At the Rose: 'Image Machine' of Andy Warhol

By Chris Bergeron/DAILY NEWS STAFF
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WALTHAM — Whether a genius or a charlatan, Andy Warhol grafted his own compulsions onto popular American culture.

From computer-generated art to our – gag – celebrity-driven culture and its "15 minutes of fame" phenomenon, the pale avatar of Pop Art still shapes how art is made in the U.S. in ways that intrigue many, infuriate some and enrich a few.

So how did the shy commercial art major from Carnegie Institute of Technology, who first earned fame illustrating shoe advertisements, come to dominate the national art scene?

Art scholar and historian Joseph D. Ketner II offers a groundbreaking explanation in an illuminating, entertaining and - and only occasionally disturbing – exhibition at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University.

In "Image Machine," the Natick resident who formerly directed the Rose and currently teaches contemporary art history at Emerson College, weaves together Warhol's own words and writings, colleagues' and critics' observations and lots of his work to convincingly argue that photography dramatically influenced how he painted in ways that affected his voluminous output.

"Warhol's greatest achievement was to be recognized as a great painter," said Ketner. "He did that through photo transfer technology."

The exhibit was jointly organized by Raphaela Platow, formerly of the Rose and now director and chief curator of the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati.

If Warhol and his followers triggered the vast proliferation of images throughout popular culture, one might reasonably ask what has happened to traditional notions of originality.

"Warhol was the first artist to realize it was all about the reproduction and manipulation of imagery," said Ketner. "That question had preceded Warhol. He heightened it by using mechanical means of reproduction."

Like the robotic boy in Steven Spielberg's "AI: Artificial Intelligence," Warhol seemed most comfortable impersonating others rather than inhabiting his own life.

Ketner explained the "Image Machine" of the show's title refers both to Warhol's obsessive mass reproduction of images and the cameras he used to achieve that goal.

And he cites a revealing 1963 quotation by Warhol that reinforces the exhibit's premise: "I feel that whatever I do and do machine-like is what I want to do."

Even if art theory bores you, this sprawling show offers most of the hallmarks of Warhol's signature work: celebrity photos and prints of New York glitterati and Factory regulars, images of Jackie Kennedy, Dennis Hopper, Lou Reed and Bianca Jagger shaving her armpit, the horrific car wreck titled "Saturday Disaster" and, of course, naked guys, letting it, as they say, "all hang out."

Subtitled "Andy Warhol & Photography," it fills the Foster Gallery and runs through Dec. 15.

Some might wonder what’s so revolutionary about the photo portraits of mostly faded celebrities like Daniela Morera, Peter Schuyff or Joan Robbins or Carlo de Benedetti who look wan and pasty-faced. But, the exhibit points out that Warhol transformed these bland photos into more vivid paintings.

While many sensible and outlandish theories have been offered to explain Warhol's impact, Ketner observed, "Warhol was working with photography from his earliest days."

"Sometimes the most obvious things are the hardest to see. People have never come to grips with how pervasive photography was for Warhol," he said.

Ketner maintained Warhol was using photo transfer processes as early as college in seminal ways that contributed to the image-making on a mass scale that characterized his later work.

By 1975, Warhol had perfected a process of transforming Polaroids to silk-screened paintings that characterized some of his most iconic work. For example, he’d shoot as many as 60 Polaroids of rock star Mick Jagger and then use a favored few to create...
8-by-10-inch acetate sheets which would, in turn, be blown up to 40-inch-square acetate sheets for silk screening directly onto a painted canvas.

In all his flamboyant weirdness, Warhol emerges as the exhibit’s central enigma.

While there are well over 100 photos and paintings by Warhol, the strength of “Image Machine” lies in its scholarly mining of Warhol’s life, particularly after the failed 1968 assassination by a disturbed woman, to his evolution into an “art businessman” and high-visibility socialite and trend setter and his quixotic move into film.

After working extensively with people who knew Warhol personally, Ketner described him as “a combination of extra clairvoyant and extra inarticulate.”

He conceded that early in his academic and scholarly career, he “had a hard time with Andy Warhol.”

“He was everything I didn’t stand for. I was an academic trying to be smart and articulate,” said Ketner. “Warhol managed to create a different way of looking at the self.”

Asked whether Warhol was “an artist or marketing genius,” he replied, “I do think he was both.”

Ketner’s “Image Machine” provides as extensive an in-depth look into this infuriating and prophetic artist as is likely to come down the pike.

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"Image Machine: Andy Warhol & Photograpy"
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