

Roy Lichtenstein's *Time* Magazine Cover of Robert F. Kennedy: His Working Method



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after Roy Lichtenstein

Background

The Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery (NPG) holds approximately 2,000 objects of original art created for reproduction on the covers of *Time* magazine. In 1968 *Time* commissioned pop artist Roy Lichtenstein to make two covers at the same time: a portrait of Robert F. Kennedy during his presidential campaign and picture of a smoking gun for a feature story on gun violence. Lichtenstein rarely accepted commissions or made portraits, but Kennedy had mobilized the antiwar movement with his campaign and the artist admired his energy. Lichtenstein accepted the magazine commissions although he thought the process a bit too commercial. This amused him because some critics thought his art work too commercial.¹ Kennedy appeared on the May 24, 1968, *Time* cover and was assassinated a few weeks later. Ironically, the image of the gun ran on the cover shortly after.

A copy of the issue of *Time* and the color proofs created for the Kennedy cover were selected by Portrait Gallery Chief Curator Brandon Fortune and Senior Curator of Prints and Drawings Wendy Wick Reaves for their exhibition "Face Value" (April 2014 to January 2015). This selection prompted further examination of the preparatory drawings, the color proofs, and the magazine cover. The Lichtenstein Foundation did not have detailed information about the drawings for this image and was interested in documenting all associated materials. Lichtenstein created the design for the magazine cover in four color separations (cyan, magenta, yellow, and black) in his signature comic-book style. The artist worked out the design in a series of black-and-white preparatory drawings, photo reproductions, photographs, and collage. In 1989 *Time* magazine asked Lichtenstein to make a color lithograph of the Robert Kennedy portrait for the Portrait Gallery, possibly due to the instability of the materials. Prior to this, the color proofs, made of acetate and dyes,² and the magazine cover were the only extant examples of the final image.

This poster addresses the artist's process in creating the color separations for the printing of the magazine cover. The artist's method was similar to the way he approached his paintings whereby the drawings described the final design and color choices for the artwork.

Process

The artist worked from photographs of Robert Kennedy, enlarged and projected onto a wall to create his primary drawing.³ There is one black-and-white primary drawing on illustration board and four black-and-white overlay drawings on translucent paper executed in felt-tip markers over graphite, some with brushed matte paint and collage elements. The primary drawing was used to create a photo reproduction that served as the underlay image for the overlay drawings created for each separate color. The sixth object is a collage mock-up of two photographs with hand-applied colored markers and a sample of Lichtenstein's printed dot paper. The drawings were photographed with a large-format graphic arts camera. The film was used to make the printing plates for the magazine. The color proofs, four sheets of acetates and dyes, were processed, overlaid, and registered for the artist's approval prior to making the printing plates.⁴



Photograph of Kennedy on p. 22 of the magazine.



Primary drawing, dimensions: 23 15/16 x 18 5/8"

Media: Two types of felt-tip marker, one blue-black⁵ and one black, over graphite pencil with adhered paper corrections and erasures on clay-coated, paper-faced illustration board. Printer's registration tapes, pencil marks, and instructions in margins in pencil: BLACK ONLY, WORK/IN COMBINATION WITH OVERLAY NO.1 BUT DELETE LINES AS SHOWN ON/ BLACK STAT



The photo reproductions of the key or primary drawing serve as underlays to the overlay drawings. All underlay reproductions are adhered overall to four-ply matboard..



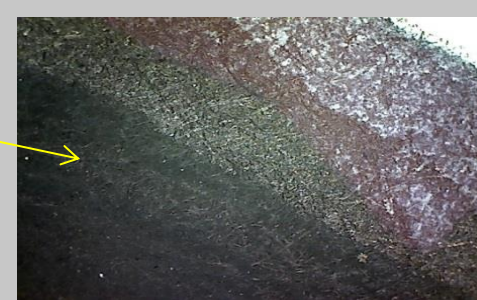
overlay drawing #1 black

Media: Two types of felt-tip marker, one blue-black and one black, over graphite pencil on light- to medium-weight white wove paper. Strikethrough is visible on the verso in the corresponding area of the markers on the recto. Printer's registration tapes, pencil marks, and instructions in margins. Instructions in the top margin are Lichtenstein's,⁶ and those in the bottom margin are the printer's. R.L.'s notations in pencil: Version II-BLACK LINES/ WITH YELLOW; printer's notations in pencil: SOLID BLACK LINES/ SOLID Y IN BURST/ AROUND HEAD. The overlay is adhered to the matboard at the top recto corners with strips of masking tape.



overlay drawing #2 blue

Media: Two types of felt-tip marker, one blue-black and one black, brushed matte black paint (Magna*) over graphite pencil with adhered printed dot paper on light- to medium-weight white wove paper. Strikethrough is visible on the verso in the corresponding area of the markers on the recto. Printer's registration tapes, pencil marks, and instructions in margins. Printer's notations in pencil: SOLID BLU/ 70% RED (the red color is 70% screened in the blue areas of the final design). The overlay is adhered to the matboard at the top recto corners with strips of masking tape.



detail of overlay #2

*Solubility tests, appearance, and the artist's use in his paintings suggest Magna (solubility tests for matte paint, insoluble in water but soluble in xylene). It is the author's intention to confirm this observation with further analysis. It seems the artist used the brushed, matte paint to cover larger areas in a more uniform and efficient manner.

Acknowledgments:
Jim Barber, curator of Time Collection, Dru Dowdy, editorial director, Mark Gulezian, photographer, CindyLou Molnar, head of conservation, Wendy Wick Reaves, senior curator of prints and drawings, Ana Spoljaric, digital imaging intern, Tibor Waldner, chief of design, and staff—all NPG; Helena Wright, curator of graphic arts, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution; Tatiana Ausema, research conservator, Hirshhorn Museum, Smithsonian Institution; Avis Berman and Andrea Theil, Lichtenstein Foundation; Margaret Holben Ellis, director, Thaw Conservation Center; Roy Hopkins and Randy Swanson, retired employees at RR Donnelley Co.; Octavian Cretu, senior account executive, Linemark Printing.

Roy Lichtenstein, BOMB 14/Winter 1986, ART by April Bernard and Mimi Thompson

MT: We saw those covers you did for *Time* magazine, including one of Bobby Kennedy; they were great. Did you like doing that, having a wide audience?

RL: Yes, I like the big audience. I also did a gun cover—the issue about gun control. In fact, I made them both at the same time, and then Kennedy was shot. Which was pretty shocking. I had done the gun before he was shot and they published it afterward.

MT: That's so strange, isn't it? It almost makes you feel like you have too much control.

RL: I know. It's just good that I don't have that control, really. There wouldn't be many critics left.

AB: You'd be great at propaganda.

MT: Then there's that cover you did for *Art in America*—the World's Fair.

RL: With people from Saturn at the World's Fair.

MT: Do you like working on things like that?

RL: I really don't think so. They have to depict more than I'm interested in depicting. They have to tell stories; they're too specific. More illustration—in retrospect they look like commercial art, which is what everybody thinks my work looks like, anyway (laughter).



overlay drawing #3 red

Media: Two types of felt-tip marker, one blue-black and one black, brushed matte black paint (Magna) over graphite pencil with adhered printed dot paper on light- to medium-weight white wove paper. Strikethrough is visible on the verso in the corresponding area of the markers on the recto. R.L.'s notations in pencil: RED--REMOVE RED DOTS FROM UNDER/BLACK LINES IF NECESSARY; printer's notations in pencil: SOLID Y, SOLID R. The two strips of red tape at the top right margin are the artist's choices for color. One is a darker and one is a lighter red. The author surmises the light red is the desired color when solid, darker red is overlaid in registration with solid yellow.



red proof



overlay drawing #4 yellow

Media: Two types of felt-tip marker, one blue-black and one black, over graphite pencil on light- to medium-weight white wove paper. Strikethrough is visible on the verso in the corresponding area of the markers on the recto. R.L.'s notations in pencil: YELLOW; printer's notations in pencil: SOLID Y



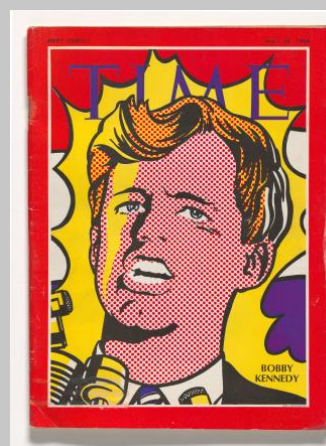
yellow proof



Mock-up photographs with collage and sample of printed dot paper adhered to matboard.

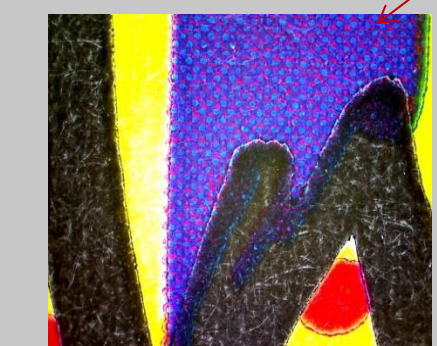


Photographs taped on studio wall (one collage mock-up with felt-tip marker) and the other with *Time* logo.



Time magazine cover May 24, 1968

"I thought your cover picture was really marvelous," Kennedy wrote the artist, "but I don't have red spots all over my face,⁸ 11 1/8 x 8 3/8."



letterpress illustration (cover detail)

Red is 70% screened in areas of flat blue. *Time* was printed by RR Donnelley Co. It was letterpress until the advent of web offset printing in the early 1970s.⁹



assembled proofs

Acetate with colored dyes, 23 x 16 1/2". Kennedy's hair was parted on the wrong side but *Time* decided not to have Lichtenstein redo the design.⁷



1989 lithograph

Color lithograph on Somerset paper. Blind stamp: "American Atelier," in lower left corner. In lower right corner: ed. "1/2," artist's signature and date, "89" in pencil, 26 1/2 x 20 3/8."

Conclusions and Future Research

While working on this poster the author realized the importance of communicating with those who were involved in commercial printing practices no longer in use. These were complex practices performed by skilled tradesmen from the mid to late 20th century while the printing technology went through many transformations. Artists such as Lichtenstein and Warhol straddled the line of fine and commercial art, thus requiring research into these practices. Also realized is the need for more examination, research, and analysis of Lichtenstein's drawing media, and to communicate these findings to other conservators, curators, and the Lichtenstein Foundation.

Notes:

- Roy Lichtenstein, BOMB 14/Winter 1986, ART by April Bernard and Mimi Thompson.
- E-mail communication and phone conversation with retired RR Donnelley Co. employee Roy Hopkins.
- Henri Zerner, *The Graphic Art of Roy Lichtenstein* (Cambridge, Mass.: Fogg Art Museum, 1975), p. 13.
- E-mail communication with Octavian Cretu of Linemark Printing.
- Roy Lichtenstein: *The Black and White Drawings, 1961-1968*, (New York: Morgan Library and Museum, 2010), p. 84.
- E-mail communication with Andrea Theil of the Lichtenstein Foundation.
- Notes from *Time* magazine cover coordinator Rosemary Frank, NPG curatorial file.
- Telegram from Robert Kennedy to Roy Lichtenstein, Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, New York City.
- E-mail communication with retired RR Donnelley Co. employee Randy Swanson.