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The Resurrection—and Destruction— of a Roy Lichtenstein Mural

This painstaking re-creation of a massive wall painting, like the original, will be destroyed



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In a Chelsea gallery as big as any around the globe, a momentous painting with a blue-chip pedigree has been taking shape under a curious condition: It can neither be bought nor sold and will be destroyed at the end of a fleeting five-week run.

The work, a 96-foot-wide mural designed by the late pop artist Roy Lichtenstein, was originally conceived in 1983 on a wall in SoHo under the watch of the artist himself. Now, more than three decades later, it has been resurrected at Gagosian Gallery as a

historical curio for an exhibition opening Thursday, along with related drawings and studies, as well as paintings and sculptures from throughout Lichtenstein's career.

"Greene Street Mural," as it was known when commissioned by the revered downtown art dealer Leo Castelli, draws on an unusual and seemingly random combination of visual elements. Among them: a slice of Swiss cheese, a folding chair, miscellaneous office supplies and a few potent art-historical allusions—to Pablo Picasso, sculptor Constantin Brancusi and the Great Pyramids. Each element has been scaled to mural size and rendered as if in a cartoon.

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"Everything here has been Lichtenstein-ized," said Jack Cowart, executive director of the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, pointing at parts of the painting still in progress during a visit to the work site. Two weeks ago, final touches were being applied to present the mural in a fashion fit for the artist—big, bright, with bold black lines, stripy cartoon shading and colors that pop and zing.

Sign painters had been hired to re-create a work too large to process all at once on a wall standing 18 feet tall and spanning nearly one-third the distance of a football field. "It's a little weird," said Rob McKeever, Lichtenstein's longtime studio assistant before the artist's death in 1997, "to be directing as opposed to painting."

The original sessions were more slapdash, with anyone who wandered by the old Castelli Gallery—now a Paul Smith clothing boutique—invited to pick up a brush and chip in.

"It became a kind of party," said Dorothy Lichtenstein, the artist's widow and, on the mural at least, part-time collaborator. "Anyone who stopped by to see it could put on a dab of color."

The operation at Gagosian was more controlled. To mimic the original, which was destroyed after its exhibition in 1983, detailed color-matching meetings were held to

conjure vibrant artist pigments from the past.

“The color out of the can that we buy nowadays isn’t as intense,” said Jason Coatney, lead painter at Colossal Media, the large-scale custom-sign-painting firm hired for the job. “They’ve taken out a lot of the things that make colors brighter, but also cause cancer. The paint is safer, but it’s a bummer.”

A team of painters—as many as seven at a time—worked for five days to fill out the mural in hand-painted detail. Their work will be on show for a little over a month before, as per Lichtenstein’s arrangement for the original, the mural will be destroyed once again.



The late pop artist Roy Lichtenstein working on 'Greene Street Mural.' PHOTO: ESTATE OF ROY LICHTENSTEIN/PHOTO: MICHAEL ABRAMSON/GAGOSIAN GALLERY

“The ’80s was a time when prices for art began to become what seemed enormous, so he liked the idea that he would do a work that couldn’t and wouldn’t be sold,” Ms. Lichtenstein said. “We didn’t want to make [the re-creation] any more precious.”

“The Greene Street Mural” falls into a lineage of Lichtenstein murals that includes a commission for the New York World’s Fair in 1964, when pop art was in its prime, and later, in 1986, a large one still on view in the lobby of the AXA Center (formerly the Equitable Center) in Midtown.

“The large murals tend to be slightly autobiographical,” said Mr. Cowart, who remained stumped as to what, exactly, Lichtenstein found appealing in elements like a roll of calculator tape, an extension cord and a cartoonish quotation of a tormented face from Picasso’s own momentous mural “Guernica.”

“He was always interested in making art out of things that people didn’t think of as art,”

Ms. Lichtenstein said.

Asked if the artist ever let on to his pictorial motives, Mr. McKeever, whose work with Lichtenstein began with the original “Greene Street Mural,” said his main interest was in abstract arrangements of lines and shapes, no matter their source, and, ultimately, composition.



The late Roy Lichtenstein, left, and Leo Castelli during the making of 'Greene Street Mural.' PHOTO: ESTATE OF ROY LICHTENSTEIN/PHOTO: MICHAEL ABRAMSON/GAGOSIAN GALLERY

He left winking hints, such as “Compositions III,” a sly smaller painting depicting a reproduced cover of an old-fashioned black-and-white composition notebook. Other related Lichtenstein works in the show play in different ways with the enigmatic subjects in the mural, including a painting titled “Portrait” of a piece of cheese dressed in a suit and a sculpture of cartoonish brush strokes cast in bronze.

But the star of the exhibition is the large mural whose days, after the opening this week, are numbered.

“We can look at historical photographs and it looks great,” said Allison Smith, Gagosian Gallery’s director of exhibitions, “but once you stand in front of it, in human scale, it becomes a totally different thing.”