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Art 450: Andy Warhol Exhibition

Ntombi Tfwala of Swaziland

Two years before his unexpected death in 1987, Warhol created a series called *The Reigning Queens*, which depicts four female monarchs: Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom, Beatrix of the Netherlands, Margrethe II of Denmark, and Ntombi Tfwala of Swaziland. After they were exhibited in America, Warhol regretted it. He stated in his diaries that they were supposed to be shown only to European viewers. Warhol is well known for making silkscreen prints of public figures and celebrities throughout his career, but *The Reigning Queens* is different from the others because it was not commissioned and it focuses on female leaders. The print of Queen Ntombi Tfwala, which we have in the Rhode Island College Foundation collection, is additionally unique in the group of four because she is an African queen while the other three are European.

The little that has been written about *The Reigning Queen* series focuses on Queen Elizabeth II. The series received positive reviews in England. In the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Jonathan Jones connects the series with mass-produced objects, noticing its relationship to common themes in Warhol's mass-produced and mechanical work of silkscreen paintings. He links it to other mass-produced objects such as coins and postage stamps, which also depict the British Queen.¹ Another media writer, Sarah Milroy of *The Globe and Mail*, called it an "American-style putdown,"² while Maria Bilsky identifies "central themes -

¹ Jonathan Jones, "Reigning Queens: Queen Elizabeth II. Part of a series that also includes the Queens of Denmark, the Netherlands and Swaziland," *The Guardian*, April 29, 2000, London Edition.

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2000/apr/29/art>

² Sarah Milroy, "Pictures of Liz;" *The Globe and Mail*, February 09, 2002, Toronto, Canada.

celebrity, portraiture, consumerism, decoration and the extremes of social hierarchy.”³ Writing for the Tate museum, Bilske notes the series as “typical” of Warhol’s theme of depicting famous figures.⁴ Meanwhile, the Royal Collection Trust owned by Elizabeth II acquired her portrait.⁵ Almost nothing has been written about Warhol’s depiction of Queen Ntombi Tfwala of Swaziland.

Queen Ntombi Tfwala of Swaziland parallels other portraits by Warhol from the mid-1980s. However, her dress distinctly showcases her ethnic identity. In 1986, Queen Ntombi (also called Ntfombi) became the official head of state of Eswatini (formerly called Swaziland) after serving as regent beginning in 1983. Here she wears an orange emanhiya with a green pattern, a traditional Swazi attire. Her white ligcebesha (red rhombus bead necklace), and earrings showcase Swazi jewelry. A feather crown in blue streaks with orange and red pastels on top of her head, much like sun rays, centralize the queen. One can read her portrait, as well as her European counterparts in *the Reigning Queens* series, as a celebration of female leadership, and also as a mass-produced commodity since Warhol and his associates made *Reigning Queens* and many other series through techniques of mass reproduction, often in large quantities and different variations.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/pictures-of-liz/article4131006>

³ Maria Bilske, “Andy Warhol Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom 1985,” Tate Gallery, 2006, accessed November 20, 2019,

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/warhol-queen-elizabeth-ii-of-the-united-kingdom-p13295>

⁴ Bilske, 2006.

⁵ “*Reigning Queens* (Royal Edition): Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom,” Royal Collection Trust, 2012, accessed November 20, 2019,

<https://www.rct.uk/collection/themes/exhibitions/the-queen-portraits-of-a-monarch/windsor-castle-drawings-gallery/reigning-queens-royal-edition-queen-elizabeth-ii-of-the-united-kingdom>

The series began in 1985 when he was commissioned to do many portraits by wealthy friends and acquaintances, which involved extended rituals of meals, Polaroid photography sessions, and return visits to Warhol's studio many called the Factory. However, *Reigning Queens*, like Warhol's portraits of public figures and celebrities, appropriated images from the media. For example, Queen Elizabeth II's portrait used Peter Grugeon's 1977 silver jubilee photograph, an image that was turned into 14 million Canadian postage stamps, a mass-reproduction that foreshadows Warhol's churning out of the same image, although the number of his edition is not publicly available.⁶ In contrast, two years before *Reigning Queens*, Warhol created a series of dynamic portraits of Princess Caroline of Monaco from his own polaroids hinting that they were commissioned. The finished paintings have fewer layers and cleaner registration. As they may vary in techniques of layering, Caroline's portraits make greater use of flat fields of color for a graphic effect that is flattering. Where the specific idea for the *Reigning Queens* series came from is unknown. It seems that Warhol specifically intended it for European audiences. In his *Diaries* on June 3, 1985, he stated, "I've hit rock bottom. This show, I have sunk to the bottom of the gutter."⁷ when the series was exhibited at Leo Castelli's gallery in New York. Three months later, he regretted showing them in America. "They were supposed to be only for Europe nobody here cares about royalty and it'll just be another bad review."⁸

The Reigning Queens fit into Warhol's extensive depictions of famous figures, from Marilyn Monroe and Liz Taylor to Mao Tse Tung and Richard Nixon. In addition, *The Reigning Queens* fits into Warhol's theme of fame seen throughout his body of work. But this series,

⁶ "Queen Elizabeth II, Silver Jubilee," Post Office Department. [Postage Stamp Press Release], 1977.

⁷ Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett. *The Andy Warhol Diaries*. New York: Warner Books, 1989, 665.

⁸ Warhol, 1989, 691.

which may not have been a commission, also raises questions about Warhol's concern for issues of gender and underrepresented groups. Warhol seems less confident in his depiction of Queen Ntombi compared to the other queens, struggling with representing the nuances of her skin tone and headdress. These issues beg further research that cannot be addressed here. Meanwhile he allegedly stated, "I want to be as famous as The Queen of England."⁹

Calling *The Reigning Queens* a celebration of female leaders may be a stretch, but not outrageous if looking through Warhol's past depiction of leaders. Warhol depicted head of communist China Mao in 1972, American president Jimmy Carter in 1976, and ancient Macedonian king Alexander The Great in 1982 (which we have in the Rhode Island College Foundation collection as well). These male leaders Warhol depicted before *Reigning Queens*, but they were not necessarily celebratory. Mao, Carter, and Alexander were part of Warhol's artistic exploration of celebrity status and interest in circulating public discussion of these subjects. Warhol increased America's attention to Mao Tse Tung in the 1970s through 15-foot portraits that showed Mao splattered with eyeshadow and lipstick, mocking the leader. In contrast, the *Queens* are portrayed with less flourish and flamboyance, perhaps a restraint that shows respect.

The Royal Collection Trust of Britain found the portraits of Queen Elizabeth II flattering because they acquired four royal edition prints in 2012.¹⁰ The Trust states, "All character has been removed and we are confronted by a symbol of royal power. By reproducing the same image four times, Warhol demonstrates his interest in mass production and reminds us that

⁹ Lili Anolik, "Andy Warhol and Edie Sedgwick: A Brief, White-Hot, and Totally Doomed Romance" *Vanity Fair*, December 06, 2017, accessed November 30, 2019, <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2017/12/andy-warhol-and-edie-sedgwick-a-brief-white-hot-and-totally-doomed-romance>

¹⁰ The Royal Collection Trust, 2012

Queen Elizabeth II is the most depicted woman in the world.”¹¹ By limiting the acquisition to only Queen Elizabeth II, they suggest that only her image has value. No one has written about the significance of Queen Ntombi to Eswatini, or Queen Beatrix to Netherland, or Queen Margrethe II to Denmark. While Warhol complained that “nobody here [in the United States] cares about royalty,”¹² only the portrait of Queen Elizabeth II has gotten attention even as Queen Ntombi’s portrait is arguably the most unique and remarkable.

Warhol appears to have difficulty in rendering subjects with dark skin in silkscreen prints throughout his career, and *The Reigning Queens* continues that problem. Queen Ntombi appears as if she is in her own series because of the stylistic idiosyncrasies with the other three figures. Queen Beatrix, Elizabeth II, and Margrethe II appear with monochromatic skin on their faces and upper bodies. Moreover, they do not have an extra layer of colors on their skin while “Queen Ntombi” has a layer of red, or orange, or blue. The highlights on her face have more contrast than her shadow and sometimes the shadow blends into the background. This technique also appears in Warhol’s painting of Marilyn Monroe (1967) and his series of drag queen of color called *Ladies and Gentlemen* (1974, a Polaroid of sitter Wilhemina Ross is at Rhode Island College). Monroe has a mixture of color applied on her skin but not so much on the three European queens in *The Reigning Queens*. *The Ladies and Gentlemen* series is visually striking. Warhol’s treatment of skin is complexly layered with different colors. Similarities in Warhol’s depictions of Monroe, the Queens, and drag queens in *Ladies and Gentlemen* emphasize their fashion and style. All wear exuberant jewelry, which makes them stand out even more.

¹¹ The Royal Collection Trust, 2012

¹² Warhol, 1989, 690.

Another unique feature about “Queen Ntombi” is the streaks of color on top of her head believed to be a traditional Eswatini feather crown. It illuminates the queen and becomes a point of focus. It is a crown for Queen Ntombi and other female royalty in her region. This feature suggests a visual similarity to the Statue of Liberty’s crown at a glance, which may help viewers realize that Ntombi is a queen. While flattened in Warhol’s portrait, he tried to depict the queen as close to Swazi tradition and culture as possible.

Warhol’s intention of creating *The Reigning Queen* is unclear since there are no publicly available sources to suggest his inspiration. He once said, “I ran out of ideas...Everyone paints the same picture over and over again anyway.”¹³ While an artist’s intention can be useful for understanding an artwork’s significance, Warhol has always remained ambiguous. Even if *The Reigning Queens* is less recognizable than other Warhol’s works, it reveals his shift and struggle in depicting sitters with screenprints, but they also show common themes he has tackled repeatedly.

¹³ Andy Warhol, “Andy Warhol in London - Interview at Revolver Gallery.” Filmed 1985. Youtube video, 2:04. Posted May 26, 2015. <https://youtu.be/paQtSOIfBbw>



Queen Ntfombi Tfwala of Swaziland, 1985,
silk screen, 40" x 31".



Princess Sikhanyiso Dlamini and Temtsimba Dlamini with feather crowns at the Reed Dance, 2006 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sikhanyiso_Dlamini



QUEEN ELISABETH OF UNITED KINGDOM



QUEEN MARGRETHE OF DENMARK



QUEEN BEATRIX OF THE NETHERLANDS



QUEEN NTOMBI OF SWAZILAND

Reigning Queens, 1985

<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/andy-warhol-warhol-reigning-queens-castelli-announcement>



Princess Caroline Of Monaco, 1983

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/andy-warhol/princess-caroline-of-monaco>

<http://www.artnet.com/artists/andy-warhol/princess-caroline-of-monaco-4-works-9eKtNml8Gym2RdBACLj2ZQ2>





Marilyn Monroe, 1967

<https://www.levygorvy.com/happenings/warhol-women-marilyn-monroe/>



Mao, 1973

<https://archive.artic.edu/modern/mao/>



Ladies and Gentlemen Series, 1975

<https://www.artsy.net/collection/andy-warhol-ladies-and-gentleman>