

Aesthetica

Review of Pop Art Design at Barbican Centre, London



With the Barbican hosting its finale, this comprehensive review of the relationship between Pop Art and design from Vitra Design Museum has just gone up a notch: its European tour finishing on a high with the addition of works from leading British institutions such as the V&A, Tate and many private collectors. These 200 works are housed within a curvaceous set designed by AOC Architecture and Village Green Studio, immediately transporting visitors into the bold and mischievous world of Pop Art.

Pop Art may often be disregarded as gaudy, garish and indulgent, however this exhibition reveals its deeply historical nature: a post-war phenomenon, reacting to the effects of mass-production, mass-media and mass-culture, with a focus on the American Dream, celebrity and the seductive femme fatale.

Although the exhibition is vast, it is divided thematically – Barbican's Lower Level a playful combination of art and design pieces, which miraculously manage to portray around 30 years of art history in one fell swoop; and the Upper Level a sleek selection of design pieces, acting as a break-out space after the near-information-overload of the floor below.

The fine art dimension of the exhibition is not just a collection of Warhols, Hamiltons and Lichtensteins (although the key names are well represented), but also ventures into Pop Art film – William Klein's dark take on the psychedelic city spectacle particularly memorable. Outside of the gallery, Barbican have also curated a season of international films entitled *Pop: Images of Desire* to further the Pop Art experience.

In fact, the exhibition is nothing if not immersive, with artworks, furniture, sculpture, the printed media and even images of collectors' homes exposing the sheer impact of the movement upon lifestyles and trends in the 1950s to late '70s – seemingly banal activities like tupperware parties being described as signifying the acceptance of fluid plastic forms within the common home.

The relationship between the everyday home and Pop Art, more specifically the duality of the feminine role, is key to Pop Art Design and is clearly depicted by the coupling of highly sexualised design pieces such as Allen Jones' Chair with less (overtly) provocative works such as Andy Warhol's giant Brillo Soap Pads boxes. Barbican's decision to discuss gender, politics and economics via these art and design pieces is

certainly a refreshing step away from the presentation of Pop Art as simply revolving around Marilyn prints and blown up comic-strips.

Offering a lighter and utterly bizarre take on the domestic sphere, however, are some of the most fascination works within the exhibition: photographs of the penthouse apartment of playboy Gunter Sachs. Sachs' apartment is museum meets Austin Powers meets James Bond set, and these images are not only wildly surreal and uplifting to look at, but also remind of the essential functionality, rather than impressive aesthetics, of the show's design works – a Verner Panton *Living Tower* exhibited on the first floor of the exhibition, also photographed supporting the odd book and teacup in Sachs' living room.

Pop Art Design presents these art and design movements as symptoms of a much wider social transformation, and quickly dispels any idea of Pop Art as trivial or shallow. Appropriate in discussing a movement which incorporated 'high' and 'low art', this exhibition not only discusses the artists, designers and collectors of the Pop Art era, but also its relationship to every area of society – even counter-culture, music and drugs. Pop Art Design is an extensive, informative and visually stimulating assortment of near infamously iconic and lesser known works, and looks likely to become a highly influential show for both the contemporary art and design movements alike.

Chloe Hodge

Pop Art Design, 22 October until 9 February, Barbican Art Gallery, Barbican Centre, Silk Street, London, EC2Y 8DS. www.barbican.org.uk

Credits:

1. Art direction: Ruth Ansel and Bea Feitler. Cover photograph by Richard Avedon. Cover of Harper's Bazaar, April 1965© The Richard Avedon Foundation. Image: Designmuseum Danmark/Pernille Klemp.
2. Studio 65, Leonardo, 1969. Collection Vitra Design Museum. © Studio 65. Photo: Andreas Sütterlin

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