

Ghost in the Machine: Warhol's Lenin, Glasnost, and Perestroika

Andy Warhol created a series of portraits in the mid 1980s of Vladimir Lenin, the Russian Communist who oversaw the Russian Revolution in 1917 and served as the first leader of the Soviet Union in the early twentieth century. Perhaps it seemed like an odd choice for the Pop Artist, whose more familiar images of celebrities were from Hollywood—Marilyn Monroe and Shirley Temple, for example—but Warhol had done a series of well-known portraits of Chairman Mao following Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972 (<http://www.sothebys.com/en/news-video/videos/2014/01/andy-warhol-mao.html>), so it really wasn't that unusual to see him use his art to comment on contemporary political events, even if the *comment* was not obvious. Was it just a nod to celebrity or more?

The portrait of *Lenin* at The Andy Warhol Museum was done around 1986, according to the museum, and a glance around the web shows that the series continued into 1987, with some, maybe all of them, completed by Warhol's protégés, especially since Warhol's death came in February of that year. The series appears to vary between what are called black *Lenins* and red *Lenins*, based on background color, and there are other variations that include skin tone and the boldness and color of the line that outlines the figure.

The *Lenin* at the Warhol Museum, <http://www.warhol.org/collection/art/work/1998-1-367/>, acrylic and silkscreen ink on canvas, has a black background and what



appears to be a strong pink, sometimes blue line outlining the figure, including the details of his face and a book in the foreground. Other black *Lenins* online do not have the eerie quality made by that distinctive line, even the ones with bold lines in other colors do not have such an impact, but it might also be the combination of the Pop pink and blue line with the red skin tone that creates an eerie combination, kind of a neon effect. The line almost obliterates the eyes, which in others of the series seem dark and recessed; in some, the line is not prominent, although still there. In addition, the red color of the skin seems to make more of a statement about the man than does the overall red of the portraits with red backgrounds. Like the signature red and yellow that he used in one painting of Mao to connect the man to his politics, the red of the

revolution is here ingrained in Lenin (<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/feb/13/andy-warhol-chinese-leader-mao-zedong>).

Unlike the Mao series, paintings of a living figure, the *Lenin* series comes more than six decades after his death, but at a time when world politics are focused on the possibility of Lenin's Soviet Union crumbling. In the United States Ronald Reagan, who rose to political prominence opposing communism, stands opposite Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union who is introducing change in the form of *glasnost* and *perestroika* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glasnost>). The figure in the painting seems to stand as a ghost haunting Gorbachev's reforms and probably couldn't have come at a better time for Reagan to remind the world that communism still stood behind the reforms. I don't know what Warhol's intent might have been, but I can imagine how the portraits could have been received by both those on the left and on the right. I can imagine how they might have been criticized by the Right as another glorification of the leftist politics of the sixties, almost cartoonized to gloss over the realities of revolution. I can see how the Left might have smirked at the kitschy treatment of an historical icon whose revolution was still admired in some circles.

Lenin was well-known in early revolutionary portraiture and propaganda posters as a leader towering above the masses, speaking to large crowds, in other words as an active figure, frequently leaning forward, but standing. After the revolution, he is often painted or photographed in the more traditional pose of the statesman, seated, captured from the waist up. This is the pose Warhol appropriates for his series, Lenin as statesman, to be compared to the two on Warhol's contemporary political stage.

Resources:

<http://www.sothebys.com/en/news-video/videos/2014/01/andy-warhol-mao.html>

<http://www.warhol.org/collection/art/work/1998-1-367/>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Lenin

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikhail_Gorbachev

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glasnost>

<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/feb/13/andy-warhol-chinese-leader-mao-zedong>