



TWO NAMES DEFINE
POP ART:

Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. Both artists made indisputably aesthetic works, which also announced loudly that mass culture wasn't kitsch or trash, but the new warp-weft of our visual and emotional reality. (YouTube's role in everything from high-stakes art to global politics bears this out.)

The difference between these icons is best summarized by well-known photographic portraits of each: in a super-slick shot by Richard Avedon, Warhol bares his chest to display zig-zagging sutures from near-fatal gunshots by Valerie Solano, a Factory regular turned bitter; the most ubiquitous portrait of Lichtenstein shows him in a comfy turtleneck, looking regular as cereal on the family breakfast-nook table.

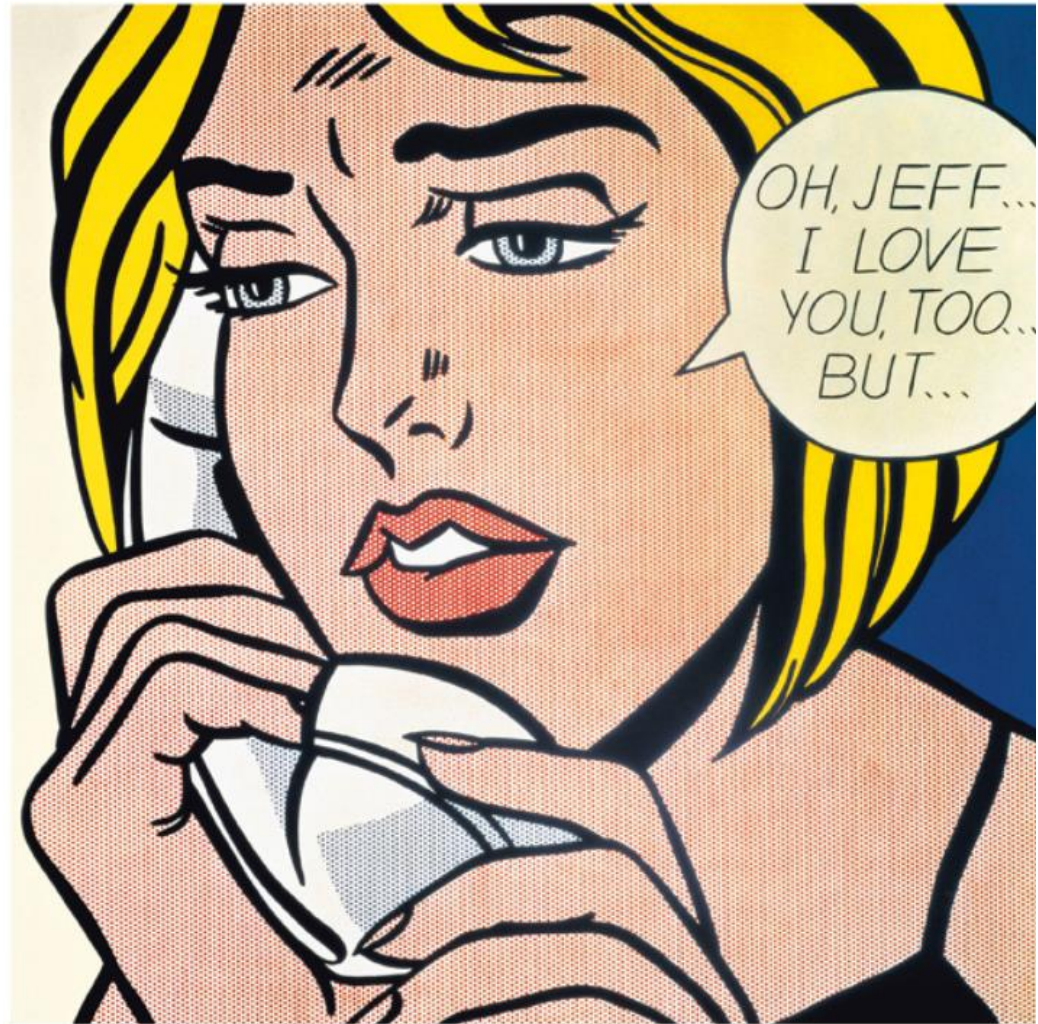
Caption The Art Institute of Chicago's new exhibit "Roy Lichtenstein: A Retrospective" shows how this pioneer of the Pop Art movement in the 1960s transgressively infused high-brow art with low-brow sensibilities. Today, his creations, including *Keds*, 961, sit in the pantheon of art history's masterworks. All images © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein, courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.

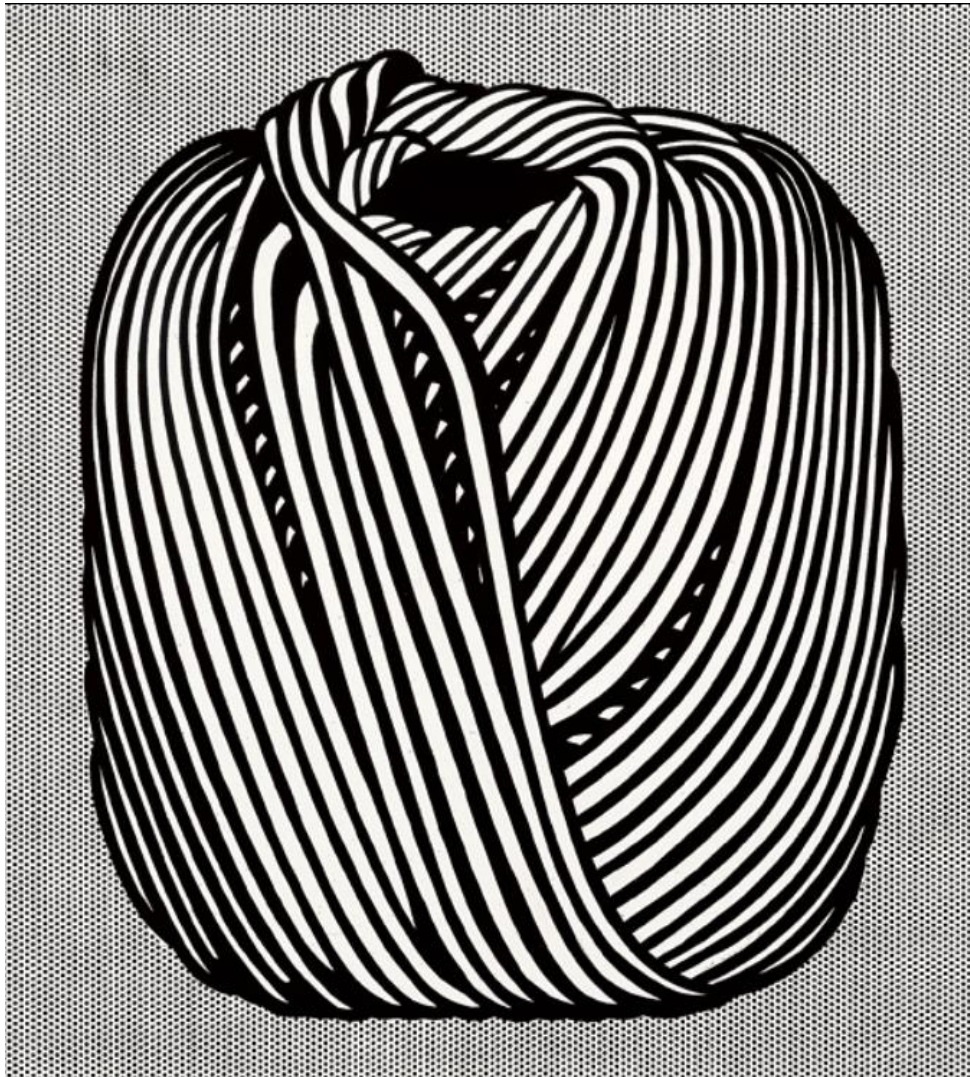
Because of his flamboyance and PR savvy, Warhol is the more well-known. But now the Art Institute of Chicago is shedding new light on the Pop era in general and on Lichtenstein in particular with "Roy Lichtenstein A Retrospective" (on view through September 3), which confirms Lichtenstein's role as the preeminent thinker and artist of the movement.

Featuring 160 works of paintings, drawings and sculptures from major public and private lenders, the show — organized by James Rondeau, the Art Institute's Dittmer chair and curator of its department of contemporary art — traces Lichtenstein's sophisticated themes, evident before Pop, alongside Warhol, into the 1980s and '90s and until the artist's death in 1997 at the age of 73.

Best known for large-scale samplings of comics and cartoonish re-do's from art history, all painted by hand in Ben-Day dots, Lichtenstein intentionally co-mingled the brush and the imaging machines of advertising. Blue-eyed Sunday-funnies blondes cry graphic tears as square-jawed heroes or scoundrels woo and wed them; fighter jets or guns explode with puffs saying *Whaam!*

Lichtenstein hand painted his oil-on-canvas works with small spots of color, known as Ben-Day dots in the comic book-printing world they were meant to mimic, as they do here in *Oh, Jeff...I Love You, Too...But...*, 1964.

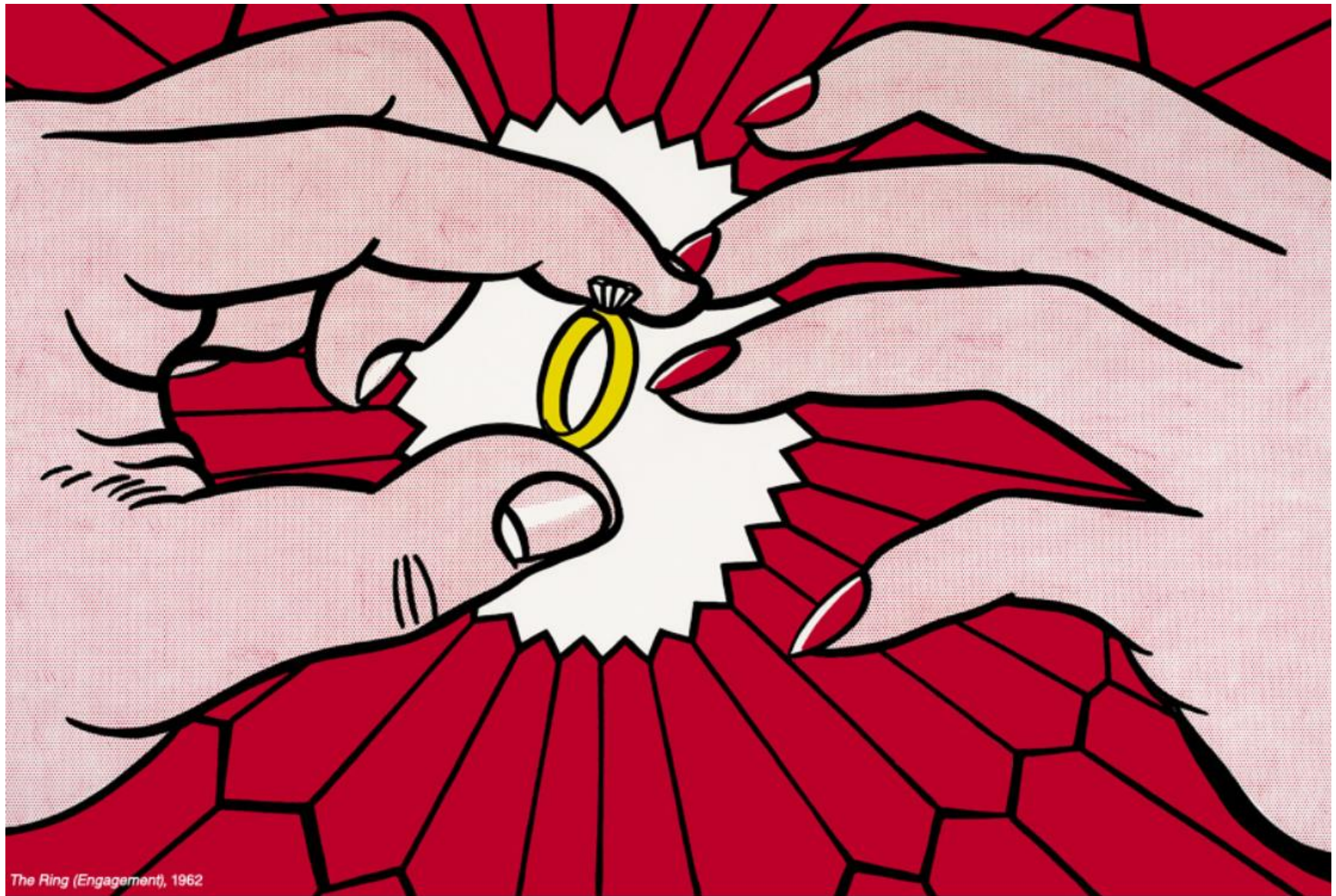




Lichtenstein is credited with producing what is arguably the first truly Pop work, *Look Mickey*, done in 1961 before Warhol's 1962 *Campbell's Soup* series, but in fact both artists were experimenting with Pop culture at pretty much the same time. It was something in the air — a desire by even more heady artists like Allan Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg to have art align better with life as we live it. Lichtenstein just distilled it in a very accessible, smart and appealing way. Appealing indeed: his iconic 1964 *Sleeping Girl* was sold at Sotheby's this May to an undisclosed buyer for nearly \$45 million.

Rondeau recently spoke to *Istdibs* on the subject of Chicago's blockbuster exhibition, "Roy Lichtenstein: A Retrospective," which travels on to the Washington, DC's National Gallery of Art, London's Tate Modern and the Pompidou in Paris.

Inherent to Lichtenstein's work was satire and parody, a fixture in the Pop Art ethos, which took the common and made it extraordinary, as with his *Ball of Twine*, 1963. tion needed



The Ring (Engagement), 1962



ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT 1961'S LOOK MICKEY, THE DRAWING OF DONALD DUCK DONE IN A VERY WASHY, SKETCHY MANNER THAT'S REMINISCENT OF DE KOONING'S PAINTERLY GESTURES?

Yes, that and pretty much down the line. He embraced ads, popular entertainment, the Yellow Pages, reproducing these in hand-applied paint for a collision of paradigms that was radical in that day.

BESIDES THE WHOLE HIGH-LOW IDEA, I ALWAYS FEEL THERE'S A KIND OF IRONY IN HIS CONTENT THAT'S LESS OBVIOUS IN WARHOL'S — ALL THOSE COWBOYS AND GUNS COULD BE TONGUE-IN-CHEEK REFERENCES AT THE HEIGHT OF POST WORLD WAR II MACHO-MAN ERA.

You are referring to his best-known images called the "romance and battle" comics done between 1960 and '64. Those are really a tiny cross-section of his production, but yes there's irony there and much more.

CAN YOU EXPLAIN?

In those comics, he was acknowledging that sex and violence have been the most prevalent themes in art history — just think of classical art and the Renaissance — and in human history for that matter. By adapting the visuals of Popular

culture to such themes, he is standing outside but also nodding at an inevitable tradition.

IS THE TRADITION HE IS INSERTING HIMSELF INTO ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM?

I think he is stepping outside it more than putting himself in it. Recall that AbEx was all about intense self-revelation, deep emotion, release, spontaneity. Over and over, Lichtenstein gives us high-stakes conditions like love and war, but he presents them in the most abstracted, standardized mass formulas, with all the emotion drained out.

THE MOST REPEATED SOUND BITE ABOUT POP ART IS THAT IT TRANSFORMS COMMERCIAL ART INTO FINE ART. IT'S MORE COMPLICATED THAN THAT, POSSIBLY FOR WARHOL, BUT MOST CERTAINLY FOR LICHTENSTEIN.

Lichtenstein is a very complex artist on a variety of levels. First, he worked outside the institutional language of painting before many.

The show includes works from all periods of the artist's long career, including, above, *Untitled*, 1959, which owes a debt to Abstract Expressionism, and, right, the Chinese landscape-inspired *Mountain in Fog*, painted in 1996, the year before his death.



★ AND HE DOES THIS INTENTIONALLY?

Oh, for sure. It's a bit like he's giving us the art that we deserve, that our culture has earned us. In the '60s we began living in this age of visual surfaces, so he gives us the most grand, intense, historically and universally complex themes but re-delivered devoid of any complexity . . . to step away from the painting of his day and mirror our times.

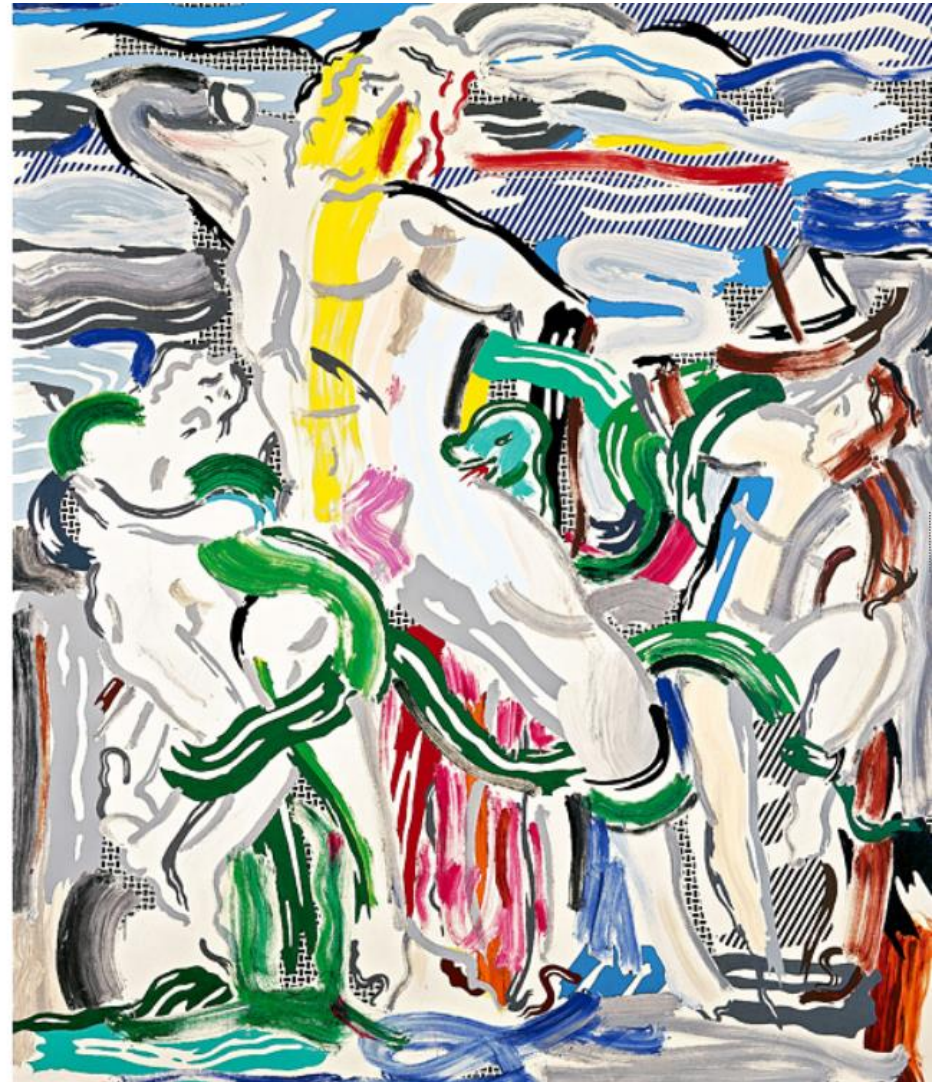
★ HE BORROWED FROM POPULAR SOURCES BUT ALSO SAMPLED BITS AND PIECES FROM MEDIA. IN ALL CASES THOUGH, THIS IS NOT ABOUT JUST COPYING, RIGHT?

I can say with certainty that Lichtenstein is always reminding us that to him art is a transformative act, that the art comes in the subtle transformations an artist sees, shows us and makes.

★ THIS SHOW INCLUDES RARER PRE-POP WORKS.

Yes, illuminating early works that few people have seen will hopefully inspire dialogue with the more expected work.

Lichtenstein's style evolved but remained loosely tethered to his comic sources. *Laocoön*, 1988, which dates from his Perfect/Imperfect period, has a classical subject but maintains a cartoon-ish feeling.





Ohhh... Alright..., 1964

★ LIKE?

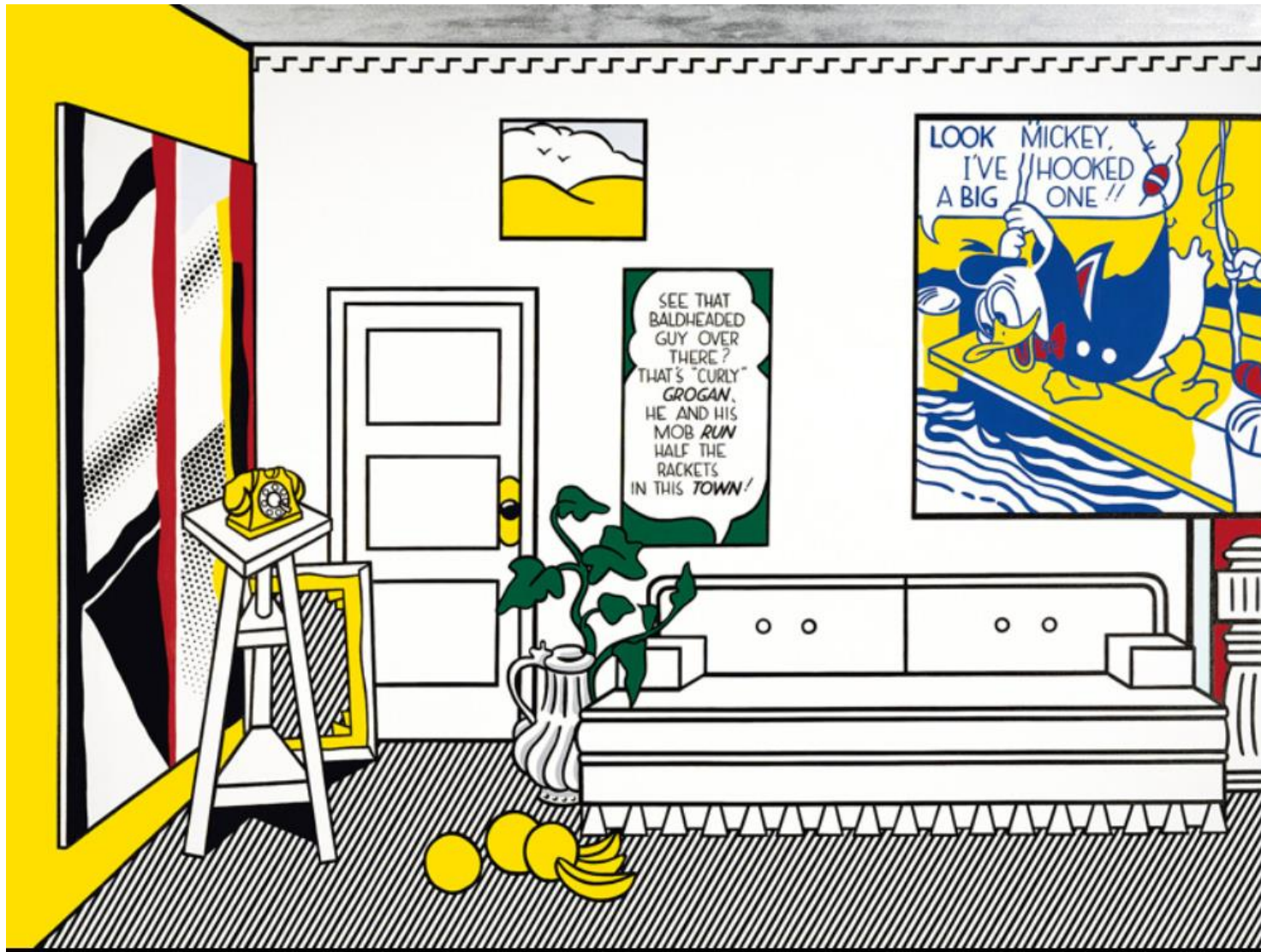
In the early 1950s when abstract painting was at its height, Lichtenstein was doing these wonderful takes on genre scenes — like quirky images of Washington crossing the Delaware or images of medieval jousts.

★ I WAS SHOCKED TO SEE HOW PAUL KLEE-LIKE AND WHIMSICALLY SURREAL THAT 1951 *WASHINGTON CROSSING THE DELAWARE* IS; OUR COUNTRY'S FOUNDER IS THIS LITTLE CHILD-LIKE SQUIGGLE, WITH LITTLE SCHEMATICS OF WATER AND FISH.

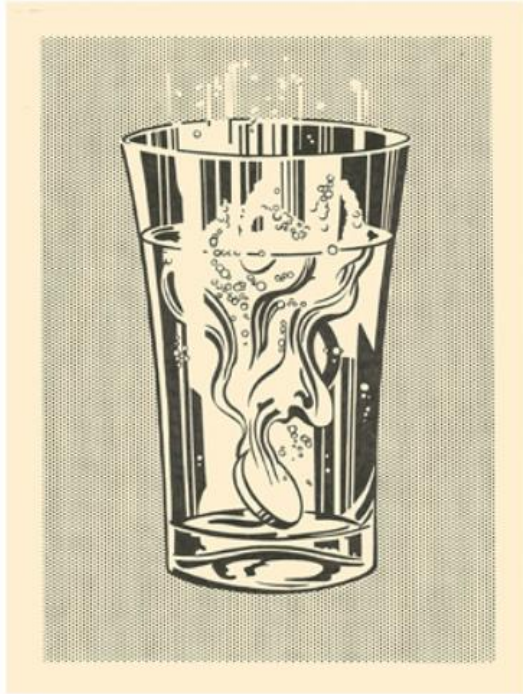
Just by virtue of what was considered art at the time, these had this very outré, outcast decision-making to them.

★ WE INHERIT FROM POP OUR ADDICTION TO FIRSTS, AND IN THAT SPIRIT, COULD WE DISCUSS THIS IDEA THAT YOUR SHOW INCLUDES THE FIRST POP WORK EVER.

That is Lichtenstein's first appropriation of cartooning taken from a kids' book featuring Mickey and Donald fishing, complete with primary colors and text bubbles. It is an extremely important benchmark. It was gifted to the National Gallery by the artist and his wife, Dorothy, and DC has lent it to us for the show.



Look Mickey, 1961, was, arguably, the first-ever Pop painting, and Lichtenstein integrated it into his self-referential *Artist's Studio No. 1* (*Look Mickey*), 1973.



Aika Seltzer, 1966

★ SO HE BEAT WARHOL?

That's not really the point so much, but, yes, it is pretty well known that Warhol was experimenting with loosely painted figures of Dick Tracy and Popeye but stopped doing comic-strip content because he saw Roy coined the motif.

★ SO WE SEE LICHTENSTEIN BEFORE POP — WHO THEN DOES THE ARTIST BECOME POST-POP, POST-COMIC-STRIP ARTIST?

I should first say that Lichtenstein never stops making the comics — comics figure in the work through his career, pre-Pop and well after Pop art ends, not because he was making popular art but because he was using media to talk about what was important to him always.

★ CAN YOU ELABORATE?

Using the same flat style, Lichtenstein in his later decades created broad house-paint "strokes" in primary colors and thick black outlines, right next to "splatters" worked to look like they were dripped from a wet brush. He was equating venerated art history with consumer culture and always said that we subvert the very things we love. He also produced these grand nudes in the same style, and both of these referenced the issues of modern art that Roy deployed and critiqued.

★ DOES THIS INCLUDE THOSE ALMOST INTERIOR-DECORATOR ROOMS AND ISOLATED MODERNE OBJECTS HE MADE LATE IN THE GAME FROM PIXILATED DOTS?

Yes, in those works and pretty much in every work, Lichtenstein was asking questions about form and style: How does the rarified formal language of a movement like Cubism come down to us and get eventually absorbed into populist tastes via Ikea? What does that say about the universality and/or the banality of pure form.

LICHTENSTEIN IS ALWAYS REMINDING US THAT TO HIM ART IS A TRANSFORMATIVE ACT; THAT THE ART COMES IN THE SUBTLE TRANSFORMATIONS AN ARTIST SEES, SHOWS US AND MAKES.



Sculpture is important to Lichtenstein's oeuvre, and the show highlights his command of steel, as with *Wall Explosion II*, 1965. Photo ©Tate, 2011

JUST TO CLOSE, LICHTENSTEIN NEVER COURTED A CULT OF PERSONALITY OR RUSHED TO ACHIEVE FIRSTS WITH HIS ART. DO YOU THINK THIS WAS IMPORTANT?

Well, Lichtenstein is famous in spite of all that. He eschewed the limelight, he was a thoroughly normal guy from middle-class roots, he was a family man, had kids, worked every day from his home studio and conspicuously lacked and avoided '60s drama. But the work holds up without it.