"Photo Revolution: Andy Warhol to Cindy Sherman," at the Worcester Art Museum through February 15, explores the evolution of photography at the hands of the baby boom generation. The exhibition brackets the time frame after WWII but before smartphones and illustrates forces that have shaped popular culture, resulting in currently different standards in contemporary art. Curator Nancy Kathryn Burns invites audiences into this show, which is a roaming look at our cultural climate when photography quickly insinuated itself into daily life, and in the process, eventually achieving equal footing among painting and sculpture as an art form.

The exhibition catalogue opens with a quote from Marcel Duchamp responding to Alfred Stieglitz's question, "Can a photograph have the significance of art?" Duchamp wrote, in part, "I would like to see it make people despise painting until something else will make photography unbearable." A wonderful Duchampian snap-back, he inclusively cites the rising cultural love affair with photography while commenting on the inevitability of leveling change.

"Photo Revolution" relates a place in contemporary art history when high and low culture converged into a polyglot of information flow. Worcester Art Museum's take on the subject skillfully illustrates, in over 225 artworks from the late 1950s to the 1980s, that photography established a new landscape of cultural coordinates.

Robert Frank's black-and-white image, "Ranch Market, Hollywood," from "The Americans," 1956, is included in the show as a pre-Age of Aquarius touchstone. His revolutionary photography ushered in a very different approach of photographic composition and subject matter that was freeing and eventually gave rise to the aesthetics of artists such as Robert Rauschenberg whose "Accident," 1963, is also exhibited.

The exhibition accepts the premise of New York as the undisputed center of the art universe, and a nexus of advertising, film and television. A number of artists with art in "Photo Revolution" had day jobs in media fields making paste-up and mechanics while others delved into TV. By the mid-1970s, New York City was nearly bankrupt and downtown lofts were cheap while many artists lived and
worked making their personal art in the city's downtown mixed-use buildings. These buildings also housed small businesses that provided specialized services for the media industry. There was certainly a symbiosis.

From 23rd Street to Greenwich Village, it was a daily occurrence that foot messengers would carry giant black portfolios from photo shoots to layout rooms and then the production facilities serving the dissemination of media information. Within this whirl of activity, "Andy Warhol Factory" was at one end of Union Square and the "Village Voice" was at the other. Dieter Roth's "Von der Hand in den Mund (Lead a Hand to Mouth Existence), Pram, 5" 1972, with registration marks and side notations, relates that era's paste-up and mechanical sensibility. It suggests a moment in visual culture before things went digital. The artist's sense of picture plane and framing is straight out of television or film. His subject matter touches upon Frank's innovation, a conceptual Earthworks sensibility and performance art.

Anonymous vernacular snapshots gifted to the Worcester Art Museum by collector Peter J. Cohen pepper the exhibition. In a number of these, people are shown in relation to their television sets, which were portals to the world that were frequently enjoyed in the living room and trusted like a family member during a time when having a TV was a status symbol. "Photo Revolution" postulates that mass availability of the Kodak Instamatic, and Polaroid's products popularized image making for the masses and allowed them to transcend the mundane, or be empowered by it, while artists sought to recontextualize its many nuances.

There are Pulitzer Prize-winning images among the news photographs in the show, including Martha Rosler's "Tron (Amputee)" from "House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home," 1967-72, and Leon Golub's "White Squad," 1987, which inform the journalistic photograph aesthetics that coalesced at the time.

Collage was an important vehicle that artists of the period found useful in organizing and inventing aesthetics out of the mounds of photographic information available for consumption on a daily basis. Tom Wesselmann's collage painting, "Great American Nude #36," 1962, is a Pop Art painting with collaged elements that stands out.

At the entrance to "Photo Revolution," audiences will see and hear a console monitor with Chris Burden's broadcasts, "The TV Commercials 1973-1977," then their attention will turn to a phalanx of mannequins wearing silkscreen printed paper dresses, a fad of Mod fashion. All of these influences integrated into the scheme of ideas circulating at the time.

A number of silkscreen prints by Warhol are in the show, including "Campbell's Soup Can," 1964-1965; "Jacqueline Kennedy (Jackie III)," 1966; "Mao Tse-Tung," 1972, and others depicting the development of Pop Art. A treat in the exhibit is "Outer and Inner Space," a 1965 Warhol film featuring "Factory Girl" Edie Sedgwick that plays on a continuous loop.

The Leo Castelli Gallery was influential in the rise of Pop Art by exhibiting the artwork of Roy Lichtenstein, Rauschenberg, Warhol and others. When Castelli opened his gallery in downtown Manhattan, it was to exhibit in the environment in which art was being made, giving credibility and cachet to SoHo as an art commerce destination. Louis K. Meisel Gallery opened less than a block away, forwarding the growth of Photorealism. Metro Pictures arrived in the neighborhood in the 1980s with a new direction in artmaking that included the photography of Cindy Sherman, whose work at the time was an inscrutable, yet fascinating anomaly.
During the 1960s, '70s and '80s, photography, television and film accelerated what can arguably be called the 20th century’s Belle Époque. "Simulacrum" is a word coined in the 1980s, meaning imitation. It is used to describe the mind-numbing plethora of imagery constantly bombarding people. The word describes the fakery of living in a world filled with replication and visual illusion.

In one of Sherman’s self-photographs, she appears as a imitation of a tomboy. In another, Sherman posed as a facsimile of Lucille Ball. In a third, she appropriates a sense of cinematic narrative. Sherman engineers herself on film as a replica of female experience exploring the fine line between media saturation and lived experience. A certain sadness or ennui is emblematic of Sherman’s photographic tropes.

The Belle Époque of the 20th century saw methods of art-making dramatically change as photography came to the fore. Advertising, at that point, cannibalized pop culture constantly and “Photo Revolution” has been curated to examine creative expression at that juncture. Suites of anonymous pictures serve to give viewers a sense of the immersion of both popular culture and advertising into everyday lives at the time. The important, even requisite, Frank photograph of “Ranch Market, Hollywood,” 1956, bookends William Eggleston’s later “Untitled (Near Rome, Mississippi)” of the 1970s. These appear relationally hung on opposite walls to suggest a bracket of sensibilities between 1956 to the early 1970s as a time frame and envelope of possibility. Eggleston’s landscape scene, which depicts a dilapidated sign for Wonder Bread, makes the ironic comment that by the mid-1970s, the Wonder Years were pretty much over.

As comprehensive as “Photo Revolution” seems, the survey has one very big glaring omission. Where is the work of Robert Mapplethorpe? Senator Jesse Helms vilified Mapplethorpe’s photography as pornography. Some of it was, but some of it wasn’t. Mapplethorpe’s photographs plain and simple changed the trajectory of the medium as an art form; therefore, it is important to say that without his creative influence the 1980s would not have been the same. Certainly, Sherman’s work and that of Nan Goldin would not evolved in the same way.

“Photo Revolution: Andy Warhol to Cindy Sherman,” at Worcester Art Museum through February 16, distills a rich tapestry of creative influences and is an exhibition worth seeing.

Suzanne Volmer

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