

Aesthetica

Laura Castellis
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Review of Kiki Kogelnik: Fly Me to the Moon at Modern Art Oxford



Kiki Kogelnik, *Untitled (small hanging)*, 1968. Courtesy of Kiki Kogelnik Foundation Vienna, New York.

Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenbourg, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. The giants of post-war American art are being reviewed once again; their replacement of high art with kitsch, brushstroke with Ben-Day dot and abstract expressionism with advertising is eerily prophetic of the current state of affairs. During its first lifetime, pop was maligned for

glorifying consumerism; it has now been revised to acknowledge the biting cynicism that bristled beneath the smiles of Hollywood goddesses and the shiny veneer of muscle cars.

Regardless, the legacy of omission has continued unabated, as the largely unknown name Kiki Kogelnik (1935-1997) will attest. A contemporary of the aforementioned postmodern practitioners, the Austrian-born artist's retrospective at Modern Art Oxford showed before several of her works go on display in *The World Goes Pop* exhibition opening at Tate Modern later this month.

After having studied at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts; the very Academy which had sought to contain a disaffected Egon Schiele and exclude a resentful Adolf Hitler; Kogelnik relocated to New York in 1961 and became immersed in post-war American culture, particularly enraptured by new industry and space exploration. However, the artist very much contested her association with pop, although this wish seems to remain widely ignored. Whilst the colours of Kogelnik's works are decidedly pop; acid greens and neon yellows; the content is other. Pop art at once condemned and celebrated the feverish scramble for artificial signifiers of wealth and opulence, notable examples being Warhol's ceaseless celebrity silkscreens. Kogelnik's work, whilst containing homages to her beloved Garment District in New York where her Manhattan studio was kept, appears to contain a heavier reliance on more substantial subject-matter, including the consequences of cosmology, the inexhaustible acceleration of machinery and the insubstantiality of the human form.

While the subjects of pop existed more or less entirely at a distance in magazine clippings, comic book illustrations and film stills (what Clement Greenberg termed "kitsch"), Kogelnik's bodies are more traditionally copied, making the impact of her work gradual, without the high-speed immediacy of Lichtenstein's comic book figures. Her human stencils, including *Mono*, an outline of her son cut out multiple times out of sheet vinyl and hung on a clothing rack, and what appears like the discarded skin of Oldenberg draped over a hanger entitled *Claes*, both produced in 1970, are drawn outlines of real people who posed for her, but are imbued with the same questions at the heart of pop; identity, fragility and consumerism. Several works combine classical themes with a fiercely modern execution, such as the painting entitled *Ikarus* of 1965, in which a featureless stencilled figure with machine-like innards topples towards an uncertain future. In 1969 she would stage a *Moonhappening* in Vienna to celebrate the successful Apollo 11 mission, writing the words of the astronauts on silkscreens as they were spoken, but *Ikarus* betrays an uneasiness about the space race, a concern about the dangers of flying too close to the sun. The 1963 work *Death with Sunglasses* and *Hungriger Totenkopf* of c.1986 combine morbid allusions with colourful humour, much like Warhol's *Death and Disaster Series*, featuring instruments of death rendered in ostentatiously cheerful hues. Kogelnik's *Death*, however, is more reminiscent of traditional iconography: a Vanitas in its representation of an allegorical figure embellished with contemporary articles. Just as pop attempted to bring high art to the general public using recognisable imagery, Kiki's skulls wearing fashionable eyewear are postmodern memento mori.

Although pop is still occasionally perceived as superficial, especially in the case of Andy Warhol, who insisted on "no meaning, no meaning", most pop artists do not fit into the classic definition of pop. Although more of a proponent of pop than a willing participant, Robert Rauschenberg had a piece, *Bed* of 1955 included in the International Exhibition of Surrealism of 1960, and one of the earliest examples of pop art came not from the billboards decorating Manhattan's skyscrapers but from British artist Richard Hammond, in his *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* of 1956. Essentially, pop was

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an answer to abstract expressionism; a witty retort to the obscure and high-brow formalism of the art world. It should be noted that quite a few pop artists began their careers as abstract expressionists, Kogelnik included.

Whilst the artist's wish to remain omitted from pop may be respected due to the limiting definition of pop, a new interpretation of the movement which pays due reverence to its cutting satire, futuristic technique and subject matter might stretch to contain Kogelnik, a significant artist and critic of the modern world.