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These ’80s Artists Are More Important Than Ever

By GARY INDIANA

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Images and technological media now pervade every minute of our lives so thoroughly that much of what passes for reality is indistinguishable from its representation. The urban environment is a cloaca of hypnotic, animated signage, sounds and image streams that follow us into taxicabs and hospital waiting rooms, and in turn, any banality, from a misspelled street sign to a funny advertisement, is considered suitable to become an image on social media.

This didn't happen overnight. One of the least helpful clichés of recent years has been the declaration that some phenomenon or person is "on the wrong side of history"; the presumption that history is headed, with occasional setbacks, toward a much-improved, even utopian state of things could only be endorsed by someone unfamiliar with history. Mistaking the perfection of our devices for the perfection of ourselves relieves us of responsibility for what happens to the world: It will just naturally turn out O.K., sooner or later. But technology can easily outrun our comprehension of what it does to us, even while it incarnates our wishes, fears and pathologies. (What could be more pathological than a nuclear weapon?)

Behind the scenes of T magazine's Pictures Generation photo shoot, as Douglas Crimp, Robert Longo and Laurie Simmons remember the '80s. By FLORA HANITIJO on February 13, 2017. Photo by Paul McMahon. Watch in Times Video »

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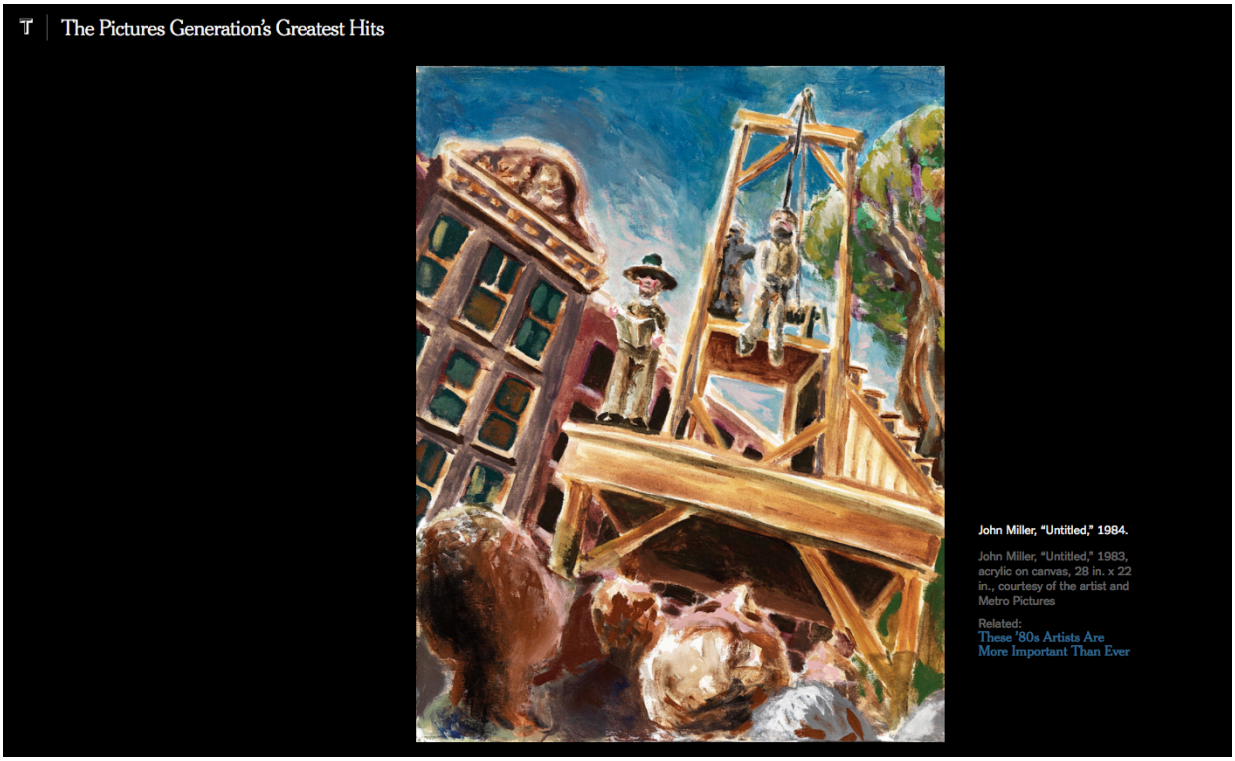
Our present bedazzlement-by-pixels was anticipated by a loosely affiliated group of artists who emerged in New York in the mid-1970s and early ’80s — before iPhones, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram. “The Pictures Generation” has become a ubiquitous, awkward catchall term, probably abrasive to the artists themselves, for something that was less an organized movement than a heterogeneous expression of a zeitgeist. Their art was connected by an interest in examining power and identity in a media-saturated, politically uncertain age. The name derives from a 1977 show at Artists Space curated by Douglas Crimp, simply called “Pictures,” where five of these artists — Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo and Philip Smith — were featured. A survey exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum a few years ago folded in another 25.

Some of the artists that carry the Pictures Generation label are well-known to the general public, such as Barbara Kruger, Richard Prince, David Salle and Cindy Sherman; many have achieved canonical status in the art world, with their work featured at multiple venues throughout

any given year, all over the world. A few, such as Walter Robinson and Troy Brauntuch, are only now starting to get long-overdue recognition. A number of them, like Louise Lawler, the subject of a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York this spring, have re-entered public consciousness at a moment that is oddly similar to the one in which they first appeared. The questions they all first addressed in a faraway, predigital period may be even more relevant today than they were then.

The Pictures artists, so-called, were born in Cold War America, during the schizoid cultural meshing of unparalleled national prosperity with the daily threat of looming nuclear annihilation. They grew up with Hollywood movies, low-def network television and ad-heavy pictorial magazines like Look and Life as the audiovisual wallpaper of their childhoods, mostly in American suburbs.



John Miller, "Untitled," 1983, acrylic on canvas, 28 in. x 22 in., courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures

The initially black-and-white, then gradually colorized media world they absorbed trafficked heavily in prescriptions for living: heterosexual

families with gleaming teeth in an all-white America; unambiguous gender stereotypes; dream homes in tidy neighborhoods; knee-jerk patriotism; holidays made sparkling with margarine; and an ever-expanding, ever-better smorgasbord of branded consumer products including cars, watches, cigarettes and anything else that could plausibly enhance a quotidian middle-class lifestyle.

As the dreary conformity of America during the Eisenhower years loosened dramatically in the ’60s, mass media got more sophisticated at manipulating public moods and private consciousness. Families that had prospered in the ’50s passed enormous buying power to their offspring, who became a lively demographic for a brilliantly adaptive advertising industry, a juggernaut that could selectively appeal to bikers, hippies, African-Americans, feminists, student protesters and bohemian types as readily as it did its traditional suburban targets.
Despite the political violence and social atomization of the ’60s, the sense of a stable country still on the rise was sustained, for the most part, by a general belief in the solidity of its institutions, including the media. This optimism lost much of its credibility as the ’60s counterculture fizzled into paranoia and bleakness during the Nixon years. American failure no longer felt impossible. The Pictures artists came of age in this disillusioning period, sharply aware that the images and narratives they’d been nurtured on were not only bogus but insidiously coercive. They were reflective people who read widely, wrote well and could easily articulate their concerns, well-versed in the deconstructive approach to texts and images of theorists like Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes’s deflation of authorship and originality, Laura Mulvey’s groundbreaking writings on the male gaze in cinema and Conceptual art’s distillation of the artwork to its self-conscious, philosophically pointed idea. They were intellectuals as well as artists, a disfavored combination throughout most of American art history: Artists weren’t supposed to think about the implications of what they were doing, or the overall context in which it appeared.

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Pop Art made the art world desirable to the general public, but this admiration constricted during the ’60s, with the ascendant asceticism of Conceptual art and Minimalism, which called into question the whole idea of art as something to look at. The Pictures artists initially had to contend with a small nexus of established galleries unwelcoming to new work, and a presiding narrative about “advanced art” that inevitably led to the disappearance of art objects. They were too fastidious, and too smart, to discard the poise and economy of Conceptualism in favor of some inchoate, spontaneous “self-expression” — the construction of the self, after all, was one of the things they were pondering.

So they experimented, showing early work in alternative spaces, which were rapidly losing funding. Providentially, the commercial rise of painting at the end of the ’70s brought serious revenue back to the art world, and with it a number of new galleries receptive to emerging artists — like Metro Pictures, where many of these artists got their start. For the first time ever, young New York artists could hope to earn serious money by making art. The work they produced in the ’70s and early ’80s might be described as a theatricalization of Conceptual art, or a caustic mimicry of both fine art and commercial illustration.

John Miller
The Faces of the Pictures Generation
Jason Schmidt

Perhaps because photographs are already “copies” of what they picture, and because photography was barely considered art at the time, so many of the Pictures artists found it the most congenial medium for what they wanted to do: to point at things already in the world, and make what they implicitly signified apparent.

Photographs could be staged to emphasize the look of artfully subtle, unremarked female stereotypes in movies (Cindy Sherman), or to picture toy housewives in miniature home interiors, evoking the pathos of domestic imprisonment (Laurie Simmons). Photos could be excavated from the morgues of bygone magazines and science journals, blown up and bannered with jarring, sardonic captions (Barbara Kruger). Images could be scissored out of National Geographic and Vogue, and repatriated to blocks of strident primary colors, where their fetishistic weirdness became hilariously disturbing (Sarah Charlesworth). A photo could present art in the settings it occupies after it’s sold, on walls of rich collectors, corporate offices and other privileged venues — today, typically, a billionaire’s storage facility (Louise Lawler).

Not everyone made photographic works, but all were engaged in photo-derived imagery. Robert Longo's large-scale charcoal-and-graphite drawings of "Men in the Cities" were sourced from photographs of the artist's friends and are key icons of the period; the remarkable painters in this group (Thomas Lawson, Walter Robinson, David Salle and Michael Zwack, to cite a few) found powerful ways to provoke questions about how we process representations of reality, in which contexts, with what quality of attention.

Above all else, these artists addressed power, especially patriarchal power, at its quotidian level of social engineering, as well as in its grip on art history.

The use of existing images, which might be altered in scale, cropped, rephotographed, angled or simply presented in copied form — "appropriation," as practiced by Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine, among others — inspired indignant critical sniping from writers like Robert Hughes. Yet it had a perfectly respectable lineage in art history. These pictures revealed how contrived, unnatural and seductive the originals actually were. They attracted and repelled simultaneously. Such works created a nervous sense of how representation operates in the everyday world — almost subliminally much of the time, tapping into myths and illusions sunk deep in our brains, influencing the way we act,how we dress, behave in public, occupy space, choose and attract sexual partners, spend money, make friends and enemies.

But above all else, the Pictures artists addressed power, especially patriarchal power, at its quotidian level of social engineering, as well as in its grip on art history. If we are to think of the Pictures Generation as an art movement, then it was the first one in history that included a

substantial number of women artists. Much of the early resistance to it was flagrantly misogynistic, though its male artists came in for their own share of ridicule from newspaper and magazine critics, whose favorite dismissive word for this art was “brainy.”

When it first appeared, in a predigital world, Pictures art looked imperiously distanced from its subject matter, detached from its own japeries and even merciless in its view of American life’s visual detritus and empty glorification of the arbitrary. But a backward glance at these artists reveals plangent nostalgia for innocent first encounters with a visual culture that proved far from innocent. It’s no accident that we are giving these artists a careful second look now. Whatever progressiveness was afforded by the Obama era has come full circle to an isolationist longing where an unpredictable celebrity president speaks directly to an electorate that is collectively backlit by technology’s artificial glow. The emotional resonance of the Pictures Generation has accrued over time, strengthened by its curious suitability to the present.

Aura Rosenberg
The Faces of the Pictures Generation
Jason Schmidt