

VANITY FAIR

Bob Colacello on Blurred Art, “Blurred Lines,” and Christmas Gifts from Andy Warhol

Ahead of his new exhibit, “The Age of Ambiguity,” art’s most famous arbitrator discusses new trends and his old boss.

By Elise Taylor | January 27, 2017



By Kelly Taub/BFA/Rex/Shutterstock.

It’s fitting that when *Vanity Fair* special correspondent Bob Colacello was asked to curate an exhibit for Vito Schnabel’s St. Moritz gallery, he chose “undefinability” as its theme. (After all, this is a man who once told *The New York Times*, “I believe in going out, not coming out.”) “The Age of Ambiguity,” which opens January 29, focuses on the complex relationship between abstraction and figuration. Once upon a time, the two were considered mutually exclusive—but, as Colacello explores, time and turmoil have blurred the genres, creating an artistic landscape in which “everything is fluid and nothing is concrete.” The show includes works by Jean-Michel Basquiat, Borna Sammak, Jacqueline Humphries, and Andy Warhol, who employed Colacello as the editor of *Interview* magazine from 1971 until 1983.

Ahead of the exhibit’s opening, VF.com talked to Colacello about its conception, fake news, and Warhol’s unorthodox Christmas gifts.

VF.com: So, this is your first time curating a show. What made you decide to take the plunge?

Bob Colacello: I’ve always had a visual side. Even when I was at Georgetown School of Foreign Service, I also was taking art courses. And I have an MFA in film from Columbia.



The Crowd, 2016, by Rashid Johnson. Photograph by Martin Parsekian/Courtesy of Rashid Johnson and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

When I worked with Andy Warhol I was selling art, I wasn't really making art. So, it's kind of nice to suddenly have the opportunity to express this other part of me.

What was the process like?

A lot of work! But it was the kind of work you enjoy, like going to artists' studios, having them show you their work, picking out some things. I'm really flattered that some artists actually made pieces especially for the show—Jeff Elrod, Jacqueline Humphries, Borna Sammak...Borna Sammak made maybe the best painting I've seen yet of his.

What is it?

He makes collages out of decals that he puts on the canvas, like American flags, and then he paints over the whole thing. It's very pop art-like, but from a distance it looks almost like a Pollock. It becomes just streams of colors. However, from close up you start realizing what it really depicts.

[Sammak's work] really encompasses the idea of the whole show, which is this total blurring of lines between abstraction and figurative.

Let's talk about that idea of the show—you call it "Age of Ambiguity."

At one point, actually, I wanted to call the show "Blurred Lines," and have the song blasting when you walked into the gallery. I still might blast this if I want to get people to leave the gallery.

But I think there's very few boundaries, rules, and morals anymore. Take the fake news phenomenon, for example. And then politics and entertainment—they've completely merged.

Artists, they tend to echo the times, or even predict the times. To make hyper-realist paintings, or purely abstract ones, it's too absolute in a time where everything is ambiguous. I don't know if the artists themselves are thinking this way, but as a curator, it's up to me to see these trends.

Your show features a lot of exciting younger artists, but it also has a painting from the artist you are most associated with: Andy Warhol.

Yes, a camouflage painting.

Got any good Warhol stories?

Well, the first time he took Polaroids of me . . . I turned out looking like the young Elvis Presley—Andy could make anybody look like a beauty. Or when we went to see the pyramids outside Mexico City, and Andy said “they’re just a pile of rocks” and refused to get out of the car.

Andy was really funny. I think people don’t understand how funny he was and how his art was meant to be a perfect joke and serious at the same time.

Oh! And Andy and Elizabeth Taylor. Andy was in one of Elizabeth’s movies, and he couldn’t remember his lines, so she kept feeding him some of her endless Bloody Marys. Finally, she said “O.K., I’m going to tell you the history of my jewelry to relax you,” because Andy loved jewelry. Watching them interact was really funny. It was 10 years after he actually painted her. When he first painted her, he did those paintings based on publicity shots.

You got painted by him, right?

Yeah. It was actually a commission. I’d gotten Andy to do a portrait for this jeweler. As payment, he gave Andy an emerald. Andy told me, “I can’t give you 20 percent of an emerald, so I’ll do your portrait.”

Well, that works.

Yeah, there were no freebies with Andy. Except we did get little paintings for Christmas and our birthdays.

What were those like?

They were like 12 by 16 inches—one year it was the hammer and sickle, another year a Studio 54 ticket. I wish I had held on to them. I sold them too early.

That’s quite the Christmas gift.

You know, Andy was a good boss!