Andy Warhol is at the head of a ‘Photo Revolution’

By Mark Feeney
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WORCESTER — So far as it goes, the title “Photo Revolution: Andy Warhol to Cindy Sherman” is accurate. Yes, the show includes a lot of photographs. It concerns revolution, of at least two kinds. And Warhol and Sherman more or less serve as bookends. But the show also brings in many works from other media: prints, video, painting, film, even couture (assuming paper dresses qualify — and why not?). A revolution that extends to just one medium isn’t much of a revolution, after all.

The show runs through Feb. 16 at the Worcester Art Museum. The more than 200 works on display are largely drawn from WAM’s permanent holdings. Their plentitude is a reminder of the excellence of the collection.

The list of additional media does not extend to drawing. Yet maybe the best way to understand “Photo Revolution” is as a kind of “PHOTO REVOLUTION,” Page G6
drawing. A drawing works through indication and highlight: a line or two implying a larger volume, a bit of shading doing the work of full delineation. That’s what “Photo Revolution” does for the quarter century of American art from the late ’50s to the early ’80s, roughly from just before the emergence of Warhol to just after that of Sherman. The chronology remains elastic, though. What might be the single most striking work in a show full of them dates from a decade later. Nam June Paik’s video installation “Robert Goddard, 1995,” a tribute to that native son of Worcester, is at once playful and imposing.

So “Photo Revolution” is a show less about date than feel, that feel being the grain of an era: scruffy, bolshie, uneven. Or maybe the feel is less tactile than musical, a matter of mood and tonality, most often dissonant. Either way, this means there’s a lot of ground to cover — a lot of turbulence, too. As curated by WAM’s Nancy Kathryn Burns, the show does so with skill and assurance.

The first of the two revolutions is aesthetic. The arrival of Pop art, the greatly increased recognition of photography as a fine art, the rise of Photorealism in painting, the Pictures Generation group of ’70s artists, even the acceptance of color in art photography: All were indicative of representation reasserting itself in American art. Abstraction wasn’t about to go away, but neither was it exalted as the artistic culmination that the ascent of Abstract Expressionism had made it seem in the ’50s. A work as vivid and charming as Alex Katz’s double portrait of his wife would have looked like a provocation in correct cultural circles in the year of its making, 1960.

The second revolution involves the engagement of art with the larger cultural upheaval of the ’60s and ’70s. Abstraction turns its back on the shared world to create one of its own. With this second revolution, the idea of a division between art and everything else isn’t so much violated as ignored. Marx’s observation about modernity, “All that is solid melts into air,” finds a counterpart here: “All that is solid melts into art.” Whether it be stills from the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination, Warhol’s 1972 screen print of Chairman Mao, or a small, triple-take-worthy Sherman self-portrait from 1975 in which she poses as Lucille Ball, the shared world is being acknowledged. Sometimes that acknowledgment is an embrace, sometimes a condemnation. Always it’s a confrontation.

The shared reality of representation in art extends back to the cave paintings of Lascaux. The period covered in “Photo Revolution” differed in that so much of the sharing took in the newly found “reality” of media. It’s there in how Pop Art drew on advertising and comic strips and product design (the
show includes a Warhol “Campbell’s Soup Can”). It’s there in the seen-by-millions photojournalism of Eddie Adams’s “Saigon Execution” or the image of Tommie Smith and John Carlos protesting on the medal stand at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. It’s there in explicit nods to Hollywood, as in Rosalyn Drexler’s 1963 collage “The Defenders” (which brings things full circle, since it looks like a foreshadowing of an actual Hollywood movie from three decades later, Quentin Tarantino’s “Reservoir Dogs”). In perhaps the most delightful instance in the show, it’s there in a set of Mike Mandel’s “Baseball Photographer Trading Cards,” from 1975.

There are works here by names one might expect — Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, Garry Winogrand, Robert Heinecken, Nan Goldin — each signally contributing to the formation of a new grain by their going against the grain. Others are less expected, but seen in context their presence makes absolute sense: Robert Smithson, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Leon Golub.

The second-most important name in “Photo Revolution” — it’s certainly the most revolutionary — comes with the two dozen snapshots on display: Unknown. There you have the aesthetic recognition of reality at its loosest and most democratic. That democratization of art was another key component of this period. More than half of those anonymous snapshots are Polaroids. The ubiquity of instant photography in this period relates to another important aspect of the era: the impact of technology. Just for starters: no technology, no mass communication, let alone art inspired by it.

Polaroids bring us back to the name in “Photo Revolution” that’s even more important than Unknown: Warhol. There are 16 examples from one of his “Red Book” snaps of friends and celebrities. In many ways, Warhol was as antithetical to these years he did so much to define as, say, Richard Nixon was. He was furiously blank, passionately apolitical, almost-giddily materialist. In a counter-culture that aspired to the condition of perpetual commune, Warhol, who had a work ethic worthy of Hercules, presided over The Factory.

What we can now see — and this may be why, however paradoxically, Warhol remains as relevant today as he did at his mid-’60s peak — is the true outcome of his labors. No one else’s art was quite as destabilizing as his, destabilizing not just in itself (there’s a lot of competition on that front) but in its ubiquity, even pervasiveness. Inspired by mass communication, Warhol, in a sense, took it over as no other serious artist had or would. “Photo Revolution” is an unsettling show (that’s meant as praise) about unsettling art from an unsettled time. At its unsettled heart is the man in the white wig born Andrew Warhola. By the time of his death he was known to much of the planet simply as Andy. More than just on a first-name basis with the culture, he was the culture. He still is.

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ART REVIEW

PHOTO REVOLUTION: Andy Warhol to Cindy Sherman
Rowland Scherman’s circa 1979 “Andy Warhol Aside Polaroids of Caroline Ireland”

ROLELAND SCHERMAN
Andy Warhol’s “Outer and Inner Space” (above) and “Mao Tse-Tung” (left), and Alex Katz’s “Double Portrait With Frames” (bottom)