstract Expressionist Town. ... In fact, Roy’s early Pop work was one of the things that had the effect of almost instantly de-activating the power mechanisms of the old-rules gravitas machine,”<sup>10</sup> by which he means to say that no one’s art, not even Warhol’s, troubled the Abstract Expressionist painters, nor their supporters, more than that of Roy Lichtenstein, which they thought was intended, in its humor and low-brow references, as ridicule of their own abstract and quasi-existential ambitions. And although it is true that Pop Art was not without its deflationary aspects vis-à-vis New York “Action Painting,” the thrust of Pop’s critique of its

10. David Salle, “Roy Lichtenstein’s Reflection Paintings,” in *Roy Lichtenstein Reflected*, exh.cat. (New York: Mitchell-Innes & Nash, 2001), p. 8.

11. Dave Hickey, in  
*Roy Lichtenstein*  
*Brushstrokes: Four*  
*Decades*, exh. cat. (New  
York: Mitchell-Innes &  
Nash, 2001), p. 13.

predecessors was less formal than ideological, as Dave Hickey has put it nicely: “Roy Lichtenstein’s penchant for vulgar technique and retro-imagery derived directly from his knowledgeable affection for the high art of the past (for which popular art is little more than a tumultuous warehouse, where Seurat survives in Benday dots and Rosetti lingers in Romance comics). In fact and more generally,” Hickey continued:

art historical self-consciousness turned out to be the great, unacknowledged virtue of *all* those Pop artists, who, in the moment of their apotheosis, were routinely derided as philistines who lacked it. What these artists lacked, it now turns out, was simply what they hated: the *utopian* historical consciousness that seeks to render the past obsolete. This was never the project, and especially not Lichtenstein’s. They all wanted to keep everything.<sup>11</sup>

That “everything,” perhaps inevitably, came to include Abstract Expressionism itself. Needless to say, Lichtenstein was well aware that the irony of his appropriating the style that he was earlier accused of killing off would not be lost on his knowledgeable admirers (or his detractors) in the art world. Obviously a descendant of the figures in Willem de Kooning’s “Woman” series, of 1951–3, the protagonist here is composed of the Pop versions of brushstrokes (manufactured-looking simulacra of Action Painting’s spontaneous and subjective traces) that Lichtenstein had first introduced in 1965. Now, as if following through sixteen years later on the implications of his own invention, Lichtenstein builds a complex image out of those iconic parodies. Indeed, Lichtenstein found himself confronting the same kinds of picture-making issues that his earnest, painterly predecessors had faced: how to construct a coherent and lively figure from fragments of pigment, while maintaining, per Cézanne, the integrity of medium, support, and



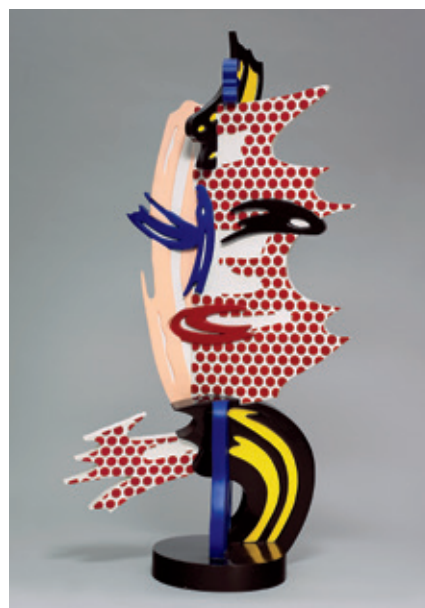




image? Although the next year he painted three more of these De Kooning-esque figures (*Woman II, III, and IV*), it was rather in three-dimensions that this project took a surprising turn. By way of sculpture, including several reliefs and a number of important free-standing works, both large-scale and small, including his *Brushstroke Heads I–V, 1987*, the full irony of creating something solid and tangible from the spontaneous

Roy Lichtenstein  
*Brushstroke Head I, 1987*  
 Painted and patinated bronze  
 39  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 16  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 8  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches  
 Edition of 6

Roy Lichtenstein  
*Brushstroke Head II, 1987*  
 Painted and patinated bronze  
 28  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 13  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 17  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches  
 Edition of 6



and semi-liquid brushstroke, or from the *idea* of the brushstroke, was made palpable. When he sculpted these now-you-see-them-now-you-don't amalgams of facial features and brushstrokes (outlined in black and Benday-dotted), was Lichtenstein thinking of Art Deco sculpture, either his own parodic re-workings of that streamlined style, or of the original plethora of prancing, leaping, and gesticulating tabletop female

Roy Lichtenstein  
*Brushstroke Head III*, 1987  
 Painted and patinated bronze  
 29 x 19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 11 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches  
 Edition of 6

Roy Lichtenstein  
*Brushstroke Head IV*, 1987  
 Painted and patinated bronze  
 42 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 20 x 9 inches  
 Edition of 6

figures of the 1920s and 1930s? And was he alluding, as well, to the Cubist polychrome, cast bronze *Glass of Absinthe*, 1914, where the pointillist dots which Picasso borrowed from Seurat serve a similar “aerating” function to those in Lichtenstein’s polychrome, cast bronze *Brushstrokes*, by helping to both visually lighten and ornament the work? Whatever their inspiration, it is obvious that in these three-dimensional works Lichtenstein was searching for yet one more way to upset the applecart of pictorial figuration, “to fathom out and understand,” as he put it in 1949, “the existence of things ... You must first feel, then see. You must feel until you see.”<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, it was the artistic upheavals of Picasso, Braque, and their colleagues, importantly

12. Jack Cowart, ed., *Paintings, Drawings, and Pastels, A Thesis by Roy Fox Lichtenstein*, exh. cat., (Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2007), p. 37.



Pablo Picasso  
*Glass of Absinthe*, 1914  
 Painted bronze; silver-plated spoon  
 8 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 4 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 3 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches  
 A. E. Gallatin Collection, 1952  
 Philadelphia Museum of Art

13. Cited in Anthony d'Offay, ed., *Some Kind of Reality: Roy Lichtenstein interviewed* by David Sylvester in 1966 and 1997, exh. cat. (London, 1997), p. 7.

including Léger, which would remain foundational for Lichtenstein, and to which he would regularly return for inspiration. "I think the aesthetic influence on me is probably more Cubism than anything," he told critic David Sylvester.<sup>13</sup> In *Modern Art I and II (Studies)*, 1994, for instance, we see Cubist fracturing of the figure aligned on a diagonal grid (perhaps inspired by the



Roy Lichtenstein  
*Modern Art I and II (Studies)*, 1994  
Graphite pencil and colored pencil on paper  
8 <sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 8 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

fine early Cubist works of Juan Gris), the facial features and body parts of a beautiful woman—and even her strings of beads—divvied up among its interlocking compartments. Note too the curious bridge-like green fretwork structure and the light gray profile of *Modern Art II*, both motifs borrowed from Picasso: the former from the “primitive” nose of the figure in the upper right of *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. Version O)*, 1907, and the latter from a 1940 painting in the Musée Picasso, Paris. In *Untitled Head (Cal Arts Print) (Study)*, 1994, Lichtenstein refines these Cubist elements and allows the work to circle back to his own reified identity by way of the Benday dots—always a self-referential gesture by the artist—which shade the picture’s lower left quadrant. Those same Neoimpressionist, Neo-Lichtenstein dots alert us to moments of especially powerful retrospection in his art, as in one of the finest of the “Reflection” paintings, *Reflections on Sure!?*, 1990, where the profusion of dots extends from the center of the work to the faux-frame, where they create an illusion of three-dimensional



chiaroscuro, and where the combination of image and word relies on the hermetic Cubist paintings of Picasso and Braque, c. 1910–11. Barely visible is the blond hair of a classic Lichtenstein heroine of the early 1960s, her face obscured by the “ripped,” collage-like fragments

Roy Lichtenstein  
*Untitled Head (Cal Arts Print) (Study)*, 1994  
Tape, painted and printed paper on board  
13 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 16 inches

that traverse the composition, as if time itself had intervened to strip away the slam-dunk of Pop nihilism, with only one word left to express, instead, a sense of profound unease. “[W]hat she has to say is the distillation of all ambiguity and equivocation and uncertainty of the last 25 years,” writes David Salle of this remarkable painting, about which we will let him have the last few, well-chosen, words:

“Sure!?” Not so sure after all. It’s really fantastically brilliant. A little slapstick, a little formalist sleight-of-hand, a very poignant piece of pictorial symbolism—the artist throws up a barrier of more or less abstract shapes which just about obscure his movements, and while we are trying to figure out how to ‘enter’ the painting, under the cover of those hilarious and intractable forms, the artist, elegant and refined as ever, makes his escape.”<sup>14</sup> ■

14. David Salle, “Roy Lichtenstein’s Reflection Paintings,” in *Roy Lichtenstein Reflected*, exh.cat. (New York: Mitchell-Innes & Nash, 2001), p. 14.





Roy Lichtenstein  
*Reflections on Sure!?*, 1990  
Oil and Magna on canvas  
40 x 36 inches

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