



"King Kong" by Burton Morris

Pop Art's Beat Goes On

Modern-day pop artists, inspired by renowned masters from the 1960s and '70s, bring joy in difficult times

BY DEBBIE HAGAN
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Pop art is stronger than ever," said Jeff Jaffe, co-owner of Pop International Galleries in New York. Art dealers, publishers, artists, collectors and auction houses agree. They point to some of the biggest names in art today: Burton Morris, Clemens Brielis, Marco, James Rizzi, Fredrick Prescott, Romero Britto, Steve Kaufman and Charles Fazzino, among others. They all work in a Pop style, and they all have found success in today's art marketplace.

Sales of Pop's masters, like Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and Keith Haring, have skyrocketed, too. In 1998, Sotheby's broke records for Warhol sales, selling "Orange Marilyn" for \$17.3 million. In November 2002, Christie's set a new benchmark for Lichtenstein's sales, selling "Happy Tears" for \$7.1 million.

Why has Pop art returned so strongly, 47 years after its birth? Some say Pop has gained respect over time and proven to be a solid investment. Others

say it's simply time for the pendulum to swing back that way. Still others see striking parallels between now and the 1960s, with the answer resting deep in American's need to be comforted by familiar things.

"When Pop art made its way into the public eye, some of the issues that existed then are before us today," said Ruth-Ann Thorn of Crown Thorn Publishing in San Diego. War, anti-war protests, threats of foreign attack and fear of nuclear bombs were as ominous then as they are now, she pointed out.

"In serious times, we want a fun escape," Thorn said. "I don't want to look at a painting and think, 'Oh my goodness, we're going into a nuclear war.' Rather, Pop art is idealistic. It's a bit like going to Disneyland."

Alan Avery, co-owner of Trinity Gallery in Atlanta, agreed with Thorn in the sense that he links Pop's strong re-emergence to nationalistic thoughts that have surfaced since Sept. 11. Pop celebrates, without apologies, American culture, which includes

Continued on page 60

Pop Art's Beat Goes On

continued from the cover

commercial products, movies stars, fast food, childhood heroes and all aspects of everyday life. "The world equates this with American freedom," said Avery.

Last fall, Avery put together a colossal Pop show, "Pop Icons: Modern Masters." It included 50 works from Warhol, Joan Miro, Lichtenstein, Jim Dine and David Hockney. He sold three-fourths of the works, most for more than \$20,000. Avery said, "I think my timing was impeccable. Pop art is stronger than it's ever been."

Avery's success is ironic. A few years ago, he abhorred Pop art. "I thought it was a joke," he admitted. Customers urged him to read about it, and when he did, he was surprised. "It just shows that dealers can learn too," Avery laughed.

Pop art originated in 1956 when British artist Richard Hamilton created, "Just What Is It that Makes Today's Homes so Different, so Appealing?" The work is a collage of a nude woman with a bodybuilder proudly displaying a phallic lollipop (labeled "Pop"). Quirky objects, symbolic of false images, advertised perceptions and blatant consumerism, surround the figures.

A group of New York City artists—Warhol, Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, and Tom Wesselmann among them—propelled this idea, and Pop art evolved.

"I think it was a brilliant move on Andy Warhol's part to take graphic art, trivial objects, icons, like Kennedy, Monroe and Howdy Doody, and all the commercialism America is known for and turn that into art," said Avery about Pop's most revered icon. "This is the first time American artists weren't pooling from the European or Asian masters. It shows a comfort level in saying, 'Hey, this is who we are.'"

But Avery believes real Pop ended in the 1970s. "It's sort of idiotic to tag oneself onto a time period and movement and not be exchanging ideas from [the originators]," said Avery about contemporary tag-alongs. That makes as much sense, he said, as calling oneself a Dutch Renaissance painter.

"Of all the people continuing today, the only one I consider a true innovator is Jim Dine," said Avery.

As for up-and-comers, Avery sees one artist adding to Pop's statement and working in an original way. "That artist is Burton Morris," he said.

Pop and Morris

Burton Morris is the artist to watch, said many dealers. Last December, when featured at the grand opening of Pop N' Art gallery in Miami, Morris' work drew 3,000 people. He's had shows in Hollywood, Switzerland, Tokyo and New York, and he's preparing 50 originals for a special show at the Olympic Museum in Lausanne, Switzerland, next year.

"People know me as the guy whose work they've



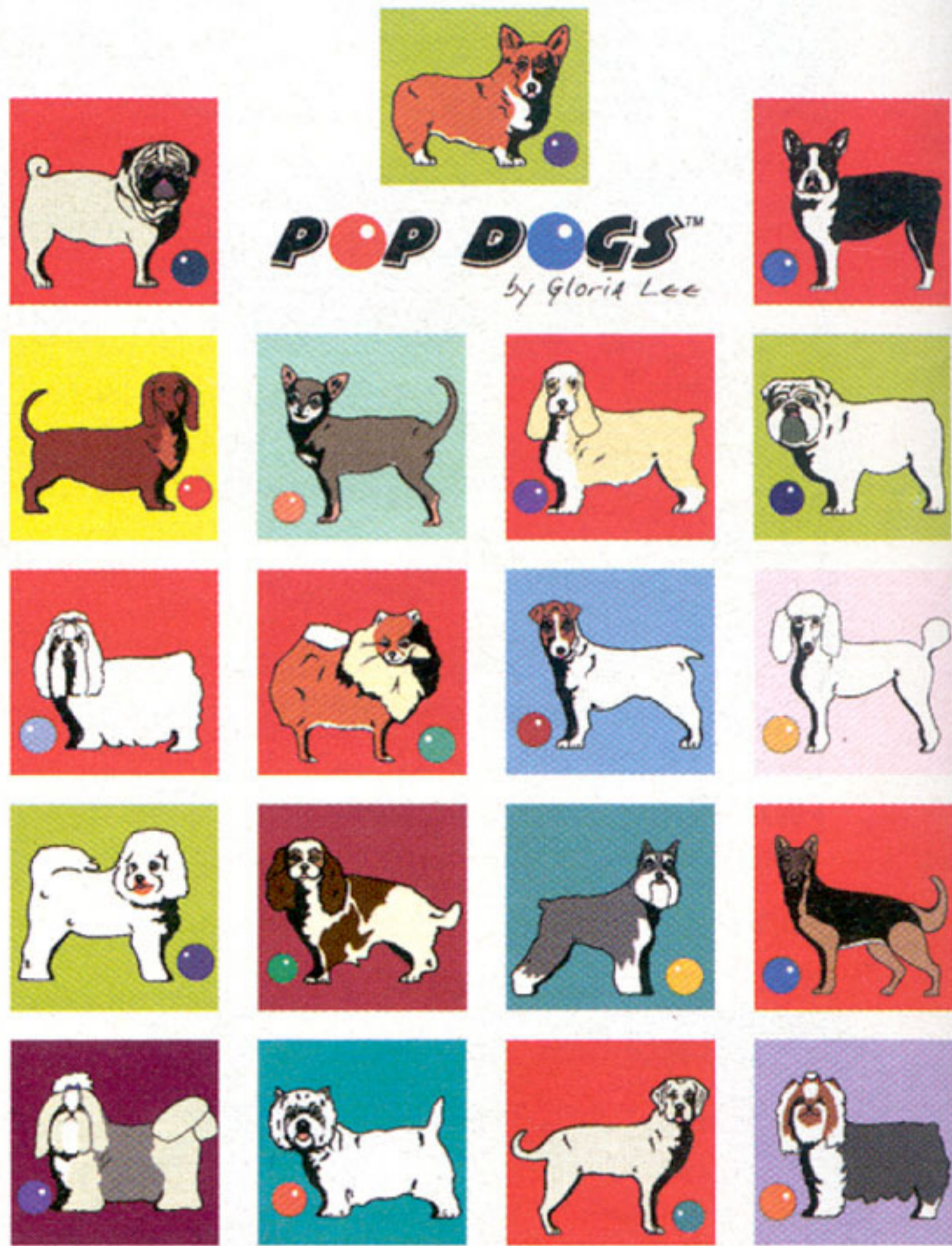
▲ Trinity Gallery featured Andy Warhol's screenprint "Mao" at its "Pop Icons: Modern Masters" show.

seen on "Friends," he said. His "Coffee Cup" and other works have appeared for seven years on the sitcom. Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston, among other Hollywood celebs, collect his work.

Though there are some parallels between Morris and Warhol, the younger artist flinches at being described as Pop. Both Morris and Warhol come from Pittsburgh and attended Carnegie Mellon University. And, oddly enough, Morris' wife is a Warhol relative. Because Morris sees himself a generation removed from Warhol, he refers, in his publicity materials, to his work as Post Pop. "I was born in 1964, and I grew

up with comic books and an exposure to color and graphics," said Morris, who remembers Captain Crunch and the Jolly Green Giant being his heroes.

"I like to make things that make me happy," said the artist who launched his career by creating giant icons of popcorn boxes. He loves popcorn in the way that Warhol loved Campbell's soup. Distinguishing his work from his contemporaries are cross-hatched lines of energy that infuse his flat icons with joyful movement. His line work reminds one of Keith Haring's radiant baby and of 16th-century artist Albrecht Durer's woodcuts and etchings.



▲ **“When Pop art made its way into the public eye, some of the same issues that existed then are before us today,”** said RuthAnn Thorn of Crown Thorn Publishing, publisher of Gloria Lee’s **“Pop Dogs.”**

At Morris’ first show, the public went wild over his popcorn icons. Thus, Morris moved onto other images: old-fashioned cars, jukeboxes, steaming coffee cups, a slice of pizza, a cupcake, a martini and King Kong clutching the Empire State Building. They are images that he said strike a chord with any red-blooded American.

Other Artists To Watch

“Though Burton Morris is the up-and-coming artist in the United States, Clemens Briels is known internationally,” said Tamar Erdberg of Side Road Publications in



Pop Art

continued from page 60

Miami, which publishes Briels' work. The Dutch artist uses Pop colors, CoBrA art influences and his personal philosophy (he calls "antipodism") to create joyful epiphanies. "Briels' own language talks about how we are acting, what we are doing and what makes us fun and funny," she said.

Briels an official artist for the 2002 Winter Olympics, and, last September, the Clemens Briels Art Centre in Holland opened in his honor. "At the opening, Sotheby's auctioned off one of his works for charity," said Erdberg. "Though it was estimated to sell for \$4,500, the work brought more than \$13,800."

Another well-known Pop-style artist is

▲ "In A New York State of Mind" by Charles Fazzino, a Pop artist who works in 3-D

▶ Roy Lichtenstein's "Reverie," a screenprint on smooth, white-wove paper sold at Trinity Gallery's recent "Pop Icons: Modern Masters" show for \$56,950 to a private collector.

Brooklyn-born James Rizzi. John Szoke Editions, publisher of Rizzi's work, warns that "Rizzi thinks of himself as an urban primitive," rather than simply a Pop artist.

Influenced by masters like Jean Dubuffet, Paul Klee and Pablo Picasso, Rizzi began his career as a street artist. "The subject of my work is a celebration of my happy childhood in New York," said Rizzi, who creates cartoon-like, three-dimensional, cut-out collages about the humorous side of love

and life in a big city. He is represented extensively by galleries worldwide.

"I think many of these [Pop-style] artists are taking the best elements of the 1960s and 1970s, combining them with their own ideas and giving a fresh dimension to their work, taking it a step further," said Nan Miller of Nan Miller Gallery in Rochester, N.Y. She publishes work by Brazilian artist Romero Britto, who describes himself as a Neo Pop Cubist.

"Britto's work deals with the simple things in life," said Miller about Britto's bold paintings that depict idyllic childhoods full of smiles, happy dogs, radiant sunrises and blooming flowers. Britto has been commissioned by Disney, Apple Computers, Pepsi Cola and IBM for work. He is collected by Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston, Arnold Schwarzenegger, the Guggenheims, Rothchilds, Kennedys and William Woodside, former president of the Whitney Museum.

Collectors Go Pop

It is not only the rich and famous who collect Pop and Pop-styled art. It appeals to a broad cross-section of people, said dealers.

Continued on page 64



"The Floating Islands of the Caribbean" by Clemens Briels measures 22 by 20 inches and retails for \$700. Briels calls his personal art philosophy "antipodism."

Pop Art

continued from page 62

Ron Valdez, a buyer for Hamilton Selway Fine Art of West Hollywood, Calif., which specializes in works by Warhol, Lichtenstein and Haring, said he sees two main types of Pop art buyers. "There are collectors who remember those times. Then there are young people who think it's a cool to have them," said Valdez. "Young people understand Pop art before they understand Jackson Pollock, Ellsworth Kelly and Cy Twombly. It's their introduction to fine art—the first step over the threshold."

Pop International Galleries in SoHo caters to this latter group. "The perfect demographic for us is the young professional who has never bought a piece of art," said Jaffe. "That individual might not be educated in art history, but that person knows he or she needs to own good pieces of art." Indeed, education plays a significant role in the gallery's sales.

"We are very interested in bringing people into the world of collecting without the fear of intimidation that other art brings," said Jaffe. "We find that people who begin collecting with us stay with us, and eventually they buy some heavy-duty materials."

Jaffe added that there's a collecting group to watch. "Children are some of the first to come bounding through the door," said Jaffe. They purchase art with their Bar Mitzvah or birthday money or request it as gifts. "We're playing popular music, and the artwork we're selling is not stuffy or intimidating. So it's very accessible," he said.

Erdberg tells of a 13-year-old girl receiving a Bat Mitzvah gift at the opening of Pop N' Art Gallery in Miami. The girl had

been collecting "Wizard of Oz" memorabilia since she was two years old. To nurture her collecting spirit, her parents bought her "There's No Place Like Home," Dorothy's glittering ruby red slippers, colorfully painted by Burton Morris.

When Morris presented the painting to her, the girl cried. "She responded in such a heartfelt way, it brought tears to everyone's eyes," said Erdberg. "This is something this girl will treasure all her life, and now she is on the road to collecting art."

Gallery Benefits

"Pop can be short for a lot of things, and one of those things is popular," said Julie Maner, director of business affairs for Museum Editions in New Rochelle, N.Y. The company publishes works by Charles Fazzino. "All art appeals to people on an emotional level, but Pop art is experienced on



◀ “For the Two of Us” by Romero Britto measures 18 by 24 inches and is available in an edition of 100 on paper and 100 gesso.

an experiential level—it comes from our daily lives.”

For that reason, she said, art in the Pop genre is always changing. “It’s a way of keeping up with the times,” said Maner about

why galleries should be carrying it. “It’s a means of keeping in touch with culture.” Thorn of Crown Thorn Publishing added, “What I think is great about Pop art is that it’s cross cultural. It’s not making a political statement. It’s the best art form for anyone who might be intimidated by art.”

She refers to her “Pop Dog” series, created by Gloria Lee. It features 25 different dog breeds in electric Pop colors. Dealers put them in the window because they’re colorful, eye-catching and whimsical. “They stop people in the streets,” she said.

It’s easy to understand why Pop art sales are strong, say dealers in this genre. “The bright colors give us hope,” said Miller. “People are looking for something with a happy joyous note. Pop art helps gives them that lift they need in life.” **ABN**