



Andy Warhol *Modern Madonna* Drawings

WITH AN ESSAY BY
MIT EINEM TEXT VON
MICHAEL LÜTHY

1999
JABLONKA GALERIE
KÖLN

Untitled (Modern Madonna) 1980-87
4 gelatin silver prints sewn together 27 1/2 x 21 1/2 inch / 69,9 x 55,6 cm

Bodyless Eye, Sightless Mouth

Andy Warhol's *Modern Madonna* Drawings



Untitled (Modern Madonna) 1980-87

Polaroid Polacolor photograph 4 1/4 x 4 3/8 inch / 9,8 x 11,8 cm

Warhol's pictures thrive on the power of paradox. And paradox is the basis of his art; it is like a revolving door which one effortlessly steps into only to find oneself spun out on the other side. For instance there is the paradoxical relationship of content and form. His work is immensely rich, with a wealth of themes that takes in all the traditional genres of painting, from history paintings to portraits, genre paintings and interiors to landscapes and still lifes. In the context of the 20th century this is both an astonishing and a unique achievement. Over the years Warhol's art grew into an archive of the most important personalities, food-stuffs, catastrophes, art-works and myths that have been of interest – particularly to the American consciousness – over recent decades. The catastrophe pictures alone, the *Disasters*, comprise a virtually complete list of violent forms of death, whether accidental or by suicide, poisoning or murder, the atomic bomb or the electric chair. If one also takes into account the hundreds of drawings which

accompanied the paintings right from the very outset then the spectrum of Warhol's work is extended even further. There is scarcely a stone left unturned from industrial production to religious symbolism to various forms of sexuality, so it is hardly surprising to encounter the suckling mothers on show here.

However, while Warhol's œuvre is universal in its themes, this is in marked contrast to the uniformity of its forms. A Warhol is always instantly recognisable as such – and not just by specialists in the field. Warhol's epoch-making achievement was the fact that he found a template that 'suited' every occasion. His imaginative powers were not directed towards finding a fitting, that is to say, individual form for a situation or a feeling – his output would then have had to be as encyclopaedic in its repertoire of forms as in its contents. Instead his aim was to develop a matrix which – however contradictory this might seem – was equally appropriate for any theme he might choose to portray. Thus Warhol achieved the unthinkable, becoming the impartial chronicler of the closing decades of our century at the same time as putting his own indelible stamp on everything he touched. Although the result of this is that it

then becomes impossible to say whether the whole world looks like a Warhol image or whether – which seems more likely – by assimilating everything visible around him the contours of his own personality simply dissolved and ebbed away.

Individual works are equally contradictory. Again and again we encounter the tension that arises from the irreconcilable juxtaposition of sensation and banality, uniqueness and repetition, emotionalism and cold detachment, mere reproduction and inexhaustible creativity. Warhol manages to make a decorative wallpaper pattern using an electric chair as his motif and to turn the image of a public figure like Jackie Kennedy into a mass-product – although not, as one might expect, making anything and everything simply seem equally meaningless but creating quite the opposite effect, namely heightening the essence of a subject in such a way that subsequently our own internal image of certain subjects – Marilyn Monroe, for instance – is today largely determined by Warhol's pictures.

This process has much in common with the mass media, particularly with television which also presents the riches of this world in one unchanging 'format', the

television screen. What appears on the screen seems intrinsically contradictory, unmediated and yet endlessly mediated, 'realistic' yet idiosyncratic, transparent yet opaque. Television also has the capacity to turn the bloodiest events into no more than part of the evening's entertainment, which nevertheless keeps us on the edge of our seats because they are catapulted right into the comfort of our own homes.

Contradictions of a quite particular kind emerge in the *Modern Madonna* drawings. For a start there is the unfulfilled promise of the title. These are not images of Mary and the Child Jesus; these are just perfectly ordinary mothers with perfectly ordinary babies. Yet the two levels mingle here. The Christian theme has always also provided a framework for the earthly, profane relationship of a mother to her child. By definition this imbued the ethereal sacred pair with the warmth and proximity of everyday human-ness, which in turn offered a way in for believers. At the same time the exemplary configuration of Mary and Jesus illuminated every relationship of mother and child with a reflection of the sacred. By inviting 'real' mother and child pairs into his studio to be photographed and by using these



[1] *Modern Madonna* 1981

Graphite on HMP paper 31 ¼ x 24 inch / 80,6 x 61 cm

photos as the basis of his drawings Warhol is only profaning the Christian motif in pursuit of quite the opposite goal, namely using the togetherness of mother and child to evoke in us those mighty 'archetypal' images that colour all our thinking: every mother a Madonna, every child a Christ child. In these drawings Warhol does the very thing that occupied him throughout his life's work. He explores that floating world where external images and our internal imagination, projection and reality, cliché and archetype, the artificial and the natural merge into one. In this case, that means that the broad cultural theme of 'mother and child' with all its biological, historical, theological, psychological and pictorial depth is condensed into the flat two-dimensionality of an outline without volume or mass on a white, wholly exposed background. In this concentration it becomes impossible to distinguish whether cultural praxis is a heightening of Nature or whether Nature is rather a projection of cultural praxis. Warhol works in the intertext of images where there is no *terra firma* of 'natural Nature' but where everything always already exists as a solidified image – either internal or external – pointing in turn to other images. Thus there

[2] *Modern Madonna* 1981

Graphite on HMP paper 31 1/2 x 24 inch / 80 x 61 cm

are pictures in the series which could be based on advertising photos, where the contentment of mother and child is simply staged for the benefit of the intended target of the advertisement – although with the significant difference that Warhol's models were not asked to present themselves in this manner but did it completely of their own accord. It is as though they had internalised the relevant stereotypes. Both the protagonists in front of the camera and Warhol behind it are well aware that the naturalness of the scene will be particularly telling if it takes the form of a harmonious, entirely familiar image. To be is to be perceived, and mimicking tried and tested pictorial patterns no doubt heightens the quality of one's own impact. Warhol himself referred to this blurring of the boundaries between reality and his images: "Everything is sort of artificial, I don't know where the artificial stops and the real starts."*

But the paradox of the extreme flatness of the forms combined with the 'depth' and multiplicity of the themes and the paradox of complete naturalness combined with perfect pictoriality seem positively peripheral compared to what must be the most striking feature of



[3] *Modern Madonna* 1981

Graphite on HMP paper 40 x 30 inch / 101,6 x 76,2 cm

these drawings. If we look at them as a series it becomes all too evident that following the initial variations on playful and posed togetherness the second half of the series is dominated by one single theme: the child straining towards the mother's breast, achieving this goal and resting happily in this position. This is not only worthy of mention because Warhol is hereby allowing an erotic, sexual dimension to obtrude which is never more than a muted overtone in traditional pictures of the Madonna: in effect Warhol is transgressing the cultural pictorial code by literally revealing it as a code, as a cipher. The focus on the child at the mother's breast is above all worthy of attention because here Warhol is dealing with archetypal bodily experiences in a manner that, from the perspective of art as the pictorial embodiment of seeing, could not be more explosive. Warhol's camera – pure eye, pure vision – is focused on a situation in which seeing becomes blind and the meeting of two bodies shifts into the realm of the wholly tactile and oral, where optical distance gives way to bodily immediacy. This shift is evident not least in the concentrated framing of the child and the breast, which generally partially or entirely forces the mother's head out of the



[4] *Modern Madonna* 1981

Graphite on HMP paper 40 x 30 inch / 101,6 x 76,2 cm

picture. The child's eye becomes sightless, the mother's eye moves to her breast.

In view of this, one last paradox should be taken into account which permeates Warhol's pictorial world from the outset. It is the simultaneity of maximum distance and non-distance. We do not encounter the things and people in his work in a measurable three-dimensional space but as locationless, floating phenomena, which are both oppressively close and unattainably distant – whether these be the hibiscus blossoms in the *Flowers* towering up gigantically like walls before us, or an Elvis Presley pointing his pistol at us from out of fathomless silver grey, oder whether it be Warhol himself in his last self-portraits – a head hovering in nocturnal blackness, gazing through us at something nameless. The viewer is confronted with the limitless depths which are the other side of what has so often been referred to as Warhol's superficiality. Things are poised at an "absolute distance" as Sartre said of Giacometti's work, that is to say, at a distance which does not diminish as one approaches but which grows instead. Warhol's art seems to be born of an obsession with holding the ever-advancing world at bay plus an inherent inability



[5] *Modern Madonna* 1981

Graphite on HMP paper 40 1/4 x 31 inch / 102,9 x 78,7 cm

– which his friends talked of – to come close to the world around him, to experience it bodily.

The artistic (not just the motivic) intimacy of these drawings derives from the manner in which a basic rift in the relationship of the person Andy Warhol to the world around him is transposed into a pictorial, in fact iconographic, form. The most immediate encounter, the most basic bodily fulfilment, the security of the child's mouth at the mother's breast, becomes an image by means of a process and governed by an aesthetic that could not be more distanced and non-corporeal. First there is the rigid eye of the camera which Warhol uses to relocate the act of seeing from his own body into a piece of technical equipment and which interposes itself between him and his model, then there is the faithful, emotionless copying of the outlines onto the paper, flattening out any three-dimensionality like a pressed flower in a herbarium. In copying the lines, picture for picture, drawing for drawing, it seems as though the artist is spelling out the ungraspable: the possibility of a sightless, purely bodily experience of another human being who nourishes, holds and protects one – an experience that remained inaccessible to Warhol and



[6] *Modern Madonna* 1981

Graphite on HMP paper 40 x 30 inch / 101,6 x 76,2 cm

which he therefore returned to again and again throughout his life with voyeuristic fervour. The insistent focusing on the mother's breast and the child's mouth reveals the drive behind this series in which the artist, growing older, draws on the very deepest levels of his own childhood and life.

"I just know this series is going to be a problem. It's too strange a thing, mothers and babies and *breastfeeding*."**

* Gretchen Berg, 'Nothing to Lose: An Interview with Andy Warhol', in: Michael O'Pray (ed.), *Andy Warhol. Film Factory*, London 1989, p. 60.

** Andy Warhol: *The Andy Warhol Diaries*, ed. by Pat Hackett, New York 1989 (27.3.1981). [Italics by the author]



[7] *Modern Madonna* 1981

Graphite on HMP paper 40 ½ x 31 inch / 102,9 x 78,7 cm

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