

# Before the world went Pop

GALLERIES:

**Jamie James** on a New York show of American art from the Fifties and early Sixties

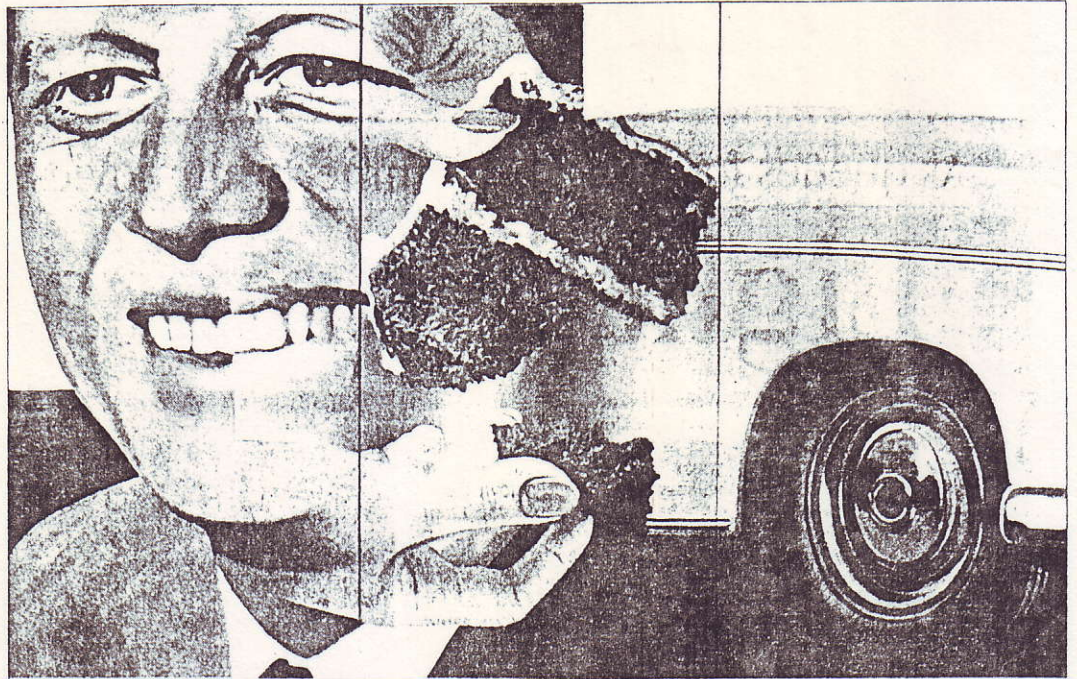
The history of art, particularly modern art, is usually presented as a time line of discrete styles, each supplanting its predecessor, or travelling down parallel but completely independent paths. First there was Impressionism, then there was Post-Impressionism, then there was Cubism, while Surrealism was floating off somewhere in the ozone. Pop Art stands at the end of this line, thrusting aside the earnest bravado of the Abstract Expressionists; after Pop ensues the bewildering muddle of Post-Modernism, a pit into which we are wallowing deeper and deeper.

A thoughtful, well-mounted exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, **Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955-62**, challenges that conventional view of modern art history as a concatenation of isms. The show, which comprises 117 works by 21 artists, attempts to bring into focus the blurred edges between Pop Art and the American painting which preceded it.

The basic premise is hardly revolutionary: it is a truism for undergraduates that Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns straddled the fence between Abstract Expressionism and Pop. Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) was the outrageous gesture of a young turk thumbing his nose at the establishment. America's answer to Duchamp's moustache on the *Mona Lisa*. Johns's one-man show of target and American flag paintings at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1958 has long been recognised as the watershed in this transition.

The Abstract Expressionists viewed themselves with tremendous seriousness as pure-art heroes, positioned somewhere between Homer (the epic poet, that is, not Winslow) and Walt Whitman. It was all terribly important.

Johns's American maps and flags,



James Rosenquist's oil, *President Elect*. From the collection of the Musée Nationale d'Art Moderne, Paris

although in the same painterly tradition, had more than a touch of irony, and were a bracing blast of fresh air to the staid American art scene during the Eisenhower years. It should also be remembered that Rauschenberg's combine paintings incorporated homely objects such as Coca-Cola bottles years before Andy Warhol painted them.

This exhibit, Janus-like, looks in both directions. The first painting the visitor sees upon entering is Larry Rivers's 1953 expressionistic and gently tongue-in-cheek version of Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, a kitsch icon of patriotic Americana — a reminder that Abstract Expressionism was not altogether a humourless, pompous monolith.

The curators are less successful in trying to shoehorn Cy Twombly and Grace Hartigan into their scheme. Hartigan made use of images from quotidian city life, certainly, but so did Pieter de Hooch. Stuart Davis, just to name one, in his jazzy cityscapes from

25 years earlier, is much closer in spirit to the Pop artists.

The exhibit's most important insight is its dissection of the Ab-Ex roots of the major Pop figures. A self-portrait by Claes Oldenburg from 1959 has all the self-conscious gorgeousness of a painting by Philip Guston. Some early works by Ed Ruscha and Allan Kaprow are executed in a style that is closer to Hans Hofmann or Franz Kline than to the cool detachment of the High Pop of the late Sixties.

The greatest revelation is provided by several very early paintings by Andy Warhol, which were lent by the painter's estate. These pastel-hued, intensely painterly canvases from the mid-Fifties reveal a side of Warhol that has never been widely known. Likewise, some drawings of comic strip characters by Roy Lichtenstein from 1958 (*Bugs Bunny, Donald Duck*), despite their pop subjects, are firmly in the style of de Kooning. James Rosenquist, the billboard painter turned firm artist, is

also well-represented by some early works. The Pompidou Centre lent *President Elect*, his first painting to incorporate commercial imagery, a car and a huge slice of cake absurdly juxtaposed with a portrait of the newly elected president, John Kennedy. Yet what was brash and provocative in 1960 now seems naive.

It is the way of all isms that what was revolutionary must become tame. The Rauschenberg combine paintings, particularly, have the jewel-like, high-art preciousness of Vermeers, while the satirical element in Rosenquist and the threshold Warhols and Lichtensteins seem gentle, endearing, and almost camp in light of the art of recent years. At the time these paintings were produced, many art critics condemned them as empty and cynical, but visitors to this exhibit may be more likely to see them as a window onto a lost era of arcadian innocence, when American artists still believed that painting mattered.

● **Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955-62**, is at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, until October 3. The show was organised by the *Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles*.

**'The important insight is into the Ab-Ex roots of the major Pop figures'**