

**WARHOL AND  
CONTEMPORARY  
AMERICA:**  
'DEATH AND DISASTER'  
SERIES

**ANDY  
WARHOL**

**GALLERY OF MODERN ART**

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## WARHOL AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICA: 'DEATH AND DISASTER' SERIES

**'I GUESS IT WAS THE BIG PLANE CRASH PICTURE, THE FRONT PAGE OF A NEWSPAPER: 129 DIE. I WAS ALSO PAINTING THE MARILYNS. I REALIZED THAT EVERYTHING I WAS DOING MUST HAVE BEEN DEATH. IT WAS CHRISTMAS OR LABOR DAY — A HOLIDAY — AND EVERY TIME YOU TURNED ON THE RADIO THEY SAID SOMETHING LIKE "FOUR MILLION ARE GOING TO DIE". THAT STARTED IT.'**

(Andy Warhol in *Supernova: Stars, Deaths, and Disasters, 1962-1964*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2005, p.12.)

This tour considers the way Warhol used repetition and the photographic silkscreen technique in response to society and popular culture. Why did Warhol focus on images of death and disaster? How did his technique of repetition relate to the volume and desensitisation of stories and depictions of fatalities in American culture at the time? How does this relate to today?

### Topics:

- issues of death and violence
- spectacle and celebrity
- media manipulation, propaganda and censorship
- religion and mortality.

### Subject areas:

- Film, Television and New Media
- English
- Studies of Society and the Environment
- Modern History.

### Students participating in this tour should come away with an understanding of:

- how Warhol's work drew attention to contemporary issues
- the effects of Warhol's use of repetition and colour in the 'Death and Disaster' series and related works of the 1960s
- the social and political contexts of the period in which Warhol worked
- issues raised by Warhol's engagement with the rapidly expanding role of the media in providing access to information and events.

### Note:

- there are a small number of works featured in the 'Andy Warhol' exhibition that contain adult content or mature themes. Parents, teachers and carers are advised to check for further signage at the exhibition entry and in gallery spaces.
- questions and activities throughout this tour accompanied by an asterisk (\*) have been specifically developed for secondary school students.

### INTRODUCTION

This tour considers the ways Warhol drew on images used in the American press in the early 1960s, and the ongoing significance of this approach. In June 1962, after art critic Henry Geldzahler drew Warhol's attention to a press headline of an aircraft crash, Warhol began a series of works known as the 'Death and Disaster' series (although he is quoted as saying that he intended to exhibit the series with the title 'Death in America').

Warhol's 'Death and Disaster' series isolates the events from their context. The images that Warhol depicted ranged from electric chairs to car crashes, and because the images were removed from their original contexts, the works appear stark and dislocated.

Warhol's series coincided with many significant events in recent United States history, including the civil rights movement, the death of American President John F Kennedy in 1963, and the advances in space exploration later in the decade — America was facing a time of incredible change.

## WARHOL AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICA: 'DEATH AND DISASTER' SERIES

Warhol began the 'Death and Disaster' series in the same year as his first celebrity portraits and the two sets are often considered companion pieces. The youngest president ever elected in the United States, John F Kennedy (JFK) and his wife Jacqueline (Jackie) quickly became American icons — they were young, glamorous and stylish. Warhol's depictions of Jackie Kennedy following JFK's death can be considered as both celebrity portraits and images of a grieving widow.

Warhol used the same techniques to make his celebrity portraits and the 'Death and Disaster' series, which add to the popular culture appeal of the works, despite their graphic nature. Warhol repeated and reduced the images using his photographic screenprinting technique, and added vibrant colour, which lessened the impact of the confronting subject matter.

During this tour, students can engage in questions about Warhol's 'Death and Disaster' images and related works, such as why Warhol focused on images of this nature; how his technique of repetition related to the beginning of the era of media saturation and the desensitisation of media consumers to images of death and destruction in American culture; and how the theme of human existence and mortality is a crucial theme in Warhol's work.

### FOR DISCUSSION

- What similarities do you think exist between Warhol's images of events drawn from newspapers and magazines, and his representation of celebrity icons such as Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy?
- Discuss how Warhol's 'Death and Disaster' series of works and his celebrity portraits indicate that the artist was interested in investigating the 'spectacle' of death and celebrity.
- What are the effects of Warhol's use of formal elements such as repetition and vibrant colour together with the representation of confronting events from the popular media?
- Do you think the imagery used in Warhol's 'Death and Disaster' works of the 1960s differs to the coverage of confronting events by the media today?

### Some suggestions for looking at and discussing Warhol's images:

- What feelings or moods do the images evoke?
- How are the images framed? What is included? What is left out?
- What techniques does Warhol use to communicate his intent?
- What do these events say about the time in which they happened?

# ANDY WARHOL

## WARHOL AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICA: 'DEATH AND DISASTER' SERIES



**Red Jackie** 1964

Acrylic and silkscreen ink on linen /  
101.6 x 101.9 x 2.5cm / The Andy Warhol  
Museum, Pittsburgh / Founding  
Collection, Contribution The Andy  
Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts,  
Inc. / © The Andy Warhol Foundation  
for the Visual Arts Inc.

I'd been thrilled having Kennedy as president; he was handsome, young, smart — but it didn't bother me that much that he was dead. What bothered me was the way the television and radios were programming everybody to feel so sad . . . (Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *Popism: The Warhol Sixties*, Harcourt, New York, 1980, p.60.)

In November 1963 US president John F Kennedy was assassinated, and in early 1964 Warhol began his series of *Jackie* silkscreen paintings based on eight grainy newspaper photographs of the President's widow. Like Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor, Jackie radiated a sense of tragic mystery, which was accentuated by the funereal and shadowy tones of the paintings.

The multiple paintings of Jackie reveal the trajectory of events both before and after the fatal shooting. These paintings, based on public appearances following the assassination of her husband, are increasingly blurred and illegible, suggesting a kind of memorial to this utopian period in American history. In these works Warhol also comments on the instantaneous dissemination of news on a massive scale, and its inherent potential for manipulation.

**GoMA / Gallery 1.1**

### FOR DISCUSSION

- The newspaper photographs used for *Jackie* 1964 have been cropped, narrowing the focus on Jackie alone. What is her emotional state? Where is she going?
- Do these images tell a particular story? Do you read them in a sequence or pattern?
- What questions do you have when you look at this work?
- What do you think Warhol wants us to remember about John F Kennedy's assassination?
- In your opinion, what is the art work's message?
- How did John F Kennedy's death affect the American people? How have the images surrounding that event shape our understanding?
- Think about the way the events of 11 September 2001 in New York have impacted upon the world. What are your personal memories of this event? In 50 years from now, what do you think will still be remembered about the event? \*



**Jackie** 1964

Acrylic and silkscreen ink on linen /  
50.8 x 40.6cm / The Andy Warhol  
Museum, Pittsburgh / Founding  
Collection, Contribution The Andy  
Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts,  
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for the Visual Arts Inc.

## WARHOL AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICA: 'DEATH AND DISASTER' SERIES



**Three Marilyns** 1962

Acrylic, silkscreen ink, and graphite on linen / 35.6 x 85.1cm / The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh / Founding Collection, Contribution The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts Inc.

Warhol's experimentation with photo-silkscreening occurred in the same year as Marilyn Monroe's death in 1962. Both events marked significant points in his career — the *Marilyn* images herald his fascination with death and tragedy, while the photo-silkscreen method was to become Warhol's signature technique.

In the four months following Monroe's death, he produced more than 20 silkscreen paintings of her, all based on a carefully selected and cropped publicity shot from 1953.

This small painting was executed by first screenprinting a faint image onto the canvas. This served as a kind of underdrawing over which Warhol then applied paint to define the different areas of the composition. The final step was to screenprint the photographic stencil over the painted canvas. Monroe's facial features are only barely defined by the silkscreen while Warhol's paint suggests crudely applied make-up or even a death mask. The result is a haunting portrait of the fallen star's decline.

The collection of newspaper articles and publicity photographs displayed in the exhibition provides an insight into Warhol's sources and the cult of celebrity which surrounded the glamorous star, which only escalated after her death. Warhol's fascination with the public and private lives of movie stars had begun in his childhood, and he obsessively collected such material throughout his life.

**GoMA / Gallery 1.1**

### FOR DISCUSSION

- Why has Warhol repeated the image of Marilyn?
- Are they all exactly the same? Can you identify any differences in Marilyn's features across the three images?

## WARHOL AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICA: 'DEATH AND DISASTER' SERIES



***Electric Chair*** 1967

Acrylic screenprinted onto canvas /  
137.2 x 185.1cm / National Gallery of  
Australia, Canberra / © The Andy  
Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts  
Inc.

Warhol's *Electric Chairs* are the most iconic images in his 'Death and Disaster' series. His first painting on this subject appeared in 1963, when the death penalty was a contentious issue of public debate and the New York State chair was decommissioned shortly afterwards. Warhol's chairs were based on a 1953 media photograph of the death chamber in the Sing Sing Penitentiary in New York, showing the chair in which the suspected Russian spies Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were to be executed. His *Electric Chair* works include large serial compositions or groups of multiple smaller canvases or screenprints, printed on monochromatic backgrounds of silver, orange, lavender, blue or red. The lack of human presence and the sense of hypnotic stillness combine to increase the poignancy and horror of these works. In a 1971 retrospective Warhol chose to have his art works displayed against his mechanically replicated and psychedelic Cow wallpaper, creating a strange juxtaposition of chilling social realism and kitsch.

**GoMA / Gallery 1.1**

### FOR DISCUSSION

- Why does Warhol use bright colours in a work about such a serious subject?
- What effect does the lack of human presence have on the viewer? Why do you think Warhol chose not to include people in the images?
- Consider representations of death and violence in the media. Why does Warhol repeat the image?
- What are the issues surrounding the execution of the Rosenbergs? \*

## WARHOL AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICA: 'DEATH AND DISASTER' SERIES



**White Burning Car III** 1963

Silkscreen ink on linen / 255.3 x 200cm /  
The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh /  
Founding Collection, Contribution Dia  
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Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts  
Inc.

My show in Paris is going to be called "Death in America". I'll show the electric chair pictures and the dogs in Birmingham and car wrecks and some suicide pictures.

(Andy Warhol in Gene Swenson, "What is Pop Art?", *Art News*, no.62, November 1963, pp.60-63.)

Andy Warhol's Paris show was not called 'Death in America' in the end, but it did consist of his 'Death and Disaster' paintings which were completed between 1962 and 1964. Considered one of Warhol's most important periods of work, it includes images of car crashes, race riots, suicides and electric chairs. Warhol has stated that the works were prompted by the art critic Henry Geldzahler, who drew his attention to a newspaper headline about an aircraft crash in June 1962. The paintings of Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy may also be seen in relation to this series. Warhol produced the *Marilyn* paintings shortly after her death in August 1962, and the Jackie Kennedy paintings were made following the assassination of her husband, US president John F Kennedy, in November 1963.

The series is divided between the 'celebrity deaths' of Monroe and Kennedy and the anonymous demise of ordinary people in car accidents and suicides whose deaths briefly captured a moment of sensational media attention. The *Electric Chair* paintings stand apart in that no figures are included. This human absence emphasises the stark, indifferent and mechanical nature of this instrument of execution.

The source images for the 'Death and Disaster' series were a mixture of contemporary press cuttings from magazines and newspapers, and photographs from the 1950s such as those used for the *Marilyn* and *Electric Chair* paintings. Warhol's selection of pre-existing images of people or events was central to his work. It acknowledged the 'reality' of the dramatically expanding media environment of the 1960s and the extent to which it penetrated the social, political and cultural life of America.

### GoMA / Gallery 1.1

#### FOR DISCUSSION

- What present-day techniques could be used for producing repeated images?
- Warhol believed that photography required decision making. Discuss this statement in light of this image. In framing his images, which perspectives are silenced? Can you identify the gaps? \*

# ANDY WARHOL

TEACHERS' NOTES

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## WARHOL AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICA: 'DEATH AND DISASTER' SERIES



**Skull** 1976

Acrylic and silkscreen ink on linen /  
182.9 x 203.2cm / The Andy Warhol  
Museum, Pittsburgh / Founding  
Collection, Contribution Dia Center  
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Foundation for the Visual Arts Inc.

The near-fatal shooting of Andy Warhol by Valerie Solanas in 1968 profoundly affected the artist. Studio assistants and professional colleagues noted a change in Warhol's attitude to work and business. During the subsequent period in the 1970s he undertook hundreds of celebrity portrait commissions, further developed *Interview* magazine and produced several major series of paintings. During the early 1980s he adopted more traditional themes such as still lifes, religious subjects and self-portraits. Warhol's late works retain the combination of his intuitively simple choice of subject with a potentially complex layer of associated histories and references.

Warhol began his *Skull* paintings in 1976. Historically, the human skull in art has symbolised mortality and, as a motif, it has continued in pop culture, graffiti, tattooing and art. Warhol had a replica plastic skull photographed in black and white to create a dramatic and prominent shadow. The shadow creates its own space in the subsequent painting and reads as a void — a space of nothing. Warhol's choice of the skull as subject is consistent with his ongoing preoccupation with death, which for him, as a devout Catholic, carried a particular blend of both promise and dread.

**GoMA / Gallery 1.3**

### FOR DISCUSSION

- Explore different cultural symbols and motifs of death.
- What events and people in Warhol's life made him think about mortality and religion?



## WARHOL AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICA: 'DEATH AND DISASTER' SERIES



### **The Last Supper** 1986

Acrylic and silkscreen ink on linen /  
294.6 x 990.6 x 5.1cm / The Andy  
Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh / Founding  
Collection, Contribution The Andy  
Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts,  
Inc. / © The Andy Warhol Foundation  
for the Visual Arts Inc.

During the early 1980s he adopted more traditional themes such as still lifes, religious subjects and self-portraits. Warhol's late works retain the combination of his intuitively simple choice of subject with a potentially complex layer of associated histories and references.

His *Last Supper* paintings were some of the last paintings Warhol completed. They engage with death, like many of his late works, but through an overtly religious theme. Leonardo da Vinci's famous wall painting in the Church of Santa Maria della Grazie, Milan, is the basis for the works, and another Renaissance master, Raphael, provides the model for *Raphael Madonna - \$6.99*. Warhol has provocatively reduced these iconic works to schematic outline drawings and introduced advertising logos and price tags — reminding us that traditions, beliefs and histories can also be commodities.

Mimicry was a 'strategy' that Warhol used throughout his career, often appropriating some of the most widely known images, such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and *The Last Supper*, or the mushroom cloud of atomic bomb explosions.

**GoMA / Gallery 1.3**

### **FOR DISCUSSION**

- Consider the work Warhol created in the later part of his life. What kind of outlook on life and death does he appear to have had at this time?
- What were his major preoccupations during these years?
- Can you see any common threads running through Warhol's work?

## WARHOL AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICA: 'DEATH AND DISASTER' SERIES

### BACK IN THE CLASSROOM

- What is the definition of 'memory'? Draw a picture of a memory you have and tell a friend about the story connected to it. When and where did this event happen? What helps you to remember it?
- Consider the depiction of death and destruction in the media today. Has anything changed since Warhol began making his 'Death and Disaster' series?
- Select a confronting image from a magazine or newspaper. How can you draw one's attention to the significance of the situation depicted? What techniques will you use? You might like to use a computer program, such as Adobe Photoshop or other editing software, to alter your image. You might like to experiment with scale and repetition. How can you express the same message or generate the same emotions, using only words rather than images? Is the end result the same? Which method is more successful?
- Collect some newspaper headlines and text reflecting an issue or theme of interest to you. Overlap the headlines to create a collage. You might like to think about the way you arrange the words (for example, hiding, rearranging, reordering or repeating). Paint an image inspired by your collage.
- What criteria must be met in order for an event to be 'defining'? As a class, list the top five defining events of your generation. Describe your memory of these events.
- Research the meaning of the word 'spectacle'. How were events such as executions and the deaths of an American President and a Hollywood superstar treated by the media at the time they occurred? What techniques are employed by Warhol to engage in a 'conversation' with his audience about notions of spectacle and the media's role in this? \*
- Are only events which receive media coverage worthy of our consideration? Why are some tragic world events given exposure in the media and others not? Discuss the role of the media and propaganda in privileging particular events over others.

# ANDY WARHOL

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