



ART REVIEW: Guild Hall Lichtenstein Show Stretches Viewers' Understanding

August 24, 2015

by Charles A. Riley II

Welcome to the second half of the Roy Lichtenstein survey. As a prerequisite, students are expected to have completed part one of the course, covering the gestural abstractions of the late '40s through the large comic book paintings of the early 1960s. This semester focuses on the experimental use of materials starting in 1964 through the large-scale late prints on Asian themes. Attendance at the Guild Hall exhibition in East Hampton, "Between Sea and Sky," is mandatory.

Just when students thought they had the Pop chapter firmly in hand, an exhibition as refined as this one, curated by Christina Strassfield of Guild Hall with the collaboration of the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, comes along to stretch us.



Installation view of "Roy Lichtenstein: Between Sea and Sky." Photo by Gary Mamay.

The first shock comes from the little seascapes and sunsets collaged beginning in 1964 with Rowlux, a plastic-coated reflective paper generally associated with little girls' barrettes and the decorative siding of snare drums. This material was invented at just about the time Lichtenstein picked it up to play with, looking for a way to get the shimmering opalescence of a marine sky onto the wall; it is a far cry from the flat primaries of standard Pop.



"Landscape 5" by Roy Lichtenstein, 1967. Rowlux and cut-and-pasted printed paper on board, 16 5/8 x 21 9/16 inches. Private Collection. © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein.



Installation view of "Roy Lichtenstein: Between Sea and Sky." Photo by Gary Mamay.

Three of these pieces even have a kinetic surprise, a little motor that rocks the horizon, capable of inducing seasickness in the viewer who has had too much wine at an opening, and lights that change color for the sunset. In a separate room, a film Lichtenstein made at Universal Studios of Montauk and the sea is shown split screen as it was originally seen in its debut at Osaka in 1970.



"Three Landscapes" by Roy Lichtenstein. Photo by Gary Mamay.

At the Guild Hall opening, heartwarming anecdotes about the artist were traded by his collaborators in the studio, experts from the Foundation, and top collectors in attendance. Speaking for myself, one of the highlights of my career was the chance to spend many days in Lichtenstein's Washington Street studio, listening to Mozart and carefully, slowly going over the text of my essay and an interview as we prepared the catalogue for a major retrospective in Lausanne, Switzerland.

A magnificent teacher of art as well as art history, he made sure I understood the importance of regarding his painting as essentially abstract: his QED was turning the canvas on its easel diagonally and even upside down to work on one defined area, for example, without concern for the upright position of the bottle on a table. He delighted in painting and making sculpture out of explosions or dripping brushstrokes, freezing the kinetic in a cartoon-inflected diagrammatic image that logically contends with the entropic nature of the subject. "I like to make ephemeral things concrete," he said.



"Water Lilies with Japanese Bridge" by Roy Lichtenstein, 1992. Screenprinted enamel on stainless steel, 83 1/4 x 58 inches. Private collection.
© Estate of Roy Lichtenstein.

The seascapes, sunrises, sunsets and shimmering moonlit water in the current show, especially the elusive paintings and lithographs of a river, are all charming examples of the impossibility of pinning Heraclitean flux to the wall. Interviewing the artist as the Reflections series, started in 1981, was still playing itself out, I was fascinated by his fearless willingness to use the reflection to

interrupt (really, to destroy) the integrity of his “canonic” imagery. “I can paint the whole thing!” he announced with delight.



“Night Seascape” by Roy Lichtenstein, 1966. Felt applique on felt, 96 x 47 inches. Edition of twenty + 3 APs. Private Collection. © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein.



“Sea Shore” by Roy Lichtenstein, 1964. Oil and Magna on Plexiglas, 24 x 30 inches. Roy Lichtenstein Foundation Collection. © Roy Lichtenstein Foundation.

Certainly the audacity of rendering the vivid tones of the sunset in a vast black-and-white billboard chimes with that ambition. A great story was related by the indomitable patron Joan Kron. In 1967, she proposed a boulevard of artists’ billboards leading into Philadelphia. The project started with Lichtenstein and ended abruptly with a “no” from town planning commissioner named Ed Bacon, father of the actor Kevin.



Installation view of “Roy Lichtenstein: Between Sea and Sky.” Photo by Gary Mamay.

The only version of it ever realized before the current East Hampton show was designed by Lichtenstein and painted on panels by an outdoor advertising company for Kron’s kids’ 28-foot-long backboard at her home in Villanova. Reconstructed for the Guild Hall show, it is accompanied by a study on paper that, examined closely, is in three delicate layers, almost sculptural and yet delicate. Kron fixed me with a steady look and said, “Everything in this show is technique except this billboard, which is a cultural event that just shows how narrow-minded people can be when it comes the question of where you can put art.” Pow!

One of the milestones of the earliest comic book group of paintings was “Look Mickey” (1961) in

which Disney's rodent lands a "big one." Anyone who fishes is familiar with the exasperating ritual of The One That Got Away, always the biggest, most ornery of fish, ready to put up a fight right to the moment it uses the curl in a wave to leap from the water and spit the hook out. In this exhibition, with the greatest deference and respect, I submit that there is such a One, the largest of the intricate series made in the mid '80s based on the theme of the river (painted in the dead of winter in Manhattan, according to the catalogue).

Each of these works labors hard to synthesize two vastly different types of mark-making. They are dominated by the congealed "cartoon brush strokes" (the artist's term, and there is a great photograph of a pile of them, razor-cut, lying on a table in front of him in the studio, ready to be pinned Matisse-style to the canvas in variable positions) tumbling across a blindingly white background. The stiffly outlined strokes are challenged by "real" brushstrokes, made with rags soaked with diluted paint, balled and swiped with great care to and fro in an arc over the canvas.



"Sailboat" by Roy Lichtenstein, 1981. Magna on canvas, 50 x 70 inches.
Private collection. © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein.

This, the chronology informs us, is a throwback to his earliest abstractions, dabbed and swept with rags wrapped around his wrist. The biggest of these is *River Scene* (1987) and it seems "unresolved," a victory of the concept over the execution, rendering it, to my mind, the One That Got Away. It seems uncharitable to point this out, but one of the things I most admired about Lichtenstein the person was his work ethic and willingness to challenge himself. He was not a virtuoso, dashing off paintings with sprezzatura. This picture is a battleground and he did not walk away unbloodied.

Permit me a plug here for assiduously researched, intelligently designed and beautifully printed catalogues with essays, footnotes, biography and a meticulous chronology. The catalogue for the Guild Hall show includes a superb essay and an invaluable chronology by Clare Bell, the Foundation's exhibition support manager, and interviews with the artist's assistants James dePasquale and Donald Saff by the renowned biographer and critic Avis Berman, whose tight biographical essay, replete with studio photos, cries out for expansion into a full-length authorized life of Lichtenstein.

Several crucial studio secrets are vital to an understanding of the show, including this gem from dePasquale about the "circular movement" at the center of the tricky sailboat and river paintings: "There tends to be a drawing within the drawing or painting, and Roy worked outward from that. It's a circular matrix, which he drew before he got the image going, because its function was to unify an area." That is the handle needed for the most difficult compositional problems in the show.

Bell's chronology nails the various moves from studio to studio as well as Lichtenstein's visits to the Hamptons, where he rented Larry Rivers's house in Southampton in 1967. He would eventually buy

a house in the summer of 1970 on Gin Lane, where here would build his dream studio. Bell, Berman, Guild Hall Executive Director Ruth Appelhof, Museum Director and Chief Curator Christina Strassfield, and Jack Cowart, head of the Lichtenstein Foundation, deserve credit and gratitude for maintaining standards with substantive publications, a corner that too many museums feel free to cut.

BASIC FACTS: “Roy Lichtenstein: Between Sea and Sky” remains on view through October 12, 2015. Guild Hall is located at 158 Main Street, East Hampton, NY 11937. www.guildhall.org.

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