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Pop art goes political

by Rachel Spence

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Cornel Brudaşcu, *Youth on the Building Yard*, 1970

In 1957, Richard Hamilton, the British artist who was one of the fathers of Pop art, wrote a list of adjectives that he hoped the new genre would embody. They included “popular”, “transient”, “expendable (easily forgotten)”, “witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous” and “big business”.

And so it came to pass that a generation of artists including Hamilton, Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg and Peter Blake relinquished the desire to take itself too seriously. The chroniclers of a society selling its soul to the business of selling, they drew on an iconography of soup cans and comic strips, cheeseburgers and celebrities, advertising posters and rock memorabilia.

Yet there was another side to Pop art. Across the world, certain artists realised that the graphic, pull-no-punches immediacy of images made for mass culture offered effective tools for socio-political critique.

Tate Modern’s new show, The World Goes Pop, aims to bring this lesser-told story to light. Certainly, the curators are right when they say that Pop art is “often referred to as a primarily North American and British phenomenon” and that consumerism is usually regarded as its main theme.

It is daft, however, to expect one exhibition both to cover the rest of the world — countries here include Brazil, Spain, Germany, Russia, Poland, France and Belgium, as well as the US and UK — and to encompass a spectrum of issues, including “social imbalances, censorship, the role of women, sexual liberation, tradition, war and civil rights”.

The problem is apparent from the first room. Here, among about a dozen pieces, is “Without Rebellion” (1970). This work by Polish artist Jurry Zielinski comprises a large, graphic face with Polish eagles (from the national coat of arms) for its eyes and a three-dimensional scarlet satin pillow, secured to the ground by a nail, as its lolling tongue. Also present is “Machine No 7” (1967-68) by Shinkichi Tajiri. Born in 1923 to Japanese parents who had migrated to the US, Tajiri’s sinister hybrid of fighter plane and gun is a critique of the Vietnam war. Meanwhile, Belgian artist Evelyne Axell serves up “Valentine” (1966), a canvas on which has been laid a curvaceous, zip-up suit and helmet in a reference both to the achievement of Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space, and to the humiliating gender politics with which most women still had to contend.

 But to ask spectators to traverse such a vast geopolitical prairie is a recipe for confusion. This show would have been perfectly valid had it concentrated just on Pop imagery in communist regimes, as the Saatchi Gallery did to great effect recently. Alternatively, it could have simply considered the style from a feminist perspective.

It’s no coincidence that the most stimulating and coherent display here consists of two connecting rooms — Pop at Home and Pop Bodies — that focus almost entirely on female artists. Pop imagery, so often used in mass culture to objectify and belittle women, offered feminists a marvellous opportunity to turn misogyny’s weaponry back on itself.

“Woman with Vacuum (Vacuuming Pop Art)” (1966-72), a photomontage by Brooklyn-based Martha Rosler, takes a swipe at Tom Wesselmann, a US Pop artist with a penchant for busty cartoon nudes, by depicting the heroine as a demure 1950s gal hoovering a corridor hung with one of Wesselmann’s paintings. An equally bittersweet sense of satire animates the series of stunning paintings by Spanish artist Isabel Oliver. A member of the collective Equipo Crónica, Oliver had a gift for Richter-like photorealism. Her images include a goddess-like creature striding over an army of cosmetic products and surgeons at an operating table, alongside a poster of a naked woman kneeling in submission to her fate.

Unlike traditional oil painting, which was soaked in a legacy of classical grandeur, Pop’s anything-goes attitude, which drew on the legacy of Duchamp and Surrealism, ushered humour, irony and a soupçon of the unexpected into the fine-art party. In that sense, it was an inherently subversive aesthetic. Little wonder that artists in repressive regimes grabbed at its vocabulary hungrily.

In both Brazil and Spain, for example, Pop’s figurative style was employed as a more accessible and thus more democratic alternative to abstraction. (In Spain, Franco’s regime actually championed gestural painting because its nebulousness deprived it of dissident clout.)

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Conversely, in eastern Europe, Pop art was a natural stylistic progression from the socialist realism favoured by the state. Yet here, too, artists used it as a way of undermining authority. Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, the two founders of Sots Art, as Soviet Pop was known, were part of an exhibition considered so rebellious it was demolished by state bulldozers in 1974. That fate seems ironic, given that contemporaneously they were working on "Post Art 1973-4", a cycle of six paintings, three of which are on view here, showing US Pop icons such as Warhol's soup can as if they have been torn by some elemental catastrophe.

Bearing complex, dialectical backstories yet blessed with a graphic clarity so direct it verges on the confrontational, a little political Pop goes a long way. As a result, the most successful galleries here are a series of rooms devoted to individual artists.

A triumph of multicultural, feminist chutzpah, Jana Zelibska's immersive environment "Kandarya-Mahadeva" (1969) sees garlands of pink and white paper flowers strung across a room covered in nude female torsos — their private parts signalled by mirrors — that have been abstracted from images of tantric rituals that adorn the sculptural column in the centre.

Born in Olomouc, Zelibska was forbidden by the Czech authorities in 1969 from displaying the work in a public space. Little wonder; its droll yet unflinching humanity makes it a perfect expression of the Prague Spring.

It's also a joy to encounter a gallery of paintings by Cornel Brudascu. Born in Romania in 1937, Brudascu exploited a moment in the 1970s when international cultural exchanges were permitted and he encountered music, art and photography from Europe and the US.

Here, portraits of friends and musicians possess the blurred intimacy for which Romania's painters have been lauded in recent years. Yet the disco hues, and photographic origins, stamp his work with the cool distance of industrial processes so beloved of German conceptualists.

Nowhere is this paradox more poignant than in "Youth on the Building Yard" (1970). An image of bare-armed young men swinging their pickaxes, it seems to sustain communism's call for private individuals to subsume themselves in the interests of the collective. Yet its psychedelic palette demands the spectator acknowledge both the artist's own imprint and western libertarianism.

This show abounds with works animated by such provocative contradictions but when each work has so much to say, curators must remember that less is more. Nevertheless, political Pop art is far more substantial than the fast-food froth served up by Warhol and his ilk. Let's hope this genre soon gets the platform it deserves.

Until January 24 2016. tate.org.uk Slideshow photographs: Cornel Brudascu/Museum of Art Cluj-Napoca, Romania; Evelyne Axell/DACS 2015 /Collection of Philippe Axell; Isabel Oliver; Claudio Tozzi/Museu de Arte Moderna, São Paulo; The Estate of Shinkichi Tajiri/Museum Het Valkhof, Nijmegen, The Netherlands; Equipo Crónica (Manolo Valdés, Rafael Solbes), courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York; Jana Zelibska, Linea Collection, Bratislava

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