

VENUS
MANHATTAN LOS ANGELES

Nechvatal, Joseph, "Death and Death and Death by Warhol", *Hyperallergic*, June 22, 2016

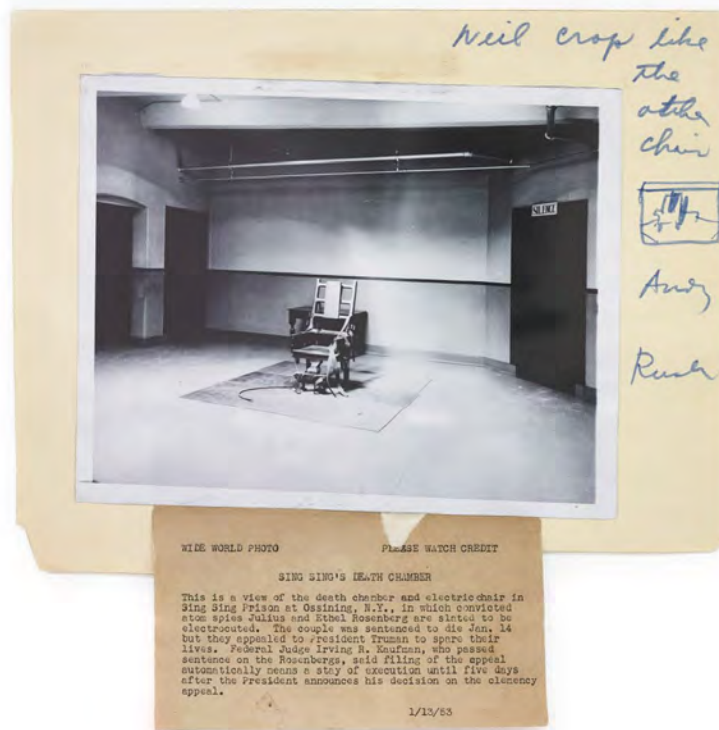
HYPERALLERGIC

Death and Death and Death by Warhol



Andy Warhol, "Twelve Electric Chairs" (1964), acrylic and silkscreen ink on canvas, 92 x 88 1/3 in (all images courtesy Venus Over Manhattan unless indicated otherwise)

[Venus Over Manhattan](#) is sparsely hung, dimly lit, and cavernous. The mood is somber, appropriate to 1% big money ventures and for contemplating [18 versions](#) of Andy Warhol's sinister "Little Electric Chair" (1964) canvases — one of which [recently sold](#) for about \$10.5 million. Welcome to the dark side of high-grade American celebrity culture.



Andy Warhol, "Photograph ('Sing Sing Death Chamber')" (1962–63), facsimile of original gelatin silver print on Manila file folder and ink, 20 5/8 x 11 13/16 in (click to enlarge)

The macabre, poignant, candy-colored, and provocative "Electric Chair" works make up one of Warhol's most significant series, executed as part of his grisly *Death and Disaster* production, as [conceived by Henry Geldzahler](#) along the lines of film noir. Warhol took the suggestion and snatched the electric chair image from a news wire service dated January 13, 1953, that was announcing the historic death sentences of [Julius and Ethel Rosenberg](#) at Sing Sing Correctional Facility in upstate New York. Seeing the *mise-en-scène* of some of the resultant paintings alongside the archived and annotated photograph, theatrically presented to the point of being tinged with religious sanctification, is one of the sardonic delights of this slim but formidable exhibition. Glowing portentously, this pretentious presentation perversely — if

pleasingly — gives to reproductive technology an aura of sanctified “original” that is visually manipulative and conceptually ridiculous. The Warhol drawing in the margin that instructs how he wishes to have the photograph cropped indicates that this document was Warhol’s second run of (re)presentation of the killing chair, from 1967, when he zoomed in on the chair/table hybrid form. “Big Electric Chair” (1967–68) is the only example of this second batch in the show. All other painted images are uncropped copies of the original 1953 photograph.

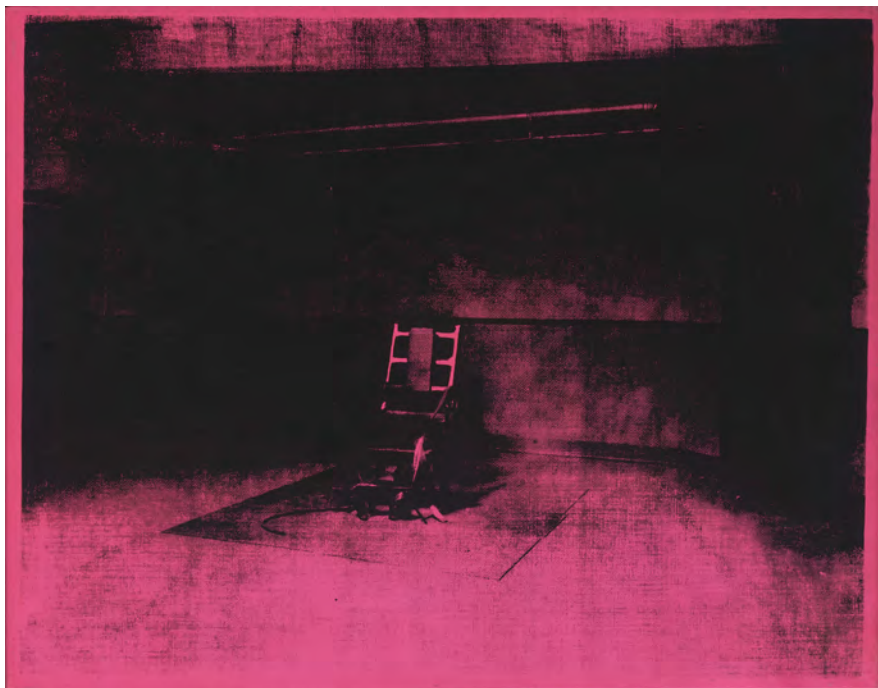


Installation view of “Photograph (‘Sing Sing Death Chamber’)” (1962–63)

In the violent, politically charged *Death and Disaster* series, Warhol waltzed into the artistic conversation know as the “death of painting.” He started in the summer of 1962 with the monumental “[129 Die in Jet](#)” (1962) — now in the collection of the Museum Ludwig in Cologne — in which he transferred an image from the June 4, 1962, edition of the *New York Mirror* by means of an opaque projector. It was painted by hand. Over the next few years, Warhol created a gripping series of gruesome paintings that transferred images of

suicide victims, the wreckage of smashed cars, atomic bomb explosions, civil rights protesters attacked by dogs, people unwittingly poisoned by contaminated tuna fish, and the electric chair onto canvas using silkscreen reproductive technology to great affect. Of course, Warhol himself suffered a near-death disaster when [Valerie Solanas](#) shot him in 1968, an incident that left him severely weakened.

Warhol created roughly 40 versions of “Electric Chair,” mostly executed in black silkscreen ink applied over “pretty” colored bases — from silver to the bright colors seen in “Twelve Electric Chairs” (1964), with its various flavors of green, orange, red, purple, shades of yellow, and, most perversely, bubblegum pink. All of these evocative and haunting canvases are identical in size and subject matter (clinical, state-sponsored death), though each silkscreen is unique in terms of its degree of black ink saturation.



Andy Warhol, “Little Electric Chair” (1964), acrylic and silkscreen ink on canvas, 22 x 28 in

There are six small single paintings on view, all of which share the same name (“Little Electric Chair”) date (1964) and size (22 x 28 inches). To add to the confusion, there are two almost identical pictures with an orange background (one apparently unsigned) and two signed greens. In all of them, the hot chair imagery feels under attack from the over-saturation of the cool black ink, transforming them from typical Pop art eye candy into stark, minimal masterpieces. Sitting in an empty room is an unoccupied, high-backed electric chair, visually humming with menace. Little leather straps dangle. Longer ones, with restraining buckles, hang at its sides. A cable runs like a snake out from underneath the seat. Strapped firmly in and attached to numerous electrodes, the condemned would be subjected to a rapid sequence of alternating currents that varied in voltage and duration. Behind the death chair, a small wooden table is shown against the back wall, and a barely visible sign that reads “Silence” can be seen in the top right corner of the composition. In most of these small single paintings, such as the fandango pink one (perhaps the show’s best), the over-inked silkscreening process blots out much of this detail. This noise increases — to the painting’s benefit — a deep and moody chiaroscuro in relationship to the all-over chromatic intensity.



Andy Warhol, "Big Electric Chair" (1967–68), acrylic and silkscreen ink on canvas, 54 x 74 in (click to enlarge)

In some other of these paintings, the clotting produced by the un-cleaned silkscreens less completely obscures the "Silence" sign. The only canvas that failed to work for me was the garish large one, "Big Electric Chair," which, by doubling the application of the chair imagery in two shades of green, makes the chair ephemeral. But that is not the problem with it. The image buzzes appropriately. What undercuts its power is the silly, distracting background, a trifurcated flat plane of clashing circus colors. Warhol left it unsigned for a reason, I believe, and it is only because it has been stamped official by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and the Estate of Andy Warhol that it made it to the light of day. Most are signed and dated on the verso. The exhibition at Venus is presented as an homage to the inaugural presentation of the terse "Electric Chair" paintings-as-monoprints — even though this unsigned "Big Electric Chair" was not part of it — that took place at the Jerrold Morris International Gallery in Toronto in March of 1965. It is

relevant that Warhol began producing his “Electric Chair” paintings in 1963, the same year that capital punishment was banned in New York State. Indeed, the chair seen in the paintings was the one that carried out New York State’s final execution. As such, these paintings of the empty death chamber are among his most important contributions to art as serious potency. Sometimes the visually magnetic pull of this horrifying death machine was repeated over and over in a single large work across the canvas, like patterned wallpaper. It is precisely this tense, uncanny leitmotif of repeated death — of intoxicating Pop, of emotional conditioning, of painting, of capital punishment — that permeates Warhol’s best pictures and charges them with allusion.



Installation view of Andy Warhol: Little Electric Chairs' at Venus Over Manhattan (courtesy VENUS New York and Andy Romer Photography)

[Andy Warhol: Little Electric Chairs](#) continues at [Venus Over Manhattan](#) (980 Madison Avenue, 3rd Floor, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through June 25.