

Tate Modern. London

Review by **Estella Hung**

Hanging over Pop Life like Andy Warhol's fright wig is the question of - Why Now? To hold an exhibition that assaults us with Warhol's "Good business is the best art" mantra and its diamond-encrusted legacy, just when the world is convalescing from a crisis of capitalism, seems about as tasteful as Andrea Fraser's video of herself making love to an art collector (on display here).



Yet, if anything, Pop Life probably serves as an indictment on those of us entranced by the shiny side of life. After all, pop art's stamina finds its source of oxygen in its audience's fascination with branding, celebrity and scandal. It's a fascination that survived past recessions and will survive the current one. It's a fascination that translated into a record £111 million sale of Damien Hirst artworks on the eve of Lehman Brothers' collapse. The genius of Warhol and his followers is their foresight (and, perhaps, guile) in tapping into this fascination for their own

gilded ends, and reinforcing it in the process.

What Pop Life does in an exhaustive and enlightening fashion is showcase how Warhol and his disciples, including Hirst and others of the so-called “Young British Artists”, deliberately forged a conduit between fine art and “modern life” by manipulating commercial media channels. As a result, the lines between high art and advertising, art and product, and art and entertainment – fractured in the 60s – were obliterated by the time Hirst and his peers entered the fray. What we ended up with were Jeff Koon's blow-up toys and Takashi Murakami's Anime-style collectables that accompanied packets of chewing gum. Thanks also to Warhol, generations of artists attempted to fashion themselves into brands to be fawned over, with money being the object.

Pop Life begins with selected works of Warhol at the height of his commercial art manoeuvrings and efforts at manufacturing his own mythical status. Warhol, the brand, appears in advertisements for cassette tapes, department store brochures, and fashion spreads; and Warhol, the celebrity, appears in intimate photos with the Manhattan A-list as well as television programmes. Just to lodge the point further into our heads, there's an assemblage of celebrity covers of Warhol's Interview magazine. This self-mythologising and concern for branding is picked up by subsequent artists such as Ashley Bickerton, whose “Self Portrait” consists of a series of corporate logos, and Gavin Turk, whose rendition of himself as Sid Vicious is also in likeness to an early Warhol print of a gun-toting Elvis.

If celebrity and idolatry, hallmarks of the entertainment industry, were good enough source materials for art, then it seemed only natural that Hollywood's other hallmarks – sex and scandal – would make the cut too. Richard Prince's photograph of a photograph of a ten-year-old Brooke Shields wearing nothing but heavy makeup was duly removed before Pop Life opened in September, leaving visitors to gawk at the adult Shields, clad in a bikini and heels, leaning against a motorcycle in a cloud of dry ice. Outdoing Prince, though, is Fraser's aforementioned video and Dadaist Cosey Fanny Tutti's photographs of herself posing naked

and spread-eagled. Even the media uproar Tutti let rip with her 1976 “Prostitute” exhibition at the ICA has been immortalised into art in the form of Xeroxed press clippings. The exhibition then connects this fixation on sex and idolatry to that of other taboos, such as Piotr Uklanski’s study of the glorification of fascism by Hollywood.

What makes Pop Life unique as an analysis of the pop art movement is that, rather than reheating the same old arguments about pop art as a form of critique of mass media culture, it illuminates its groundbreaking ways in extending fine art’s appeal beyond gallery walls. If this appeal entails the kind of escapism found in the entertainment and tabloid industries, then the timing of Pop Life might be fitting after all.

*Pop Life continues until 17 January 2010*