Roy Lichtenstein

Prints from the Collection of John and Kimiko Powers

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The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art
An Interview with Dorothy Lichtenstein

The following conversation between Dorothy Lichtenstein and Richard Klein took place in New York in July 1998.

RK John Powers' interest in Pop art was the impetus for his starting a visiting summer artists' program in Aspen in 1966, which led to the creation of the Aspen Center for Contemporary Art. Roy participated in the program in 1967, along with several other artists, including Claes Oldenburg and Robert Morris. Is this when you first met Roy?

DL No. I met John Powers in probably 1963 or 1964 when I was working at the Whitney Museum. He would come by the gallery regularly to look at work. I believe he was at that time a member of the Young Presidents of America—people who had to be good at their job. He was very good at his job and had a lot of connections and people interested in art and collecting. He was a great art dealer. In 1965, Paul Blanchard and I would look at work and buy a piece for ourselves—and occasionally say, "Pack this up and send it to so-and-so in Boise, Idaho, and send them an invoice!"

RK What kind of work was he interested in at that point?

DL I know he had a huge number of de Kooning sketches and drawings. Occasionally, we would have a piece of Roy's or something of Andy's and he would take an interest. For example, we did a show called The American Supermarket in 1964, with various things that were made by artists to represent food, and we set up the gallery to look sort of like a supermarket. Instead of doing a poster we got Roy and Andy to put an image on a shopping bag. I recall John getting one of the bags done by Roy.

RK The influence of music on Roy's work has been much on my mind as I worked on this exhibition. I know that John and Roy shared a love for jazz, and in my conversations with John I was surprised to find out that he had played the saxophone since he was a kid and encouraged Roy in taking up the instrument.

DL Probably one of Roy's pivotal experiences was when as a teenager he heard jazz for the first time. I think he heard Charlie Parker—and it was a real coming of age experience. He took some clarinet lessons when he was a child and when he was older he had fiddled around with the flute. At some point I decided to take some flute lessons from someone who also taught saxophone who lived in Sag Harbor, and Roy always used to pick it up and play around with it. He actually had an ear for music, but not that much knowledge—he could listen to something and figure it out after one or two tries, and get the notes right. I knew he really loved this, and so maybe five years ago I decided to buy him an alto saxophone for Christmas.

RK It was a total surprise?

DL Yes! He loved it, and he started taking lessons. He really had a talent for it. What he needed to do was build up his chops, as they say, and he also started studying and learning how to read music. As soon as John Powers realized that he had a saxophone, he started calling him and sending him scales to study, books on instruction, sending him new reeds to try. They had seen a lot of each other, but with John living in Aspen, they had just sort of drifted apart. This interest brought them back together again. I was amazed to learn that John plays the saxophone a couple of hours every day.

RK Jazz has been a significant influence on many twentieth-century artists. In looking at the paintings that are in this exhibition, my thoughts often turned to Stuart Davis—and another artist influenced by the rhythm and improvisational nature of jazz. Did Roy ever talk about Davis's work?

DL Well of course. When Pop started, people looked back to Stuart Davis and also to Gerald Murphy, so I think it was clearly an influence. Certainly the strongest influence for Roy was Cézanne and Picasso, and that had to do with his art professor at Ohio State University. From then on he looked at things in a different way. But I definitely think that jazz influenced him. Some of the last paintings that he worked on, the Compositions, were inspired by his renewed interest in music.

RK We have Composition I and Composition II in the exhibition. It seems to me—instead of interpreting Roy's quotation of other artists' work as pure appropriation—it might be more correctly seen as an analogy to jazz's approach of taking a popular melody and espousing on it.

DL That's a great point. I mean I hadn't thought of that specifically, but that does describe the way he thought about art when he was improvising. Even earlier than the Pop days, his work was a play on American historical painters like Benjamin West, or Charles Willson Peale.
He always knew what he was going to do before he went to Gemini. He would work for four or five months on developing ideas before he would go out to Los Angeles. He would make some small sketches, and then usually make a collage for a print. Once the idea had gelled he would start thinking about process—frequently sending some of the collages out for the printers to look at, or Sid Felton might come by and visit the studio. By the time Roy showed up the printers would be ready so he could really work—they could start making trial tests. He didn’t really want to leave empty space when he wasn’t working. He would stay at Gemini for six weeks or two months, and maybe go back later to see proofs, or they might be sent to the studio for Roy to approve.

DL: There was usually a connection between the paintings that were being worked on and what was going on in the print studio?

DL: Usually. There were those when he did prints, or was working on an idea for a print, and then wanted to incorporate the development in a painting—or it might become incorporated in a sculpture. The printmaking process was a very integral part of his working, often a jumping-off point for a painting.

RR: When you look through the catalogue raisonné of the prints, it seems that printmaking formed the core of what he was doing—certainly as important as the painting.

DL: I was struck by that idea when I saw the print show that was traveled by the National Gallery. Because of the different materials and techniques—embossing, etching—the prints actually have a lot more texture—physical presence—than the paintings. The printmaking process adds a lot of depth to the work.

DL: Well, there were things he liked about them all, but I know he loved the Cow series—with the cow becoming more and more abstract. Around 1970, when he was exploring the "modern" style, the Modern Head prints that he did at Gemini, he really loved those. John and Kesicko have a number of them.

I think he really liked the idea of the Mirrors. People always tended to like things that were immediately recognizable and simple.
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