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SIGNS OF OUR TIME

Which object says most about American history: a Warhol original or a reconstructed eagle? Dealer and writer Richard Polsky and artist Julian LaVerdiere might disagree

BY ANTHONY HADEN-GUEST

Richard Polsky, the San Francisco dealer whose memoir, *I Bought Andy Warhol*, has just been published by Harry Abrams, first came to attention — well, my attention anyway — as the troublemaker behind *The Art Guide*. In this, which began as an annual in 1995 and went online three years later, Poisky picks artists, gives a product description, and grades the goods with a SELL, HOLD or BUY. Polsky's take on the artworld is a *film noir* combo of tough guy and naive out-of-towner.

Acquiring a Warhol is the main plot line of his new book. The piece Polsky finally nails is not a Liz or Elvis but a 12-inch square green *Fright Wig*, acquired from Vincent Fremont at the Warhol Foundation for $50,000. But it's a scene of high drama all the same. There is also painful comedy, as when he is invited to lunch in a fancy restaurant with two of the sleekest California dealers, John Berggruen and Jim Corcoran. Berggruen elects to throw dice for the bill. Guess who loses? An unhealed wound, this.

"The artworld, it's such a stratified business. It kind of reminds me of the rock world," Polsky says. "When the club On The Rox opened on Sunset, Paul McCartney dropped by. Alice Cooper was there. And some young rock star comes up and says, 'Do you think you can introduce me?' And Alice says, 'No! You haven't earned the *right* yet to talk to McCartney.' The artworld is the same. You've got to pay your dues. You've got to bring something to the table."

In Polsky's opinion, the only thing most dealers bring to the table is themselves. "The trouble is that the business is unregulated," he says. "I wish there were an exam that art dealers had to take. To become a brain surgeon you actually have to know how to *do* something. A beautician has to be certified. You can't just open a hair salon. But anybody can wake up tomorrow, find a space, paint the walls white, hang a few pictures ... And that's it! The public assumes you have taste, you have business ethics ... It's not a profession, it's a lifestyle."

Polsky's most startling vignette describes a food fight that erupted during a dinner at Jim Corcoran's gallery, when a chicken leg, launched by artist Chuck Arnoldi, hit a painting by Ed Ruscha. At which the normally laid-back Ruscha got upset. Has Polsky had any feedback on his book? Arnoldi was vexed, apparently. And Corcoran? "I FedExed him a copy with a note, saying 'I hope you'll keep your sense of humour about this. I'm one of your biggest fans,"' he says. "But I haven't heard a word."

Julian LaVerdiere had shown at Andrew Kreps and with Deitch Projects, and was getting a thrum of artworld attention. Then he and another conceptualist, Paul Myoda, teamed up with two architects to create the *Towers of Light* memorial for Ground Zero. A computer simulation of it made the cover of the *New York Times* magazine, and the real thing beamed through the usually foggy sky for a month last year. Few — LaVerdiere is 32 — have so swiftly entered the visual vocabulary. "Goliath Concussed", his recent show at Lehmann Maupin, was as ambitious. Indeed, it showed him biting off almost more than he can chew — a relief in our down-sized times.

The central piece was a massive neo-classic eagle, swinging in a tremendous circle. "I want to pinpoint objects that cultivate American nostalgia," he explains in his 29th Street studio. "That was one of the reasons that I chose the federal eagle that was on top of Penn Station. Maybe that was New York's Lacanian mirror stage. Once we destroyed that building in 1963, we first recognised our own history."

Artefacts in the studio conjure up melancholic visions of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* or Robert Smithson's *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic:* futures that never happened, or shouldn't have happened, or were invented, or are submerged in the past, or are as false as the futures promised by the imperial bombast of the propaganda arts.

Another piece incorporates a vacuum tube. "My interest was in the way the vacuum tube has fallen by the wayside, and been forgotten. But it is the grandmother of the microchip," he says. "A lot of the instruments I have made are like reliquaries, even though they are obsolete. I think of empty patent medicine bottles as a symbol of a lost hope that was never legitimate. There is a romance to these ruins. They are all the more heroic when you seem them in a state of decay."

A replica of an early 20th-century medicine bottle, labelled THE ELIXIR OF LIFE, stands close to a shelf lined with miners' lamps. These were like mechanical canaries, LaVerdiere says. "They are from uranium mines. The companies were giving miners lamps to assure them of their safety, when in fact they were in great danger."

And this minimal piece of blackened matter? “This is a chunk of the World Trade Center. I’m not sure what it was. But whatever it was, it is now carbon. Ashes to ashes.” No irony intended, believe me.