When a Can of Worms Is Opened, an Artist Does Some Fishing

Andy Warhol’s grandchildren, numerous beyond count, have cashed in on his legacy in varied ways. Some have done replays of the classic art-as-fandom routine associated with Warhol’s Elvis and Marilyn portraits. Shepard Fairey of Barack Obama poster fame is in this category. Others have dug into this heritage, a rich and radical one, to see what fresh possibilities it might yield. Such is the case with the New York artist Jonathan Horowitz, who has a smart, crisply edited retrospective at the P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center.

Mr. Horowitz was born in 1966. By the time he was finishing college as a philosophy major with art on his mind, Warhol was gone, and the full range of his accomplishment was evident: not just the celebrity-as-commodity portraits, but also the early car crashes, electric chairs and race riots, and the later drag divas, dictators and “Last Suppers.” It is when seen as a whole that Warhol’s presence becomes the potent, complex, morally sliding-around proposition it is, one that helped generate successive waves of new art: the media-saturated art of the 1970s, the neoconceptualist consumer art of the 1980s and the identity art of the 1990s. Mr. Horowitz’s work is a product of all of these trends, as well as of the cultural changes around them, as politics moved to the right, gay came further out of the closet, network television gave way to cable, and analog changed to digital. Just as Warhol in the 1960s drew some of his images from the 1940s and ’50s, Mr. Horowitz often situates his work in both the past and present, at an unlikely point where, say, Doris Day and Paris Hilton have equal currency.

The result is a survey with a funny, mixed-up, today-and-yesterday look, as if it were made of many random parts. At the same time it feels of a piece, with a sense of cine sensibility overseeing all.

As organized by Klaus Biesenberger. Continued on Page 7.
With a Can of Worms, an Artist Fishes

boch, the chief curator in the department of media at the Museum of Modern Art, the show is not arranged chronologically, though its earliest work, from 1990, does come first. It’s a film of a single word, “Maxxel,” projected on a screen.

The name of a leading brand of videocassettes, it represents a type of recording technology on its way to obsolescence, and Mr. Horowitz has physically enacted its demise by copying the logo repeatedly on tape until, like generations-old photocopies, it dissolves into a blur.

Obsolescence, often in the form of death, is a theme that runs through the show, as in the two-channel video piece titled “The Soul of Tammi Terrell.” One monitor plays a 1967 tape of this pop singer, who died of a brain tumor at 24 years later, performing her hit “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough” with Marvin Gaye; the other monitor shows Susan Sarandon and Julia Roberts singing the same song in the 1986 Hollywood weepie “Stepmom,” in which Ms. Sarandon played a character dying of cancer.

Whether the piece is about art imitating life or exploiting death is a Warholian question left unresolved. But there is no doubt about the moral message intended by a 2004 photographic piece in the same gallery. It has three parts: two vintage New York Post front pages honoring Ronald Reagan at the time of his death, and a single photograph of a man dying of AIDS. The title of the work sums up its didactic content: “Archival Iris Print of an Image Downloaded From The Internet With Two Copies of The New York Post Rotting in Their Frames.”

Much of the show is about queerness, political and personal. A 2005 piece called “Three Rainbow American Flags for Jasper in the Style of the Artist’s Boyfriend” recreates the famous 1958 painting “Three Flags” by the gay artist: Jasper Johns, but in different colors and coated with glitter, a decorative material that Mr. Horowitz’s partner, the artist

“Jonathan Horowitz: And/Or” runs through Sept. 14 at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, 22-25 Jackson Avenue, at 46th Street, Long Island City, Queens; (718) 784-3084 or ps1.org

he also made portraits of Ronald Reagan, Richard M. Nixon and the Shah of Iran.

The Nixon picture, produced for the 1972 presidential elections, came with a perverse little twist. Under Nixon’s face, Warhol wrote “Vote George McGovern.” But when people congratulated him for making a subtly partisan joke, he said, “The idea was you could vote either way.”

By playing all sides and no sides, Warhol kept the very concept of ideological commitment and political hero worship in a state of imbalance. And given the machinations of global politics, that seems like a healthy notion. How can anyone be anything but a skeptic?

This brings us to the most recent work in the P.S. 1 show, a 2008 election poster designed by Mr. Horowitz that endorses Barack Obama for president. The poster doubled as an announcement for the artist’s election-themed solo show at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise gallery last fall. And while that exhibition had its share of jokes — extravagant red-and-blue decor and a life-size bronze cartoon figure titled “Hillary Clinton Is a Person Too” — its basic tone was notably glib-free.

The poster, with Mr. Obama’s portrait punctuating a long line of white presidential faces, delivers a thumbs-up message of change too direct to be missed. And the exhibition itself culminated at the gallery in an all-out cheers-and-tears election night celebration. Can Andy’s grandkids turn out to be cockeyed optimists, after all?

Well, maybe not. It says something that the single most compelling — in the sense of emotionally persuasive — piece in the retrospective is the 1997 Jackson video. Mr. Horowitz has tweaked it so that the soundtrack runs in reverse, but its heroic, heart-pumping, hokey vision of a redeemed world still comes through.

And thanks to the passage of time, so does the real-life story of a black artist who played the role of popular hero only to have his career undone by a combination of racism, snobbery, personal paranoia and changes in consumer fashion. In Mr. Horowitz’s retrospective, the Obama poster and the Jackson video both represent the American political present. And the future? As the extremely knowing Andy might say, “Oh, gee, I don’t know.”