

Designing Warhol at the Whitney

Exhibition designer **Melanie Taylor**, of the Whitney Museum of American Art, reveals the creative process behind a major retrospective.

by Allison Malafronte

Although some creative professions combine aspects of fine art with architecture and design, few give designers the ability to work directly with iconic paintings from the past and present. Melanie Taylor, the Director of Exhibition Design at the Whitney Museum of American Art, in New York City, has that rare privilege as someone who decides how exhibitions are presented to the public. Her vocation requires all the observational sensitivity of a fine artist, the spatial and mathematical understanding of an architect, and the cinematic vision of a set designer. Most crucial to the position is the ability to make a curator's thesis come to life while customizing the exhibition experience to a vast range of viewers.

ROAD TO WARHOL

How exactly does one get into a field as distinctive as exhibition design? For Taylor, the journey began as an undergraduate at Bowdoin College, in Brunswick, Maine, where she majored in art history and, through the encouragement of her art history advisor, also took studio art classes. "In doing so, I discovered an entire creative space that I could occupy," Taylor says. "When the campus museum hired an exhibition designer to renovate its galleries during my senior year, I suddenly could imagine



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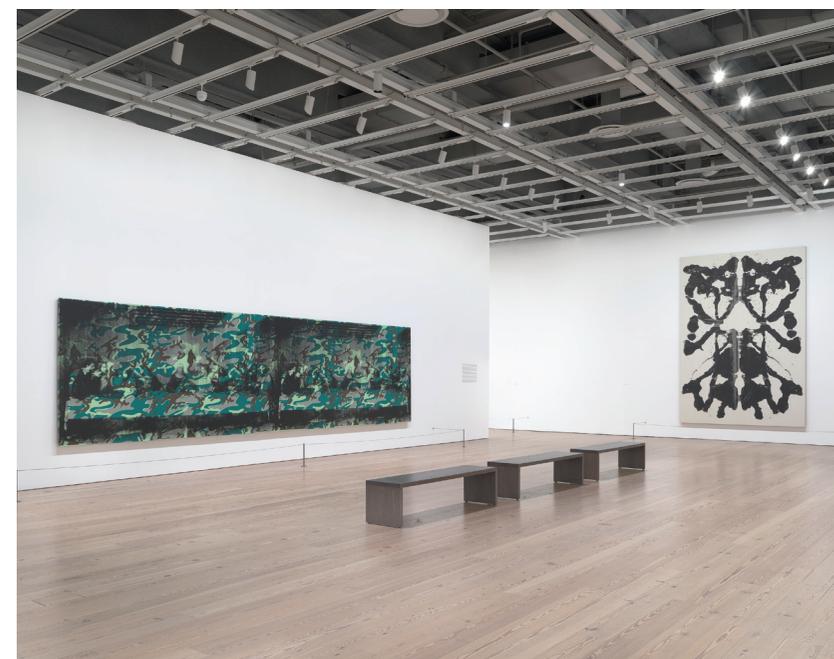
The work from Warhol's commercial illustration days bleeds into the same sight line of his Pop Art-era paintings of mass-produced images. This "slippage" allows the viewer to see how the printed image played a part in Warhol's thinking and output at multiple stages of his career.

ALL IMAGES IN THIS ARTICLE ARE INSTALLATION VIEWS OF "ANDY WARHOL—FROM A TO B AND BACK AGAIN" (WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK, NOVEMBER 12, 2018–MARCH 31, 2019). PHOTOGRAPHS BY RON AMSTUTZ. © 2018 THE ANDY WARHOL FOUNDATION FOR THE VISUAL ARTS, INC./LICENSED BY ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK



SILVERSCREENS

Warhol's fascination with movie stars and famous musicians, along with his curiosity about America's celebrity obsession, led him to experiment with silk-screening photographic imagery directly onto canvas to create a series of iconic images. The Whitney curatorial team displayed this collection of works in a way that resembles strips of vintage movie film, further emphasizing the pivotal role film played in Warhol's life and art.



another way of being with art—via design and architecture." With this career path secured in her mind, Taylor went on to earn a masters degree in architecture from Columbia University, in New York City.

After 15 years of designing exhibitions for the Guggenheim network and the Whitney, as well as for the arts biennials in Venice and Marrakech, Morocco, Taylor parlayed her expertise into her current position at the Whitney, where one of her most ambitious design projects to date, "Andy Warhol—From A to B and Back Again," was recently on view. Curated by a team led by the Whitney's Deputy Director for International Initiatives and Senior Curator Donna De Salvo—one of today's foremost Warhol scholars and one of the last living curators to have worked directly with the artist—this is the first Warhol retrospective to be produced in America in 30 years. As such, the more than 350-piece exhibition reveals novel revelations about the famous artist while subverting typical retrospective expectations and debunking a few myths.

DETERMINING THEMATIC DIRECTION

The curators certainly had a challenging task when selecting pieces for this project. Warhol is not only one of the most recognized artists of recent time, but he was also one of the most prolific, having produced thousands of works. Given her lifetime of research on the artist, De Salvo had several possible curatorial avenues to take, but ultimately, three themes ascended: to retrace the recursive nature of Warhol's output and show



REFLECTIVE ENDINGS

The final gallery in the exhibition is devoted to Warhol's abstract art, as seen in **Camouflage Last Supper** (left)—a mediation on spiritual sacrifice and mourning—and **Rorschach** (right). "The sublimity of these images is amplified by a spare installation and diffuse natural light from a custom clerestory window," says Taylor.

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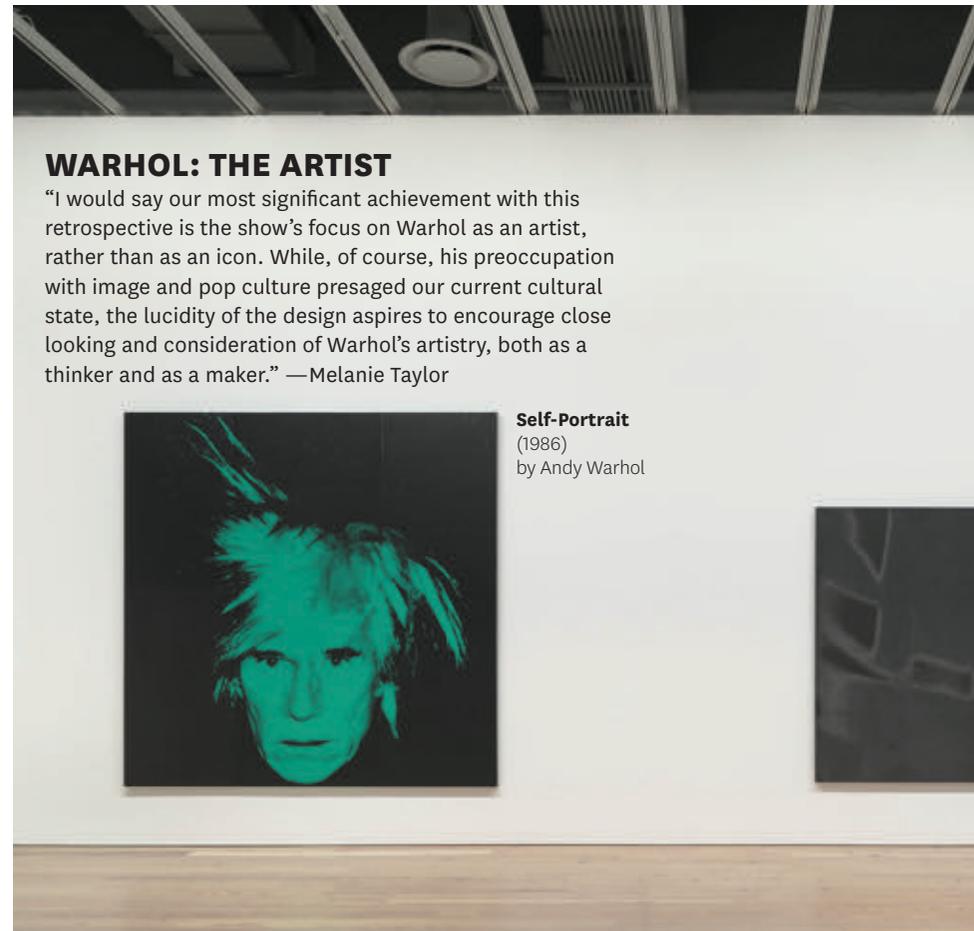
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WARHOL: THE ARTIST

"I would say our most significant achievement with this retrospective is the show's focus on Warhol as an artist, rather than as an icon. While, of course, his preoccupation with image and pop culture presaged our current cultural state, the lucidity of the design aspires to encourage close looking and consideration of Warhol's artistry, both as a thinker and as a maker." —Melanie Taylor



Self-Portrait
(1986)
by Andy Warhol

the interconnectedness among various stages of his career; to re-examine the creation of Warhol's image-centric work in light of our current digital age; and to reveal the true artistic identity of Warhol behind the smoke and mirrors.

Working in tandem with this curatorial direction, Taylor's desire as a designer was to create a "layered complexity" in the layout that presented both natural connections and unexpected juxtapositions among the stages of Warhol's career; to consider

BACK TO THE 60S

These works, predominantly from the 1980s, recall Warhol of the 1960s, including his preoccupation with political, economic and social issues. Also, his association with East Village art stars (Basquiat, Haring and Schnabel among them) re-energized his interest in the more expressive, direct hand-painting technique he'd used prior to silk screen.



how the artist could resonate for a new generation; and to have an element of "lucidity" in the design that encourages "close looking" and the consideration of Warhol as both "a thinker and a maker."

DESIGNING THE NARRATIVE

According to Taylor, the curatorial and design teams begin collaborating to shape an exhibition's narrative as soon as the curator has an initial checklist of works. "First, we have detailed conversations to clarify the exhibition's thesis, organizational concept and design sensibility," Taylor says. "I'll also research the artist, his or her work and the current scholarship so I may be an effective partner in determining the final checklist and layout. The majority of this planning happens with design models, using miniature maquettes of the artwork because it is the most intuitive and free way of testing and communicating ideas." De Salvo and Taylor and their teams collaborated for one and a half years on the planning process, finding innovative ways to problem-solve and cross-communicate.

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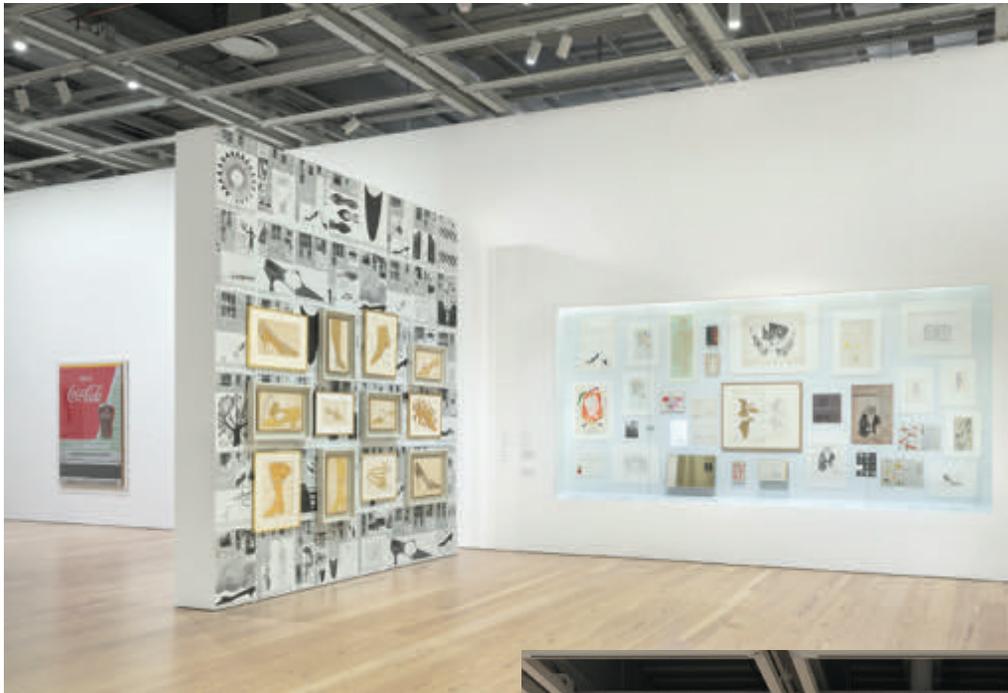


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VERTICAL VIEWS

The Whitney experimented with a vertical vitrine typography—a glass display situated perpendicular to the ground. The largest of these displays (back wall, right), shows the extent of Warhol’s early commercial work, evoking, as Taylor explains, “the scale of the retail storefront and the casualness of the studio pin-up board.”



INSTA-IMAGE

The proliferation and instant accessibility of images today was foreshadowed in Warhol’s work. In this section of the exhibition, Taylor connected the modern-day digital experience to the repeats and graphic quality of Warhol’s imagery.

Deciding to arrange the exhibition chronologically, the team narrowed the initial list of more than 1,000 works to approximately 350 that best exemplified the curatorial narrative. “The greatest challenge was finding a way to truly represent Warhol’s career while simultaneously bringing fresh focus to lesser known early and late works and Donna’s many strands of new thought,” Taylor says. “While the design is restrained, it quietly maximizes hanging space and generates the kind of complex, layered sight lines that I felt were crucial to the project. We used a vertical vitrine typology in which ephemera are housed in the thick walls, bringing the material into the same viewing plane as paintings, film and works on paper” (see Vertical Views, at top).

In line with connecting the visual experience to the evolving optics of a younger generation, Taylor conceived a way to replicate a cultural trend that Warhol’s work foreshadowed. “I kept returning to the idea of the multiplicity and instability of images in his work and how it correlated to the contemporary experience of scrolling through a digital folder of photographs, with one image surfacing at a time from an expanse of more images,” says Taylor (see Insta-Image, above). “My goal was to capture that sensation of an unfurling of infinite and infinitely complex images as one moved through the exhibition. During the installation, as the works began to fill the space, it was marvelous to see the concept become tangible—and its power.”



RAISING THE BAR

In this retrospective—the largest that the Whitney has ever staged—the power of “Andy Warhol—From A to B and Back Again” is felt throughout the institution and the public. “I really believe this is a retrospective against which all retrospectives will be measured,” Whitney Director Adam D. Weinberg commented during the exhibition’s press preview. “And, thanks to Donna De Salvo and our wonderful exhibition designer Melanie Taylor, it is also, I believe, one of the most stunning exhibitions the Whitney has ever produced.”

Allison Malafronte is an arts and design writer, editor and curator based in the greater New York area.