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Sturtevant, Warhol Flowers

This week's Contemporary Classic was created by a female artist who liked to “repeat” works by more famous male peers—and in the process threw into question some of the art world's most beloved clichés about the nature of originality and individual genius.
Words by Robert Shore



Sturtevant, Warhol Flowers, 1990. Silkscreen, acrylic on canvas. Collection Thaddaeus Ropac, London/Paris/Salzburg

Elaine Sturtevant—or just plain Sturtevant as she was known professionally—gave her first solo exhibition at the Bianchini Gallery in New York in 1965. The show featured carefully handcrafted works that begged to be mistaken variously for the plaster sculptures of George Segal and the stripe paintings of Frank Stella, not to mention silkscreened images that were almost indistinguishable from the breakthrough Flowers series by the then emerging art superstar Andy Warhol. As a reviewer quipped at the time, Sturtevant “must be the first artist in history to have had a one-man show that included everybody but herself”.

The difficulty of telling Sturtevant’s vivid blooms apart from Warhol’s was entirely intentional on the part of both artists: Warhol actually lent Sturtevant his original to execute the images for the show. Over the coming years Sturtevant would make a habit of copying the works of Warhol, who connived at the practice and, to avoid answering cloying questions about his working methods, once quipped: “I don’t know. Ask Elaine.”

Sturtevant’s “repetitions”, as she called them, were designed to disorientate. They were intended to be precise enough to persuade viewers that they were looking at an “authentic” Warhol or Stella, and at the same time sufficiently free and inexact to suggest that another hand might actually be at work—indeed, for the work to be no less unmistakably a Sturtevant. “I create vertigo,” the artist-repeater liked to say. If you visit the Vice Versa show currently at Thaddaeus Ropac in London, you may find yourself growing dizzy among all the Sturtevant-Warhols, Sturtevant-Lichtensteins, Sturtevant-Stellas.

The Ropac Sturtevant show also contains a repetition of a 1925 Man Ray photograph of Adam and Eve featuring a naked Marcel Duchamp. In Sturtevant’s restaging, the artist Robert Rauschenberg takes the role of Adam/Duchamp while, arm outstretched beneath the hovering snake, the bare-breasted Mother of Appropriation herself assumes the part of Eve.

Man Ray's photograph evoking the Bible's great apple scene draws most obviously on Lucas Cranach's Renaissance painting of the Fall, although, in composing the tableau, it's hard to believe that he didn't also have Dürer's Adam and Eve in mind, the one that borrowed from the Apollo Belvedere, itself a Roman copy or pastiche of a Greek original. Sturtevant thus compresses a few millennia of copying—and theology, for that matter—into a simple repetition, to create the last word in unoriginal Original Sin. "Remake, reuse, reassemble, recombine—that's the way to go," as Sturtevant herself put it.

"She was ridiculed when she made her debut in 1965, and no one at the time made the links between her work and a critical discussion of surface, product, copyright and autonomy," noted Fredrik Liew in 2012. "Nor did anyone consider what it could mean that a woman artist was repeating the works of male colleagues." So was Sturtevant a feminist artist? Was her appropriation of the work of male masters a way of taking something back for the sisterhood? The expression on her face as she attempts to get the apple from Robert Rauschenberg in her Man Ray repeat could certainly be interpreted as suggesting as much.



Installation view, Sturtevant: Vice Versa at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London