

POSTED ON 24/06/06

Faster than you can say Campbell's Soup

An impromptu birthday dinner conversation has brought Salah Bachir's private Warhol collection to Oakville in a 50-work exhibition that rivals the AGO's upcoming show, DEIRDRE KELLY writes

DEIRDRE KELLY

Salah Bachir didn't know Andy Warhol. But the 50-year-old Toronto art collector and philanthropist -- "not to sound pretentious," he says -- knew members of Mr. Warhol's famous entourage.

In fact, it was the artist Keith Haring who first goaded him to consider Warhol for his collection. Mr. Bachir relented, picking up the 1957 notebook-sized drawing *Happy Butterfly Day* for less than \$1,000. Another New York friend bestowed on him a number of prints. Mr. Bachir, ignorant of their worth, kept them rolled up in a tube under his parents' bed.

"They seemed like posters to me," he says, wrinkling his nose. So, one by one, he gave them away as wedding gifts to friends. "I'm not sure if they knew what they were worth either. I bet some tossed them in the garbage."

That was 30 years ago. Today, Mr. Bachir, now something of a Warhol expert, owns 75 pieces by the late American pop artist -- and he's still giving them away. Well, almost.

Mr. Bachir has lent 50 works to the Oakville Galleries for Wall to Wall Warhol, an exhibition furnished entirely from his collection -- and one that comes on the eve of the Art Gallery of Ontario's own Warhol show, which opens in two weeks.

"Warhol is a departure for me," Mr. Bachir says, sprawled out like a pasha on a leather divan in his waterfront condo. "Because I normally collect Canadian art."

Mr. Bachir is well known as the president of Cineplex Media and a philanthropist who has donated \$1-million toward the expansion of the 519 Church Street Community Centre (a generosity that was recognized when he was made Grand Marshal of last year's Pride Parade).

As an art collector -- he has a stockpile of more than 600 works -- he's known as the champion of such homegrown talents as Attila Richard Lukacs, Betty Goodwin and Stephen Andrews. (He is preparing exhibitions of Goodwin and Andrews for Hart House.) But Warhol has long fascinated him.

"I was always a huge fan of what he stood for," Mr. Bachir says. "He was a gay man, working in the 1960s and 1970s, and yet he called himself asexual and not homosexual. He refused to be pigeon-holed."

Most of Mr. Bachir's Warhols are major works, among them a *Black Lenin* (the last portrait painted by the artist before his death in 1987) and selections from the Endangered Species series that Hollywood-based Warhol dealer Ron Valdez calls second-to-none.

They rival in artistic importance the 26 works that will be on display at the Art Gallery of Ontario come July 8 with the opening of its Warhol show, *Supernova: Stars, Death and Disasters, 1962-1964*, that has been curated by filmmaker David Cronenberg.

"For anyone wanting an understanding of the breadth of Warhol's career this is the place to be," says Marnie Fleming, the Oakville Galleries' curator of contemporary art.

Tom Sokolowski, director of The Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, PA., who consulted on the AGO's show, hasn't seen the Oakville collection. But he says that Mr. Bachir's compilation of screenprints, oils on canvas, drawings, printed photographs and Polaroids would rank among the largest in the world.

"He has a marvellous range," Mr. Sokolowski says. "And he would represent one of about 50 people in the world with such a sizable Warhol collection."

Ms. Fleming got the idea for Wall to Wall Warhol while celebrating her birthday at Mr. Bachir's home earlier this year. They'd first met a few years ago when Mr. Bachir sought her out to talk shop after she'd purchased an Attila Richard Lukacs painting for the London Regional Art Gallery. But he didn't realize Ms. Fleming was eyeing his collection for the Oakville Galleries until that night at dinner.

"I was amazed at how many Warhols he has," Ms. Fleming says. "From where I was sitting I could count almost 14 on one wall alone. And then I asked him. Have you ever thought of showing your Warhols publicly?"

Then, faster than you can say Campbell's Soup, a rather stupendous little Warhol show out in the suburbs was born.

In fact, it could be called custom-made. In March, Mr. Bachir went out and bought at auction two new works -- "just for Marnie" -- to make the Oakville exhibit stand out as an overview of the artist's output.

The new additions, a silver-tint Marilyn Monroe and a large sensual-lipped Mick Jagger, are among the highlights of a show in which a portrait of the Marx Brothers shares a room with a photographic print of the Birmingham race riots and where a red-streaked rendering of a panda bear hangs next to a hologram of a white-and-yellow flower.

The Oakville show represents the first time some of these pictures are being shown in Canada. They include *Ten Portraits of Jews of the Twentieth Century*, a portrait series that features, among others, images of Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein and Gertrude Stein, never before seen in its entirety. There is also an almost complete presentation of *Ladies and Gentleman*, Warhol's 10-part series of black New York transvestites.

Ms. Fleming has grouped Mr. Bachir's collection thematically, with subtle expressions of wit. Her new Marilyn ("Warhol's Mona Lisa," Mr. Bachir says), for example, lies next to a four-panel screen print of Jacqueline Kennedy as wife, witness and widow. "I wanted to put the two women together," says Ms. Fleming, "because they shared a man."

The Jackie images are iconic, recorded the day her husband, John Kennedy, was assassinated. Reworking them, Warhol made them into a kind of history painting for the times.

It is that prescience, lurking behind a pallid fringe of hair over perpetually startled eyes, that has driven Mr. Bachir to revere the artist.

"He was, for me, the poet laureate of the United States, of Western culture. From the icon series to the logo series, it's like he was creating a living history of the arts, of what was happening at the time."

Wall to Wall Warhol runs until Aug. 27 at the Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens, 1306 Lakeshore Rd. E., <http://www.oakvillegalleries.com>.

© Copyright 2006 Bell Globemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.



globeandmail.com and The Globe and Mail are divisions of Bell Globemedia Publishing Inc., 444 Front St. W., Toronto, Canada M5V 2S9
Phillip Crawley, Publisher