

GALERIE BRUNO BISCHOFBERGER

Founded 1963

ANDY WARHOL - BIG RETROSPECTIVE PAINTING

Introduction to the publication by Bruno Bischofberger, 2009

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In the late 1970s and 80s I travelled to New York for a few days about once a month. One Saturday morning in the second half of 1979 I went to my appointment at the Factory at Union Square to visit Andy Warhol. The normally busy place was quiet and I encountered Andy all alone on his knees next to a bucket of paint with an eight-inch brush in his hand, painting the background on a 7' x 36' (213 x 1097 cm) unrolled canvas with big gestural strokes. He told me that this was going to be one painting from a series to be called *Reversals*. He said that he had already made a number of smaller *Reversal* paintings and that he was still working on this and five other large works.

At the beginning of the following week he showed me all the works of the *Reversal* series, featuring his classic images from the early 60s. In almost all of them the tones and colours were reversed, which is to say that the previously dark areas became light and the lighter areas were now dark. They looked like photonegatives that he used for his silkscreen painting. All the paintings showed the usual repetition of the same image but mostly on a more vividly painted background. The series was begun with a group of works that Warhol called *Retrospectives*. In this group of smaller works, which he had begun in the previous year, he normally painted about nine of his most famous images from works made in the 1960s on the same canvas. Some of these images were overlapping or even slanted and some were silk-screened in the reversed way outlined above. I was overwhelmed by the beauty and importance of the *Reversals* and immediately decided that I would buy all of them. This purchase went smoothly since Andy in 1968 had granted me a «right of first refusal» on all his subsequent work as part of the deal in which I bought eleven very important early paintings at

very high prices from him. Andy had granted me the «right of first refusal» at a time when he was saying that he did not want to continue to make art and instead would focus his energy on making films, but in later times when Andy again made more art he remained true to his word.

For me the culmination of the whole series of *Reversals* is *Big Retrospective Painting*. In this work Warhol does not overlap or slant any images as he had done in the earlier, smaller *Retrospective Reversals*. Here all the images, three reversed and six positive, were shown in a dramatic and beautifully designed way as if to show us a film featuring his most famous images: a real retrospective, a striking work of designed forms and colours. At that time, in 1979 at the beginning of the post-modern era, *Big Retrospective Painting* was a radical statement and reflection of Warhol's own historically important past. I showed the painting together with another large 36' *Reversal*, *One Hundred and Fifty Marylins* and about ten smaller ones in my gallery in Zurich in the spring of 1980 (14 May-11 June). In the beginning of May of the following year I travelled with Andy and a small entourage to Vienna where I had organized a big exhibition of the *Reversals* at the Museum of the 20th Century (Museum Moderner Kunst / Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts, 9 April-10 May, 1981). A catalogue was printed in an elongated size of 15 3/4' x 5 7/8' (48 x 15 cm) to accommodate the reproductions of the six large paintings.

I was already used to Andy printing images on 36' (1079 cm) long canvases. Some years before he had sold me two rolls of canvas, made back in 1963, on which he had painted a number of standing Elvis images, with a drawn gun in a cowboy outfit. We had unrolled the works at the Factory and Andy told me where he wanted me to cut the images back in Zurich, differing from one to eight overlapping Elvises, which we marked with tape. He told me at the end of that day that he was almost sorry that we would not leave one 36' roll of canvas as it was in one piece.

By 1979 I had already had a long relationship with Andy documented by a series of varied Warhol exhibitions in my gallery. It was my idea for Andy to do commissions portraits with an established size and price that became the artist's main source of income for the rest of his life. In 1969 I was one of the founding partners of Andy Warhol's *Interview Magazine* with a

commitment of 25% that I traded back to Andy in 1986 for a group of new paintings. In 1971 I published the *Electric Chair Portfolio* that was printed and signed by the artist in Zurich and was the producer of his full-length movie *L'Amour* in 1970/71. I commissioned his first big blue Mao paintings, his *Children's Paintings* and later on the *Collaboration Paintings* between Warhol, Basquiat and Clemente and published Warhol's only two portfolios of photographs.

Forgive me; I am getting carried away recalling some of my many involvements with Andy. But this reminds me of his answer when he was asked in 1974, which one of his images he would choose to represent his work as a whole. He replied: «I just wanted to do one. But I got so carried away.»

Big Retrospective Painting also shows Warhol getting «carried away». The painting has always reminded me of Picasso's monumental painting *Guernica*, a work that is, for me the most important one in the second half of the artist's life. And, in the same way that Picasso was the most important artist and influence on the art of his time during the first part of the twentieth century, Warhol was, in my and most people's opinion, the most important and influential artist of the second part of the century. I am convinced too that the most important painting Andy made in the last two thirds of his artistic life is *Big Retrospective Painting*.