

Roy Lichtenstein: History in the Making, 1948 – 1960

Transcript

Nina Chanel Abney: “When I first saw his earlier work, I was very surprised. I saw it as kind of unrecognizable from what I’m used to seeing so, I was like extremely shocked.”

Allison Zuckerman: “When I looked at Lichtenstein’s early work, I felt very surprised, and amazed, and happy because it’s kind of a vulnerable thing to see an artist’s career unfold, and the way that they’re looking at art, and what they’re invested in.”

Stacy Lynn Waddell: “My first reaction was, ‘uh, I don’t like this work,’ (laughs) but then I looked again and realized that everything was already there. So, I began to have a relationship with it the more I looked at it.”

Marshall N. Price: “*Roy Lichtenstein: History in the Making, 1948 – 1960* is the first major museum exhibition to investigate the early work of one of the most celebrated American artists of the 20th century. Lichtenstein has influenced several generations of artists who have found inspiration in his investigations of contemporary culture.”

Marshall N. Price: “It’s important to study Roy Lichtenstein’s early work for several reasons. Number one, it’s a story that really hasn’t been told in a comprehensive way. So, uh, it allows a window onto the artist’s work, um, that we really haven’t seen. The other thing I would say about studying the early work is that we can see just how indebted the Pop work is to this early period. Even though visually it may look quite different from Roy Lichtenstein’s Pop work, the early work is filled with all of the hallmarks of Pop. An interest in popular culture, appropriation, this unbelievably sort of witty sense of humor. And so it was really laying the foundation for the work that is best known.”

Beth Finch: “So when I began working at the Colby Museum, um, it was one of the works in our galleries that stopped me in my tracks. And I did that kind of, um, sort of bob and weave that we all do when we’re in front of a work that we don’t-can’t immediately kind of say ‘That’s a so and so,’ um, so I, you know, looked at the label and I had that moment of disbelief, ‘How could that be a Lichtenstein? So that was probably the very beginning of, um, that process, um, and then looking more closely at that work, um, the work in question is *The Cowboy (Red)*, it’s from 1951,

and I realized that, uh, eventually I began to look into it and I realized that there was actually a *Cowboy Blue* that is at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and it's one of the loans to the exhibition, so we're really excited about bringing those two works together, in addition to, and this was later on. . . . We found out there was a preparatory drawing also in our exhibition. So beginning to understand that the works were out there — and this wasn't just this strange enigma (laughs)!”

Jack Cowart: “I’m Jack Cowart, the founding Executive Director of the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, here in Roy Lichtenstein’s last studio in West Greenwich Village, New York. What Roy thought about his early work has always been a question that has amused us, uh, over the years. And I knew Roy for 30 years, so I knew that he would probably say numerous things about it. Uh, we’re still not quite sure. He was ambivalent, he was loyal to it, he recollected it during his lifetime, he preserved it during his lifetime. And-I think he would be amused that we’re spending this much time studying this as we have been. But along the way we’ve found over 600 works, as opposed to the known body of 250 when we began the project. He would be amazed at, by our diligence, by how many works we have found with people that he had given works to over the years in Ohio, and how we’ve kind-of bird-dogged them to ground. I think he would be very pleased with the breadth of our inquiry.”

Marshall N. Price: “I think many artists, when they tend to reach a certain age, uh, they are grateful that they have this early work. You know it’s a story of origin for every artist, and, if an artist does not have the early work, or doesn’t have access to early work, then, it can be a chapter of one’s career that is missing.”

Allison Zuckerman: “I feel nostalgic about my early work, but also embarrassed at the same time. It’s kind of like looking at old pictures of yourself, like, when you’re going through puberty, and you know, I, I’m happy that that work happened, and I know that I wouldn’t be where I am now within my work, had it not. I have saved it all, and I reference, I reference that work too. And, I think just as people, we are products of our own experience, so I think my work is definitely a product of previous work.”

Nina Chanel Abney: “Um, my earlier, my own earlier work I'm a little embarrassed by it but I'm starting to appreciate it as I get older because I've started to see some similarities from how I was working when I was younger to now. It’s cringy, it’s cringy (laughs).”

Stacy Lynn Waddell: “How do I feel about my own early work and did I save it?”

Um, I did save it. I feel...I have a mixed bag of emotions about the early work, but it's really, it's important. I feel that it's important because it shows me the way forward. Um, it shows me, like, some of the things that I was thinking about doing before I got distracted or went down a different path. Um, and really recently it's offered me an opportunity to think about the way that I work in a different way."

Pedro Lasch: "There's something about a young artist's mind — even when it's your own mind — I still find really surprising. Like, there are works that I really, I myself have to really put myself in that place in time to kind of retrace my steps and see what I was thinking, you know, because one day I would make work that is completely conceptual and the next day I would make a hyper-technical set of etchings you know and it was fine for them to coexist. To some extent my practice is still like that, but overtime because of everyday life you have to become more focused, you know, and in those early years I remember not having any focus whatsoever, you know, I had focus for that particular project and then moved onto another one. I feel like when you look at Lichtenstein's early pieces you can see that way of offering."

Beth Finch: "I think it's important to study Lichtenstein's pre-pop output, um, because, because he, you know, one of the things Lichtenstein knew was that we understand knowledge through stories! And, um, this, you know, he has come to be a kind of known quantity, he was the most consistent artist from his Pop period forward of anyone out there in terms of his artistic achievement, and this is a story that needed to be told to understand him anew. I also think Lichtenstein, um, you know, he was able to mine, um, aspects of American culture and sort of bring them back to us in such interesting ways. So he played with, um, what we thought we knew and showed it to us in a different way. So in that way, um, he also kind of got at, um, the profundity of satire. So Lichtenstein is so funny, and humor is a really powerful medium for an artist to work with, and he seemed to be a natural at it really from the outset of his artistic life. So we're, you know, drawing that back to a different moment, to a moment when an artist born and raised in New York City actually went west, kind of did something a little counterintuitive to what we might expect of the avant-garde, and found new material there."

Marshall Price: "Um, one of the most illuminating things about this project has been the artist's, uh, take on American history, uh, American exceptionalism, um, and, um, his, um, continued interest in that, throughout his entire career, beginning in the late 1940s. So, I think it shows us, uh, a much wider angle on, on not only Roy Lichtenstein's career, but Pop art in general."

