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## The Reemergence of Celebrity Imagery in Twenty-First Century Art

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The Reemergence of Celebrity Imagery in Twenty-First Century Art

by

Maria Olsson Skalin

A thesis project submitted in conformity  
with the requirements for the  
Master's Degree in Contemporary Art  
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2020

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## Abstract

The frequent reappearance of artistic celebrity imagery and portraits is something to which I have paid particular attention in the last five years of having studied art and art history, and from having worked intimately with contemporary works of art in the commercial art sector. The artist who I was particularly taken with who has for years been relying on found images of celebrities as source material for his art is Sam McKinniss, and my fascination with him is what led me to pursue this study. Observing the trajectory of McKinniss' career, as well as having interest in depicting the images of celebrities in my own artistic endeavors brought me to the question of whether artworks featuring celebrities is something which has had a consistent timeline over the history of contemporary art, or whether such subject matter has had particular momentums. Documenting and analyzing a historical survey of how artists have captured the likenesses of celebrities over the course of contemporary art led me to discover that artists have for decades been influencing the next generations to paint celebrities. With movements such as fashion photography carrying influence into Pop Art, and both movements having ties to the high society portrait of the early twentieth century, celebrity imagery is something that has been highly saturated and become even more so with the introduction of the Internet and Social Media. The depiction of celebrities in works of art have followed parallel trends with the way that the public have treated celebrities for centuries, with reportages in the press and the rise of the paparazzi and tabloid media causing celebrities to become central to the day to day lives of many people around the world.

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## Introduction

When considering the term “celebrity” in an artistic context, what first comes to mind is how many artists have themselves been inserted into the category of celebrity over the last century, if not longer. With artists such as Andy Warhol—who famously coined the expression “fifteen minutes of fame,”<sup>1</sup>—and pop culture artist Jeff Koons who has been embroiled in many a controversy, artists have themselves become the subject of fame with regards to both their artistic achievements and their public personas. However, what I seek to examine rather than the celebrated lives of the artists themselves is the manner in which these artists have treated celebrities within their works of art. To guide my research, I will provide a survey of how and why celebrity imagery in art has had its peaks and troughs over the course of contemporary art history. On the path to achieving fame, several artists have themselves intermingled in celebrity circles that have led them to work and socialize closely with celebrities. Therefore, it would only make sense that celebrities and figures of high society should often become the subjects of renowned works of art. Additionally, a noticeable shift has occurred since the early 1990s where the images of celebrities used in works of art have been taken from secondary found sources such as paparazzi images and film stills.

Celebrity portraiture, or rather the renewed use of the celebrity image as source material in a work of art is something which has unexpectedly cropped up in the last two decades of the twenty-first century. What has recently emerged instead of the commissioned high society portrait—popularized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth with the intention of instilling the aura of wealth and nobility in its viewers—is a reliance on found images. Many of these images

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<sup>1</sup> Warhol, Andy. *Moderna Museet 1968 Exhibition Catalogue*. Boston Book & Art, 1970.

reference or make use of new media, technological innovation and a rapidly increasing obsession with celebrities, tabloids, and social media and all related spectacular elements. The public's rapt consumption of media featuring celebrities has driven artists to pay special attention to the irony, ridiculousness and sheer crassness of how saturated celebrities have become in the average person's everyday life. The artist of the twenty-first century that most evidently takes this into account is Sam McKinniss. Much of McKinniss' work recreate and further dramatize what are considered to be "iconic" paparazzi photographs, movie covers and similar material in both a critique and celebration of the American entertainment industry. In addition to McKinniss, I will be examining the work of Elizabeth Peyton, who takes special interest in celebrities and characters to whom she feels she has a personal connection, as well as the work of Karen Kilimnik and Laura Collins, whose work also features images taken from paparazzi photography.

To tackle the argument surrounding the ways that celebrity imagery has become popularized by contemporary artists in the past few decades, it is necessary for me to turn to the pioneers of the marriage of celebrityhood and art. It is firstly essential to include high society portrait artists such as John Singer Sargent in my overall study, as Sargent provided a new dimension to how commissioned art played a major role in the dominance of portraiture in the early twentieth century. Next, Richard Avedon of the world of fashion photography is a vital player in initiating a refined approach to the treatment of celebrities in photographs and studio portraits. Finally, and as previously mentioned, the Pop Artists cannot be ignored when it comes to the topic of how celebrities mingle with contemporary art. A major point which I will further illustrate is that were it not for Andy Warhol, the Western world might not treat celebrities with the same amount of obsessive attention that they do today. Outside of the sphere of high art, one of the key members of my argument without whom this thesis would not be made possible is the

paparazzo. The emergence and evolution of the paparazzo is what has led to the rise of the tabloid industry. Notable examples of incidents with which the paparazzi have been highly involved in historicizing are the death of Princess Diana, the photographing of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis following the assassination of her husband, John F. Kennedy, and the photographing of “it girls” such as Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears and Paris Hilton during the height of their partying and public displays of intoxication and raucous behavior.

After fully examining this historical survey of celebrity-based artworks and media, what will eventually arise that demonstrates how celebrity imagery in art has reemerged is the introduction of the Internet to the world of art, and how this new gateway of accessibility in spreading information and creating new communities has spurred the connection between the public, artists, and celebrities. From the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, a never before seen movement has occurred in which the entire world has become plugged into every ongoing cultural development or action taken by notable figures and celebrities, leading pop culture to entirely dominate the public gaze. The evolution of the internet, coupled with the capitalist boom of the early twentieth century and the subsequent recession of 2008, is what will culminate my thesis and argument surrounding why artists are so taken with celebrities now more than ever.



## Chapter One: Photographing Celebrities

Photography has had a central role in the saturation of celebrityhood within mainstream society and the consequential desire for artists to capture the likenesses of famed figures. In this vein, it is useful to consider a citation from professor of sociology Chris Rojek's *Celebrity*, which is an in-depth examination of the cult of celebrity. Rojek states: "One of the key elements in making staged celebrity prominent in society was the invention of photography. The public image is logically crucial in the elevation and dissemination of the public face."<sup>2</sup> Rojek's words can be directly applied to the three modes of photography which will be examined in this chapter: fashion photography, staged studio portraiture, and paparazzi photography. All three genres of photography can be considered a part of the evolution of celebrity imagery in art due to their often shared subject matter of socially notable people, which have since become source material or inspiration for artists wishing to emulate the same staged or candid scenarios captured in such compositions. Additionally, staged photography studio portraits cannot be examined in full justice without background being provided regarding the popularization of the painted high society portrait. The timeline of how each of these genres have had their peaks can be traced quite linearly. The high society portrait was in mode throughout the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth. In the beginning of the twentieth century and throughout several following decades, fashion photography began to gain momentum as well as the studio photograph or portrait of celebrities that became all the rage with photographers like Richard Avedon and, later, with Andy Warhol's photographs and screen prints. Finally, the paparazzi photograph, while originally being traced back to the early twentieth century, gained its name from the Fellini movie "La Dolce Vita" of 1960, where the name "paparazzo" was coined from a

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<sup>2</sup> Rojek, Chris. *Celebrity*. Routledge, 2010. 125.

character named as such, whose primary role in the movie was to chase and photograph celebrities.<sup>3</sup> However, the paparazzi photograph can really be said to have had its defining moment in the very end of the twentieth century and reaching its peak in the early twenty-first, with the uprising of the tabloid magazine and reportage websites such as *Perez Hilton* or *TMZ*. Additionally, the paparazzi movement reached its peak momentum with the death of Princess Diana, and the major ethical debate that ensued surrounding the often intrusive and borderline dangerous behavior of paparazzi.<sup>4</sup> By looking at this history, it becomes clear how today's artists reference the very beginnings of how celebrities have always maintained a presence in photography and portraiture, having such immense presences in our mainstream culture that they have even bled into today's artistic trends.

The growth of fashion photography can largely be accredited to the popularity of the high society portrait, an established symbol of wealth and power that existed for centuries before largely falling out of favor in the early- to-mid-twentieth century when the decadent attitude of high society was replaced by the need for privacy and security among the rich and famous. One of the most notable high society painters in recent surveys of art history is the American portrait painter John Singer Sargent, whose career was most prolific in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The work of Sargent can certainly be understood as having a significant impact on how portraiture has been treated since, specifically that of celebrity portraits taken by photographers such as Richard Avedon or Man Ray. An example of this can be seen in Fig. 1, which is a portrait of British noblewoman Lady Helen Vincent, Viscountess d'Abernon painted

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<sup>3</sup> Fellini, Federico. *La Dolce Vita*. 1960. Film: © Astor Pictures Corporation.

<sup>4</sup> Samuelson, Kate. "How Princess Diana's Death Changed the British Media." *Time*, Time, 27 Aug. 2017: <http://time.com/4914324/princess-diana-anniversary-paparazzi-tabloid-media/> (accessed on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

by Sargent in 1904 and currently housed in the Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama. This oil painting embodies every quality of a classic high society portrait with the intention of evoking opulence, luxury and importance; the voluminous, silken sleeves of the dress, the ruby red lips contrasted against porcelain skin as a symbol of beauty and self-maintenance, and the richness of the reds in the drapery of the painting's background are all symbols of this. As Sargent's own fame was on the rise in the early twentieth century, his portraits became highly sought after and were increasingly commissioned. Having Sargent's name attached to a high society portrait raised its value and symbolism of wealth and importance to even higher planes.<sup>5</sup> In this way, the high society portrait of this time can easily be considered to be the foundation of how artists became celebrities in their own right, and being important enough to have a portrait of oneself painted by such an artist was an indication of one's own fame.

Although high society portraiture was a way for the upper crust to showcase their affluence and significance within society, celebrity photographs taken by well-known photographers share the results of Sargent's portraiture in demonstrating how artists have become members of the cult of celebrity. This can be seen in the case of the photographs taken by Richard Avedon and Andy Warhol's polaroid photographs. It can also be argued that Avedon is responsible for bringing art photography, fashion photography and general celebrity portraiture together, blurring the distinct lines between the so-called "low culture" of the Hollywood celebrity and the high culture of art and photography.<sup>6</sup> Avedon was a longtime photographer both for Harper's Bazaar and Vogue and therefore clearly operated mainly in the commercial side of fashion photography, though today his more popular photographs were those taken in his

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<sup>5</sup> Ratcliff, Carter, and John Singer Sargent. *John Singer Sargent*. Abbeville Press, 1982.

<sup>6</sup> Avedon, Richard, and Maria Morris Hambourg. *Richard Avedon Portraits*. Abrams, 2002.

private practice. Much of Avedon's work is minimalistic, focusing entirely on the subjects of his portraits and their individual natures, which is a far cry from the extremely superficial and retouched side of commercial photography that most consumers associate with the standard fashion photography magazine. One example of such a portrait is Fig. 2, taken by Avedon of Marilyn Monroe, one of the most ubiquitous subjects depicted in celebrity-based portraits. In this photograph, Monroe looks off to her left with an ambiguous expression, demonstrating Avedon's ability to capture the soul and raw emotion of his subject with no fuss or need for background noise. This photograph of Monroe has circulated at multiple photography auctions, with editions still being printed today by Avedon's posthumous foundation, the Richard Avedon Foundation<sup>7</sup>. One such print belongs to the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (see Fig. 2.), which further demonstrates how fashion photographers are an essential component in the history of picture-making and introduction of pop culture into high art. Actress and pop culture icon Marilyn Monroe was also among Avedon's sitters. In reference to Avedon's photographing of Monroe in his studio in 1957, Avedon said in his own words:

For hours she danced and sang and flirted and did this thing that's—she did Marilyn Monroe. And then there was the inevitable drop. And when the night was over and the white wine was over and the dancing was over, she sat in the corner like a child, with everything gone. I saw her sitting quietly without expression on her face, and I walked towards her but I wouldn't photograph her without her knowledge of it. And as I came with the camera, I saw that she was not saying no.<sup>8</sup>

In this manner, Avedon managed to capture one of the most photographed stars with her public façade down, producing an image that provides a rare glimpse of her inner life. According to writer and curator Maria Morris Hambourg, Avedon was taken with celebrities for their

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<sup>7</sup> “Richard Avedon - Marilyn Monroe, New York City, May 6, 1957.” 2018. Auction Record. Courtesy of Phillips: <http://www.phillips.com/detail/RICHARD-AVEDON/NY040318/21> (accessed on October 12th, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Avedon, Richard and Maria Morris Hambourg. *Richard Avedon Portraits*. Unnumbered Foreword page.

theatrical nature, writing: “Initially drawn to actors, Avedon also sought out people with a highly cultivated sense of themselves as characters—subjects who could collaborate with him in the creation of an impromptu performance.”<sup>9</sup> Essentially, it was performativity and the desire to stage and capture pure expression that lay at the heart of Avedon’s portraits, so it was only natural that he would be drawn to actors whose careers were defined by theatre. This theatricality with a raw edge is something that would continue on with the work of Andy Warhol, whom Avedon worked with and involved in his portraiture.

If the work of Avedon and other fashion photographers demonstrate the borrowing of source material from high culture, the opposite can be said for paparazzi photography, which arguably utilizes the most low and crude material taken from tabloid magazines. Whereas fashion photography is particularly notable for bridging the gap between high art and celebrity culture, paparazzi photography has allowed for significant “moments” to be created that have since become cemented in pop culture history. Such moments include a photograph taken of Britney Spears during her infamously reported “mental breakdown” of 2008, which captures Spears wielding an umbrella moments before swinging it at the vehicle beside her (see Fig. 3). This photograph was taken following Spears being photographed having her head shaved completely bald. As writer Kim McNamara explains in her oeuvre Paparazzi:

The images of Spears in a small Los Angeles hairdressing salon were published in newspapers and magazines worldwide. As Navarre alludes, this was at the time “the celebrity story of the decade”, enabled by a team of photographers trained on Spears over a long period.<sup>10</sup>

According to McNamara, the importance of the photograph lies in the paparazzi being responsible for capturing and thus creating “the celebrity story of the decade,” and Spears’

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<sup>9</sup> Avedon, Richard and Maria Morris Hambourg. *Richard Avedon Portraits*. Unnumbered Foreword page.

<sup>10</sup> McNamara, Kim. *Paparazzi: Media Practices and Celebrity Culture*. Polity, 2016. 30.

breakdown was undoubtedly a defining moment for pop culture which has lasted the entirety of the decade and is still highly talked about today. This photograph is not only essential to celebrity history, but also is a quintessential example of how photographs taken of celebrities by paparazzi have taken on their own narratives and thereby occupy a memorable space in American social history. As I will examine in my later chapter regarding the treatment of celebrities by more recent artists of the twenty-first century, it will become evident how paparazzi photographs have since emerged as a particular point of reference by artists who wish to capture the way that celebrities are so imbued within the lives of the everyday person. The photograph of Spears is only a small piece of a much larger puzzle regarding the way that paparazzi photography completely changed pop culture over the course of the late twentieth century and into the early twenty-first.

According to Rojek, Spears represents what he refers to as a “celeactor”. Rojek defines this term as “...a fictional character who is either momentarily ubiquitous or becomes an institutionalized feature of popular culture. Celeactors are adjuncts of the mass-media. They cater to public appetite for a character type that sums up the times.”<sup>11</sup> The concept of the celeactor is extremely relevant to my theory that celebrities are formulated by the public into fictitious characters due to the outward personas and behaviorisms that they allow to be exposed, thereby allowing the public to create an entire mythology or storyline around their life and personality. Taking this theory a step further, the paparazzi photograph therefore represents a vessel for the shaping of the celebrity as a celeactor, whereby the paparazzi capture extremely brief moments that are dissected and exploited by the tabloid magazines and general public alike. The celeactor becomes an icon of a real-life mythology created by the public who watches their every move,

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<sup>11</sup> Rojek. *Celebrity*.

which is exactly why it would make sense that celebrities should become figures observed in artistic capacities, as many artists have for many centuries been occupied with capturing the likeness of important figures of religion, mythology, royal families, and the like. The celeactor is merely a representation of today's version of such figures, with the dedication to the traditional school of portrait painting having shifted gears to an overall concern with keeping up with current events and trends.

As tabloid media was gaining momentum during the early- to mid-twenty-first century, the world's attention to celebrities was rapidly reaching a peak reminiscent of the Pop Art era that is clearly reflected in the art of today. Enough time has lapsed for artists to be able to revisit significant celebrity incidents that have become essential to the generational nostalgia that is now being experienced as a byproduct of paparazzi photography and tabloid media. McNamara elaborates:

The most recent phase in this review of the emergence of the paparazzi industry concerns a period running from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s. Often referred to within the industry as 'the gold rush', this was a time, prior to the global financial crisis, when the American economy was enjoying a long boom...It was also a good time for the sales of tabloid entertainment magazines, gossipy titles sold on newsstands and supermarket check-outs that focused on the human interest side of celebrities...<sup>12</sup>

According to McNamara, the rise of celebrity in the early twenty-first century runs parallel with the success of the American economy at the time, which is significant to the manner in which the paparazzi photography and tabloid magazine market have flourished alongside each other.

Additionally, this gives more insight into how the cult of celebrity has so much present-day influence and why there is a great sense of nostalgia for the early twenty-first century felt within

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<sup>12</sup> McNamara. *Paparazzi*. 26.

recent works of art that are dedicated to capturing the likenesses of celebrities. The years immediately preceding the global financial crisis can be remembered by many as a time of capitalist decadence and ostentatious behavior, something which can be particularly observed in the behavior of celebrities such as Spears and Paris Hilton. What can therefore be seen in the way that artists of today reference paparazzi photography is a yearning for a more carefree era, one in which celebrities publicly displayed their exploitation of their own inhibitions, even doing so purposely in many cases.

The period of the early twenty-first century where paparazzi photography was at the height of its success can be traced back to a trend in particular which dictates who was most often photographed by the paparazzi and why. This trend is more specifically directly related to the phenomenon of the young “it girl.” The it girl has been a pervasive figure throughout history, and is defined as “a fashionable young woman who receives a lot of attention in the newspapers and who many people admire, especially for a short period of time.”<sup>13</sup> The inclusion of temporality in the definition of an it girl is particularly important to the inner workings of celebrityhood in general and the way that celebrities are treated by the public and subsequently by the artist who captures them in painted form. Namely, notable examples of it girls through history are Marilyn Monroe, Marie Antoinette, and newer additions such as Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan and Britney Spears. These women have all been the subjects of painted portraits at one point in time or another, either for which they have sat or, more recently, have been taken from paparazzi photographs. The majority of these celebrities have had transient fame during their

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<sup>13</sup> “IT GIRL (Noun) American English Definition and Synonyms: Macmillan Dictionary.” *IT GIRL (Noun) American English Definition and Synonyms | Macmillan Dictionary*: <http://www.macmillandictionary.com/us/dictionary/american/it-girl> (accessed on August 14th, 2020).



careers but have all had memorable impressions upon history that are not easily forgotten, especially with the existence of photography and painting keeping their images alive. The paparazzi can definitely be said to be primary operators in spurring the length and extremity of the it girl status of a celebrity, carrying their image to media sources who tear at or uplift these young women at their own whim to play to the public's craving for drama-filled stories. Of course, many of the it girl characteristics that Lohan, Spears, Hilton and many other celebrities possess are public knowledge largely by their own doing, with being spotted and photographed by the paparazzi becoming a mechanism utilized as a way to keep their fame alive and tangible. It is because of their it girl status that the aforementioned celebrities have become such cemented icons and celeactors, and why they have been portrayed in works of art and other creative modes of expression since the height of their fame. The creation of the it girl has arisen not only from the public's arguably perverse fascination and obsession with youth, femininity and beauty, but also from the need for the creation of a character to worship as a way to focus on something outside of one's perceived reality. As Rojek explains:

Celebrities are part of the culture of distraction today. Society requires distraction so as to deflect consciousness from both the fact of structured inequality and the meaningless of existence following the death of God...Celebrity and spectacle fill the vacuum. They contribute to the cult of distraction that valorizes the superficial, the gaudy, the domination of commodity culture.<sup>14</sup>

For Rojek, the public's treatment of celebrities functions as a placeholder for a redundant religion, as he references Nietzsche's theory of the death of God<sup>15</sup>. As humanity needs a spectacle to serve as a way to deflect from coming to terms with the death of religion, the production of a celeactor, and thereby an "it girl", is the perfect way to produce something to care about in the

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<sup>14</sup> Rojek. *Celebrity*. 90.

<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *The Gay Science; with a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. 1974. New York, NY. © Vintage Books.

most superficial manner. Ultimately, the need for spectacle and celebrity to fill an existential void within humanity returns to my earlier reflection of the paparazzi era representing a time of capitalist glory within the West. For the public, glorifying the celebrity is akin to glorifying the success and domination of capitalism, which is another key theme touched upon by many artists who are concerned with the painting and photography of celebrities, such as Andy Warhol and Sam McKinniss. Both artists make ironic references to capitalism and the commodification of human beings while simultaneously capturing it girls, symbols of relevance and currency.

While the it girl status is something highly sought after by celebrities and young impressionable women alike, there is often a tragic side to the highly pressurized and quickly maturing status of the it girl in question. This is often captured by the paparazzi, as demonstrated in the case of Spears, and is further demonstrated in my later chapter where I will be examining a painting of Lindsay Lohan by Sam McKinniss which frames the phenomenon of the fall of the it girl. Paparazzi photography documents this fall, and consequently turns the it girl into more than a mere celebrity; rather, a celeactor with depth and a multifaceted persona. Another example of the celeactor phenomenon can be seen in Fig. 4, which shows a *Vanity Fair* cover taken by the portrait photographer Annie Leibovitz of the young actress and singer Miley Cyrus in 2008. Leibovitz is an artist who serves as a prime example of the melding of celebrity portraiture and photography. While being predominantly known for her high-profile curated snaps of celebrities a la Avedon, Leibovitz has also turned to commercial photography in the past as demonstrated with the *Vanity Fair* cover. The magazine's cover photograph shows Miley Cyrus seated in a minimalistic pose, partially displaying her bare back and face to the camera. Clutching what appears to be a bedsheet against her chest, the image seems to imply Cyrus's nudity. While not explicitly provocative, the collective opinion of the magazine's public was that the image evoked

the scene of Cyrus having just emerged from a suggestively intimate interaction. The controversy was further exacerbated by the fact that Cyrus was only fifteen years of age at the time, as well as the fact that Cyrus was appearing in a child- and family-friendly Disney television series, “Hannah Montana”. In light of this, both Cyrus and Leibovitz issued apology statements to the press.<sup>16</sup> Cyrus was consequently labeled by tabloids as a raucous party girl and would in the years to come fall into such a pattern at the delight of the press and paparazzi. It can almost be said that the paparazzi and tabloid media can be partly held responsible for such a result, having documented and spun stories about Cyrus in similar fashion to Lohan, Spears, and many other young “it girl” celebrities.

What can therefore be concluded by examining the previously outlined modes of portraiture and photography in relation to celebrities, art and pop culture is that what these photographs have most closely in common is the great attention that is often paid by artists and photographers to young women thrust into the spotlight. What has additionally occurred in these previously described fields of portraiture and photography is a subsequent bridging of the gap between private and public. More astutely, what is brought forth by the celebrity being photographed and thereby put on display to the public is the strengthened bond between a celebrity’s outwardly exposed personality and the public which so raptly engages with and follows the celebrity’s every move. In the case of John Singer Sargent the painter was producing portraits of the men and women of high society, taking every measure to capture the affluence, elegance and beauty of his female subjects in particular and being highly sought after for that very reason. This thereby evolved into the work of photographers such as Avedon, whose work

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<sup>16</sup> Kronfeld, Melissa Jane. “MILEY BARES HER TORMENT.” *New York Post*, New York Post, 28 Apr. 2008: <http://www.nypost.com/2008/04/28/miley-bares-her-torment/> (accessed on July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

was not commissioned but rather privy to his personal social connections and partaking in the world of fashion and celebrity culture. The paparazzo takes a completely opposite stance to their treatment of the celebrity, with the only shared aspect of their field being the intimacy of the subject, albeit with an edge of desperation and a staunchly outsider perspective rather than the up close and personal atmosphere exuded by the works of Sargent and Avedon.

## Chapter Two: The Treatment of Celebrities by Pop Artists

One of the most significant periods of contemporary art history to the genre of celebrity portraiture is Pop Art, a movement that occurred predominantly in the United States as well as Great Britain throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Characterized by images, phrases and symbols directly taken from popular commercial culture and press and repurposed through the perspectives of Pop Artists, the movement has clear ties with celebrity portraiture. Of course, celebrities are an integral part of commercialism and what is considered popular culture, particularly in the United States. As much of the art categorized as Pop Art can be understood as a commentary on the commodification of human beings and the dominance of capitalism, the movement did not exactly paint celebrities in a glamorous and dignified light. Rather, as we will see with the work of artists such as Andy Warhol and British Pop Artist Pauline Boty, celebrities were often reimagined as tragic figures subjected to the dark side of commercialism. Taking this perspective into account, it was often the celebrities whose lives either ended in or revolved around tragedy that were depicted by these artists. This in turn would be a trend which would reappear in the early twenty-first century, with tabloid magazines, reality television and paparazzi photography exploiting the innermost lives of celebrities, thereby bringing their tragedy directly into the spotlight.

One of the undisputed pioneers of the trend of using found images of celebrities for the sake of art is Andy Warhol, best remembered for his silk screen prints featuring a great range of iconic household names including but not limited to Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe as well as more political figures such as President John F. Kennedy and his wife Jacqueline Kennedy

Onassis.<sup>17</sup> Warhol was not only a pioneer of Pop Art, but can be accredited with popularizing the mass American preoccupation with celebrity culture that dominated the Pop Art era, as his outward persona and concern with celebrity imagery was a major source of fascination for the American public both inside and outside of the art sphere. What sets Warhol apart from other artists who worked with celebrity imagery was the fact that he himself was a prominent figure in many celebrity circles. In this way, similarly to the way Richard Avedon would photograph notable socialites and other members of the upper echelon in his private studio, Warhol would engage with celebrity culture on a highly intimate level. This was especially the case with his multiple studio locations, appropriately entitled “The Factory” as a play on Warhol’s assembly line-style manner of producing prints with the help of his many studio assistants. The Factory did not only function as a studio but was also a hot spot for many superstars who would frequently visit the main studio site, either to participate in Warhol’s film and photography projects or to just make social appearances. It is partially because of Warhol’s participation in the cult of celebrity that his work has had such a lasting impact on the general course of art history, as he has become a legend not only through his production of art but just for having achieved such a significant level of household fame. Warhol participated directly in the culture of celebrity but was able to simultaneously comment on the darkness and tragedy that heavily plagues celebrityhood. As the internationally renowned critic Isabelle Graw explains in her publication entitled High Price: Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture:

As much as Warhol’s practice imitated and reflected these conditions (of celebrity culture), it also distanced itself from them. Warhol both accepted *and* analyzed the laws of celebrity culture...Not only do his pictures reflect the star system, as in his early silkscreen prints of popular idols like Marilyn Monroe, Liz Taylor and Elvis, his life stories recounted by telephone, such as *POPism* and his *Diaries*, also pay tribute to the

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<sup>17</sup> Gopnik, Blake. *Warhol*. Harper Collins USA, 2021.

massive presence of gossip in a celebrity culture interested in even the most banal everyday acts.<sup>18</sup>

In this sense, it is evident how Warhol is a major contributor to the growth of the tabloid, as he began to record and dissect the lives of celebrities and his relationship to them in his writing, and was constantly printing their image, taking polaroid photographs or creating short film clips of them. Warhol's most notable silk screens often depicted the dominant figures of Hollywood's Golden Age, namely Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor and Elvis Presley. An era which encapsulated most of the early twentieth century into the early 1960s, Hollywood's Golden Age falls in line with a time slightly before Warhol's dedication to depicting its biggest stars. An aspect of Warhol's artworks featuring celebrities that relates to more recent celebrity portraiture is his dedication to capturing or dissecting the tragedy surrounding the figures depicted in his portraits. In reference to Warhol's overall fascination with tragedy, famed art critic Benjamin Buchloh writes in his essay entitled "Andy Warhol's One-Dimensional Art: 1956-1966": "In 1963, Warhol juxtaposed the most famous (and common) photographic images of glamorous stars with the most anonymous (and cruel) images of everyday life: the photojournalist's coolly 'detached' images of car accidents..."<sup>19</sup> Buchloh thereby specifically comments on Warhol's juxtaposition of Hollywood stars against his other silk screens that utilize press photographs of everyday disasters such as car accidents, with which he was creating an amalgamation of everything that encapsulated the constant stream of information being pumped from the press. However, what Warhol accomplishes here is not just capturing stars and disasters but he is also depicting stars *as* disasters. By replicating press images and movie stills of Monroe, Presley,

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<sup>18</sup> Graw, Isabelle. *High Price: Art between the Market and Celebrity Culture*. Lukas & Sternberg, 2010. 169.

<sup>19</sup> Buchloh, Benjamin H. D., et al. *Andy Warhol*. MIT Press, 2001. 26.

Kennedy and Onassis, Warhol is specifically targeting notable figures who have suffered disasters and tragedies within their own lives; Monroe and Presley both died from suspected overdoses, while Kennedy was assassinated and Onassis was forced to endure the aftermath of his death in the public eye. The depiction of these figures by Warhol opened the gates to a new manner of perceiving celebrities from the public point of view, which Graw astutely references in her survey of Warhol:

...Warhol's works of the 1960s and 70s embody a shift from the old star system to the emergence of celebrity culture. While stars, as mentioned above, were admired on the basis of their performative achievements, the attraction of the celebrity is based purely on personality and the way they supposedly live. Stars live through their roles, while celebrities are admired for simply existing<sup>20</sup> (Graw, p. 172).

What Warhol accomplished through his involvement of celebrities in his silk screen pop productions was the initiation of celebrityhood into a more human and fleshed out standard. Instead of having celebrities exist as perfect storybook stars within an exclusive, outdated Hollywood bubble, they were instead being proven to have relatable and disastrous problems that the public could see and understand. Warhol's humanization of celebrities, particularly those who were greatly beloved by the American public before and after their individual instances of tragedy are what his most famous works of art are centered around. This can most accurately be summed up by American art historian and critic Thomas E. Crow in The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent when he states, "...his most famous portrait series, that of Marilyn Monroe, which is as much about the pathos of celebrity identification as about celebration of the star...The *Marilyn Diptych* of that year lays out a stark and unresolved dialectic of presence and absence, of life and death."<sup>21</sup> Warhol was especially fascinated with the

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<sup>20</sup> Graw, Isabelle. *High Price*. 172.

<sup>21</sup> Crow, Thomas. *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent 1955-69*. Yale University Press, 2005.



temporality of life and death and the way it was incessantly reported by the press as well as the public's fast-paced and everchanging reception to such publications. This would, as Crow explains, include his Marilyn Monroe series, in addition to his use of the press publication of the assassination of former United States President John F. Kennedy. Warhol heavily utilized the press photographs of the assassination as well as the photographs taken of Kennedy's wife, Jacqueline Onassis Kennedy following the assassination and leading up to the funeral of the former president. The assassination of John F. Kennedy was an extremely significant moment for all of America due to its mass publication as well as the spread of the assassination footage like wildfire through the public, so the capturing of it on an artistic level was extremely significant to the public's attitude to celebrities that would follow through the remainder of the twentieth century.

The most significant star to appear in the pop art movement is by far Marilyn Monroe, the face of the bygone Hollywood Golden Age. According to art historian and author John A. Walker in his book entitled Art and Celebrity, "As is the case with so many models and movie actors, Norma Jeane Mortenson or Baker (1926-1962) adopted an invented name for professional purposes. This practice immediately opens a gap between the private person and the public persona."<sup>22</sup> Monroe's recreation of herself for the stage is only one of the many qualities which have made her into such a lasting and influential legend in the world of celebrities. By giving herself a new name, Monroe allows for the public to dream up a fictionalized personality for her, which would become the bubbly, slightly airheaded blonde that is so well remembered today. The general creation of stage names, as Walker notes, is what turns a regular person not only into a celebrity, but into an identifiable figure that allows their image to become open to

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<sup>22</sup> Walker, John Albert. *Art and Celebrity: John A. Walker*. Pluto Press, 2003. 97.

interpretation. The stage name of Marilyn Monroe was no doubt something which would catapult her from the regular, plain Jane “Norma Jeane” into the glamorous “Marilyn” with an ambiguously luxe background. Recreating oneself into a character also allows for the celebrity to mask their private life behind a carefully constructed façade, which is another reason why Marilyn would become so fascinating to both her public and the artists who took an almost obsessive liking to her image.

Warhol’s series of Marilyn Monroe portraits are likely one of his best-remembered oeuvres today, and the timing of his preoccupation with the star was no coincidence. As former Whitney Museum executive director Donna de Salvo explains in her introduction to the catalogue from the Whitney’s Warhol exhibition entitled “From A to B and back again”, “If the decision to make a celebrity a subject was crucial, so was the timing of the decision: as Warhol would recall in the 1980 book *POPism*, ‘When Marilyn Monroe happened to die that month (August 1962), I got the idea to make screens of her beautiful face.’”<sup>23</sup> Warhol aptly chose to produce his series of Marilyn silkscreens a week after her tragic suicide, again highlighting his dedication to exposing the darker side of Hollywood and the underlying tragedy that surrounds its superficial façade of glamor. Using a found image of Marilyn taken from a publicity still shot for the 1953 movie “Niagara”, Warhol pioneered an incoming trend of using stills and found photographs of celebrities, a style of artmaking that would be replicated decades later by artists of the twenty-first century with the quite similar intentions of exposing the dark side of celebrityhood (see Fig. 5). According to the Museum of Modern Art’s website, where several *Marilyn* prints are housed: “Each image here was printed from five screens: one that carried the

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<sup>23</sup> de Salvo, Donna, and Andy Warhol. *Andy Warhol from A to B and Back Again*. Whitney Museum of American Art, 2018. 24.

photographic image and four for different areas of color, sometimes printed off-register. About repetitions Warhol said, ‘The more you look at the same exact thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel.’”<sup>24</sup> In Fig. 5 it is clear exactly how Warhol employed the technique of using four screens for color, as the vibrant pink hue used for the background of the image reappears in Monroe’s freckle, lips and mouth. Similarly, her signature blonde hair is emphasized by its electric yellow hue, without which the actress would still be recognizable but would not be the quintessential blonde character that is rooted in her public persona. The majority of the prints in Warhol’s *Marilyn* series utilize some form of yellow or “blonde” to pay homage to the actress’s famous coiffe. The citation taken from the Museum of Modern Art’s description of the print which directly quotes Warhol serves as an exemplary explanation for why Warhol chose to capture Monroe’s image other than having been fascinated by her recent suicide. This print is taken out of a series of thirteen prints, all utilizing different background hues and varying colors for Monroe’s skin and hair. Warhol also created the prints in the form of diptychs, which can be likened to the diptychs often featured in religious paintings and sculpture of many cultures including Byzantine art and art from the European Middle Ages. Overall, Warhol’ dedication to producing and displaying multiple prints featuring the same image of Marilyn Monroe was a clear reference to his preoccupation with reappearing images of tragedy in the media and the mass production of commodities. In the aforementioned quote, Warhol mentions how the meaninglessness of a multiplied image causes one to feel “better and emptier,” a sentiment which echoes the theory behind why people are so taken with celebrities in the first place. Celebrities themselves are elements of commercialism and are a representation of the societal need for entertainment in the face of existentialism and are often utilized as a way to

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<sup>24</sup> Warhol, Andy. “Andy Warhol. Marilyn Monroe. 1967: MoMA.” *The Museum of Modern Art*: <http://www.moma.org/collection/works/61240> (accessed on August 12th, 2020).

distract oneself from long, endless days of work. Therefore, Warhol's words are extremely appropriate in capturing why the rise in interest in the lives of celebrities grew and became commercialized over the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Marilyn's face was plastered in newspapers for weeks following her suicide, so Warhol's repetitive treatment of her image acts as an homage to the desensitization that occurs once a tragic image has been overly saturated in the public eye. Additionally, the public's obsession and fascination with someone like Marilyn and the creation of art as a way to pay tribute to her legend distinctly echo the Christian preoccupation with religious figures like Mary, mother of Jesus and the vast number of artworks built in her likeness as a tribute to her significance in the Bible. As religion has often been considered as a way for people to fill the gaping fear of existentialism and death, it is understandable that the worshipping of and the obsession with religious figures would later evolve and adapt to include celebrities for those who feel a need to distract from fear and the reality of life.

Warhol's interest in Monroe can definitely be attributed to the way that Hollywood was so preoccupied with star quality and young thriving "it girl" actresses, something which was likely a large part of his coming of age in the early- to-mid-twentieth century. Warhol thereby became particularly responsible for bridging the gap between celebrities whose hard work in the film industry was what dictated their fame to celebrities who purely thrived off of appearance-making and socialization within celebrity spheres and in celebrity-dominated venues. Examples of the latter include his introduction of stars into his studio, where he would take polaroid photographs and "screen tests" as means of capturing their portraits. This signature style coined by Warhol would again serve as an echo not only of Avedon's studio portraits but also of the high society portraits of the nineteenth century, where Warhol was not merely capturing the

likeness of a person, but of a prominent, globally recognized figure. Additionally, Warhol's celebrity status was further cemented by the notion that he not only invited celebrities into his studio, but also was responsible for the creation of stars simply by including them in his works and being associated with them.

Warhol's screen tests, created between 1963 and 1966, provide major insight into the exclusive and celebrity-rich life which he was living and simultaneously turning into art. This can be best seen in Fig. 6, which is a still of Bob Dylan taken from one of Warhol's studio-based screen tests. The screen test of Dylan exemplifies Warhol's penchant for playing with the concept of integrating commercial culture into his artworks without having to put much complexity into the final product. Instead, the work relies on the subject matter, and on the intensity exuded by the portrait of the figure depicted, echoing the rawness of Avedon's portrait of Marilyn. The relationship between the subject and the viewer are what become most significant in this work, as the subject's face and eyes serve as enough material to occupy the viewer's attention. Bob Dylan gazes without much evident emotion or any scripted activity into the camera, likely attempting to appear at ease. What comes across from this screen test is a sort of power play between Dylan and the camera or viewer, which can be attributed to the unwavering eye contact that he makes with the camera. It is undoubtedly the eye contact in many of Warhol's varying screen tests that causes them to be so captivating and which creates an air of raw tension in the final product. Buchloh calls attention not only to Warhol's attitude to tragedy but also to Warhol's own words regarding his inclusion of celebrities within his screen tests and films:

Although Warhol constructed images of Marilyn Monroe, Liz Taylor and Elvis Presley in the context of the tragicomical conditions of their glamour, the paintings' lasting fascination does not derive from the continuing myth of these figures but from the fact

that Warhol constructed their image from the perspective of the tragic condition of those who consume the stars images in scopic cults: 'I [made films of actors doing the same thing] because people usually just go to the movies to see only the star, to eat him up...It was also easier to make.'<sup>25</sup>

Warhol himself does not deny both that his art centers around the ease of their production but also demonstrates that an actor can be doing little to nothing and will still become the center of public fascination. In this way, the fact that the subject depicted in the aforementioned screen test is specifically Bob Dylan adds yet another layer to the film, as the viewer watches Bob Dylan almost in the same way one would regard a zoo animal; with fascination about his behaviorisms and to have some insight into his personality and affectations.

Returning to the highly celebrated Marilyn Monroe, the actress would prove to be a frequently recurring symbol of Pop Art, with her likeness being captured in works by several artists. An example of another artist who was fascinated by Monroe and gave her an almost religious treatment is Pauline Boty, who painted several iterations of the actress's portrait with one example being *The Only Blonde in the World* of 1964 (see Fig. 7). While the way in which Boty regards the actress through her own female gaze and paints her thereafter is one of the most notable characteristics of Boty's portrait of Monroe, it is also clear that Boty and Monroe are kindred spirits; both women lived as actresses and powerful female spectacles who were known for having unmistakable signature personas and were irrevocably iconographic just in the way they presented themselves to the public. According to Walker, "During the early 1960s, Boty became a minor celebrity in her own right. She and her collages were featured in a television arts documentary directed by Ken Russell and, due to her youth and beauty, photos of her appeared

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<sup>25</sup> Buchloh, Benjamin, et al. *Warhol*. 28.

in the press.”<sup>26</sup> Even bearing a striking resemblance to Monroe, Boty would sometimes act as Monroe and sing songs from her movies, which further establishes the undeniable connection shared between the two. In Fig. 7, Boty presents Monroe in luxurious clothing, clad in a large fur shawl and toting equally large hair, her legs coming together at the knees in a stride that shows off the actress’s famous figure, and the ornamental quality of her dress and high heeled shoes. This scene is the reproduction of a still from the movie “Some Like it Hot,” in which Monroe starred, which mirrors Warhol’s attraction to using film stills as source material. The use of this still is in no way coincidental in its subject matter, as the movie from which it is taken explores and parodies the stereotypes of the female gender and the way in which men attempt to perform as women. The parallel drawn between “Some Like it Hot” and Boty’s use of its still speaks to Boty’s portrayal of Monroe both as a sexualized character and as a fellow woman. Additionally, Boty’s use of Monroe’s likeness in her paintings had much to do with the effect that her death had upon Boty, similarly to Warhol’s fascination with Monroe following her suicide. According to Walker, “Boty greatly admired Monroe and was upset by news of her death. Boty had impersonated the star in art school reviews and later paid homage to her in the painting *The Most Beautiful Blonde in the World* (1964).”<sup>27</sup> The idea that Boty painted Monroe as a way of paying homage to her livelihood and to celebrate her life is another important factor of why artists become fascinated with celebrities to the point of incorporating them in their works of art, as many celebrities who have been depicted in portraits by artists have suffered tragedies or have had downward spirals in their lives or careers.

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<sup>26</sup> Walker, John Albert. *Art and Celebrity*. 106.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 105.

In *The Only Blonde in the World*, Boty squeezes Marilyn Monroe into a narrow field that only gives so much room to encompass the entirety of her frame, while the remainder of the canvas is otherwise filled with an expansive green field filled with abstract geometrical shapes. This composition likens the painted Monroe to a photograph collaged on top of the painting, However, there is somewhat of a desperate air surrounding the painting, as though Monroe's perfection and womanhood is being performed. Boty utilizes a still of Monroe where she looks flawless and is at the peak of her career, and gives the painting a title that almost seems to exaggerate this perfection while completely turning it on its head. It is equally ironic that in a film that centers around the performance of gender, and specifically the performance of womanhood, Boty chooses to paint a moment where Monroe is performing as herself. This iteration of Monroe represents the performed image that Marilyn created both for her actual real life public, and the performed character that she plays in the movie, which is essentially just another version of her real public image. "Film Stars are the 20<sup>th</sup> century gods and goddesses," Boty said when photographed for *Men Only* magazine in March of 1963. "People need them, and the myths that surround them, because their own lives are enriched by them. Pop art colours those myths."<sup>28</sup> Boty equating Pop icons with mythological gods and goddesses aligns with Pop Art's exploration of the world's obsession with celebrities who often end up with their own publicly derived mythology. Boty's words simultaneously mock the exaggeration of the worldly significance given to celebrities and attempts to answer the question of why people are so taken with them in the first place. However, Boty does not question as much as celebrate the notion that pop icons should be documented and used as the subjects of portraits and homages. It was Boty who famously said "Pop art is the nostalgia of now" in reference to the use of celebrities

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<sup>28</sup> French, Cedric. *Pauline Boty*. March 1963. © Men Only.



and the recycling of contemporary commercialist imagery and advertising in Pop art. This statement perfectly sums up the way that artists engaging with pop culture have a sort of yearning or need to emphasize what is culturally relevant during this time in order to create a steadfast tribute to that culture that, while present, will last in history.

An artist whose work is a necessary inclusion in the conversation surrounding celebrity depictions in contemporary art, and who can be considered as a consequential result of the pop art movement is Jeff Koons. *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* was a porcelain sculpture created in 1988 much after the definitive culmination of Pop Art, and as the name suggests it depicts Michael Jackson and his notorious pet chimpanzee, Bubbles (see Fig. 8). Something which is immediately noticeable in the work, and which Walker briefly touches on, is the stark white skin tone that Koons gives both Jackson and his pet chimpanzee:

Koons' statue proved controversial because the snow-white porcelain of the face made it seem that the Afro-American entertainer wanted to become a white person. (Jackson, Koons claimed, had to become white in order to appeal to white, pubescent, middle-class American girls).<sup>29</sup>

Koons is certainly no stranger to controversy in his artwork and even outside of his artistic practice, so it comes as no surprise that he would depict Jackson in a way that would upset much of the singer's fanbase, who did not share his thoughts regarding Jackson's desire to appear as a white man. However, Koons did have other motives for creating a sculpture of Jackson that seemed to be aimed more at celebrating the extreme measures he thought Jackson to have taken in order to achieve maximum fame. According to Walker, "...Koons approved of self-transformation whatever the cost. He believed the artists' duty was to communicate and entertain, and Jackson was brilliant at both...Koons presents Jackson as an ostentatious

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<sup>29</sup> Walker, John Albert. *Art and Celebrity*. 109.

ornament.”<sup>30</sup> Taking this perspective into account, Koons admired Jackson rather than wished to mock him, as Jackson’s career choices and hunger for fame seemed to mirror his own. Koons, like Warhol, is famous for injecting himself into elite social spheres often made up of celebrities, and for taking majorly controversial, highly publicized artistic leaps in order to make a name for himself. It is true that while Koons was not himself a Pop Artist, his work is essential to the conversation of how Pop Art influenced celebrities in the coming decades to produce works of art which feature the likeness of celebrities.

In all, the treatment of celebrities by artists took its most prominent turn with the beginnings of the Pop Art movement, with Warhol undeniably taking the lead in regarding celebrities as important artistic subject matter. With artists like Boty and, in later decades, Koons taking similar routes of reinventing the images of celebrities through their own perspectives and understandings of them, what can be immediately recognized is a rendering of the celebrity into their most basic and straightforward public image as received by its viewers. While Warhol took an interest into the saturation of images in public media and how they are publicized in the press, Boty was interested in the playfulness and femininity exuded by a celebrity like Marilyn Monroe who is famous for being the quintessential Hollywood woman. Finally, Koons’ aim in his work is to tackle the controversy surrounding a celebrity and to provoke a reaction through doing so, having no hesitation in his treatment of the dark side of a celebrity’s life and fanbase. What all three artists have in common therefore is their attentiveness to the public reception of a celebrity, and their ability to critique the pop culture to which the celebrity belongs as a result of their intimacy to the celebrity scene. This is a phenomenon which

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 109.

continues into the 1990s and the twenty-first century, with the internet and spread of information further evolving the attitude artists have to celebrities as both viewers and friends of them.

### Chapter Three: Celebrity Imagery in the Twenty-First Century

The treatment of celebrity imagery in artistic form, particularly in painting, has experienced a major shift and resurgence since the very end of the twentieth century and continuing through the twenty-first. As I have already explored the importance of photography and tabloid media to the early contemporary treatment of celebrities in art, as well as the emergence of Pop Art with Andy Warhol performing as a key player in the overall proliferation of celebrities in art, this chapter will take a further look at how such movements have contributed to the reemergence of celebrities within art today. Additionally, the most revolutionary intervention responsible for the recent growth in fascination with celebrityhood is by far the introduction of the Internet. The popularization of the Internet in the average household caused visual images to have much quicker traction in their spread through the masses and coincided with the rise of reality television. These aspects of new media thereby influenced the manner in which younger generations—primarily the Millennial and Generation Z generations—have a tendency to treat trends with more and more transience for each decade, while simultaneously capturing, documenting, storing and cementing images and other information in a sort of living archive. To further elaborate on the concept of the living archive, it can be said that younger generations have turned certain images of celebrities, and even the celebrities themselves into living fragments of history that exist within a memorial and physical archive. A major change that took place in the way celebrities have evolved in the face of new media is explained by sociologists Suzanne Leonard and Diane Negra for their oeuvre Keywords for Media Students which primarily explores the ways that today's celebrities function within the vast realm of contemporary media:

Indeed, the advent of reality television, and particularly its valorization of self-commodification and self-branding, is crucial for understanding the functioning of

stardom and celebrity in the twenty- first century. In such realms, selling oneself replaces being “discovered,” talent is no longer conceptually fixed, and qualities such as scrappiness and determination inexorably come to the fore.<sup>31</sup>

As noted by Leonard and Negra, the concept of “selling oneself” and the shift in what is considered talent has led to celebrities becoming more and more desperate in their strives to achieve and maintain fame. To add to this, the paparazzi have become prime candidates in capturing and bringing out the desperation of celebrities in their quests for fame. This combination is what has thereby led to some of the best remembered incidents and photographs to have come into existence, with the best example of this being Britney Spears’ infamous breakdown (see Fig. 2), which came as a result of the increasing commercialization of fame and the appearance of stardom taking over the need for real and true talent. An even better example of this is Paris Hilton, a young socialite who achieved fame mostly because of her ostentatious presence in the Los Angeles party scene as well as her various reality television roles. It is because of this new need for artists to adopt nearly ridiculous and over-the-top personalities as a result of reality television that artists have captured these celebrities in particular, and especially in their infamous moments of breakdowns or moments of desperation, as will be seen with the works of Sam McKinniss in particular.

Sam McKinniss is an artist who is crucial to the understanding of how the internet has played a major role in the reintroduction of celebrities as artistic subject matter both to the domain of high art and to the contemporary American gallery scene. McKinniss is best known for his depictions and reproductions of found images of celebrities primarily through the media of colored pencil drawings and oil paintings. As Suzanne Leonard and Diane Negra explain: “Many of the modes and mechanisms of contemporary celebrity originate in the prehistory of

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<sup>31</sup> Leonard, Suzanne and Negra, Diane. *Keywords for Media Students*. NYU Press, 2017. 30.

film, television, and digital media.”<sup>32</sup> As today’s celebrities are most often created through their appearance in film and reality television as well as musical artists, it is therefore understandable that artists such as McKinniss, Elizabeth Peyton, Laura Collins and Karen Kilimnik would draw from such resources as a way to reference pop culture and to provide a relatable foundation for a target audience made up of their generational peers.

Sam McKinniss’ *Lindsay* (see Fig. 9) is an oil painting of a photograph taken of the actress Lindsay Lohan, shown here driving a car while holding a cigarette in one hand. The original source of McKinniss’ painting is a paparazzi shot of Lindsay Lohan taken outside of the infamous party hotel Chateau Marmont located in Los Angeles, likely following a night of partying as indicated by Lohan’s general demeanor. McKinniss’ *Lindsay* falls in line with many of his paintings featuring found photographs of celebrities taken either from tabloid media or from various paparazzi-fueled, internet-based sources, such as *TMZ* or *The Daily Mail*. By borrowing such images for the sake of reproduction through oil paint, McKinniss casts a direct spotlight on how certain eras of paparazzi photography and celebrities who were relevant during the early twenty-first century when paparazzi photos and tabloids were at their peak have led to the sealing of certain moments and images as legendary and iconic shards of history. In an interview with McKinniss for *W Magazine* in December of 2017, writer Stephanie Eckardt highlights the way that McKinniss uses found images to relate to his audience:

Audience is, after all, part of McKinniss’s work, as he’s focused more and more on recreating images we’re all familiar with, often via the internet. These works depend on accessing a popular collective memory, which is why the artist has always based his paintings on his Google Images search results—or at least ever since it was invented in 2001, when he was in high school. “They’re just stolen. They’re just appropriated and taken from the internet,” McKinniss said casually of his subject matter.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Leonard, Suzanne and Negra, Diane. *Keywords for Media Students*. NYU Press, 2017. 28.

<sup>33</sup> Eckardt, Stephanie. “In the Studio with Sam McKinniss, the Unapologetic Painter of ‘Perverted’ Internet Culture.” *W Magazine | Women’s Fashion & Celebrity News*, 15 Dec. 2017: <http://www.wmagazine.com/story/sam-mckinniss-lorde-artist-team-gallery-exhibit-venice>.

McKinniss' use of internet-based media and his shameless admittance of it largely plays into the intention of his paintings, which give much insight into the ways internet-based communities function as platforms for sharing and spreading the exact imagery which McKinniss uses without much attention being paid to crediting the photographers responsible for the images coming into existence in the first place. McKinniss utilizes images from the internet as small shards of a vast contemporary history made possible by the creation and complexity of the internet itself. Furthermore, these shards of history have become memorialized on internet platforms such as *Tumblr*, *Twitter* and *Instagram*, where intimately taken photographs of celebrities and other various facts of their everyday lives are documented and spread from platform to platform and from user to user. This spread has thereby led to the building of an ever-growing archive of celebrity footage that can easily be pinpointed and categorized as a part of a certain memorable era or decade. In the case of artists such as McKinniss, Peyton, Collins and Kilimnik, this era can be more specifically recognized as the period between 1990 and 2010. The purpose behind McKinniss' work seems primarily to be the capturing of generational moments that resonate with the majority of a public of peers similar in age to McKinniss, as much of his work typically references Hollywood and culturally trending Americana imagery. This is certainly the case with *Lindsay*. It can be safe to say that much of the world's populates who have been exposed to television and tabloid media—or at least those who pay particular attention to the everchanging social climates of the celebrity world—can remember the period of the early 2000s when Lindsay Lohan famously had a downward spiral laid bare for the entire world to witness. In the case of Lohan, the major party responsible for this exposure was the paparazzi. McKinniss' rendering of Lohan's paparazzi photograph into an oil painting on canvas—a medium typically associated with tradition and what is referred to as “high” art—belongs to a trend that has arisen

which engages with the overlapping of low and high culture. Paparazzi photographs and tabloid media are widely considered to belong to the sphere of low what is considered low culture. On the other hand, oil paint has for centuries been considered a medium associated with the staunchly traditional execution of art in formal practice, so the overlapping of such a highly respected and historical medium with the often frowned upon paparazzi photography leads to an interesting juxtaposition. This overlap of cultures can most closely be linked to Warhol's treatment of press photographs of scandals and tragedies. Lohan represents a more current and perhaps a more niche variation of what Warhol was targeting through his paintings. Warhol's main goal was to capture the media spectacle that surrounds celebrities, and the desensitization that those behind the cameras and the viewers of the scene and photographs taken of the celebrities' experience. The media spectacle surrounding Lindsay Lohan during a large part of the early twenty-first century attests to this public attitude, with the young star often being mocked and relentlessly targeted in the press.

McKinniss hand-picks moments such as the scene including Lohan for several of his paintings, capturing celebrities by playing with both the cult status of these scenes while at the same time calling attention to the inherent ugliness of them. In *Lindsay*, McKinniss does not shy away from somewhat distorting and exaggerating certain unflattering aspects of Lohan's appearance, painting the prominent nasolabial folds brought forth by her grimace and adopting unnatural hues when painting her skin, further emphasizing the evidence that she is coming from a night of excess. The painting is made particularly striking by the highly saturated quality of Lindsay's animated expression, skin and hair, which are sharply contrasted against the much colder blue tones of the car upholstery that serves as the painting's backdrop. This saturation and use of sharp, vibrant color is typical of McKinniss' portraiture style, where his texturized



treatment of oil paint combined with his lack of shying away from vibrant color combine to produce elements of melodrama within the features of his subjects. As most of these subjects are often celebrities or other notable members of pop culture, this style charges the generational nostalgia of internet-based snapshots of celebrities with vivid emotion reflective of the already transient nature of celebrityhood. McKinniss thereby gives these scenes life, making it easy for the spectator to imagine the distraught, frazzled state that Lohan finds herself in. As writer, artist and critic Gary Indiana perfectly puts it for his article “Claim to Fame” written about McKinniss for *Artforum* in September of 2019, “McKinniss invests faces with high drama; they are suspenseful in that the viewer naturally imagines the next moment, and the moment before, and can’t quite define the vaguely troubled emotional flavor of the moment at hand.”<sup>34</sup> The “high drama” that McKinniss evokes in his paintings feeds into the global treatment of celebrities and the obsession that the world has with tracking, observing and catching them in humiliating or compromising states. As previously explained, this obsession serves as a form of self-satisfaction, a need for those who are taken by celebrities to compare themselves to someone who has been elevated in the eyes of the public. As McKinniss himself explains to Eckardt in his interview with *W Magazine*, when speaking of another one of his paintings, the source for which is a photograph of JonBenet Ramsey: “...I’m attracted to the pageantry, the human drama of it—the mythology wrapped up in certain well known faces and the symbolism of their public images and careers, which drive people’s lifestyles and sense of right or wrong and righteousness.”<sup>35</sup> In this interview, McKinniss himself recognizes that he views celebrities through a lens of publicly

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<sup>34</sup> Indiana, Gary. “Gary Indiana on the Art of Sam McKinniss.” *Gary Indiana on the Art of Sam McKinniss - Artforum International*, 1 Sept. 2019: <http://www.artforum.com/print/201907/gary-indiana-on-the-art-of-sam-mckinniss-80521> (accessed on June 18th, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Eckardt, Stephanie. “In the Studio with Sam McKinniss.”

fabricated mythology, which is precisely why he chooses them as subjects to explore the extremely unique and superficial world of celebrities. *Lindsay* was also juxtaposed with another painting of Lindsay Lohan when McKinniss displayed his series of entitled “John Taylor Thomas”—a play on words as the series is named after the actor of the same name and was displayed at JTT Gallery in February of 2020.<sup>36</sup> The painting in question depicts Lindsay as the role she played as both twins Annie and Hallie in the movie *The Parent Trap*, a classically American childhood movie of the late 1990s. Evidently McKinniss included both paintings to comment on the jarring contrast between the two, as *The Parent Trap* is a quintessential family friendly movie, and was responsible for bringing Lindsay Lohan into the spotlight in the first place. McKinniss’ juxtaposition showcases exactly how the actress has changed due to having grown up in the public eye, and how that can consequentially lead to a breakdown akin to the one experienced by Lohan as seen in *Lindsay*.

Another artist whose work is dedicated to capturing the cult attitude towards celebrities is Laura Collins. In her series aptly entitled “The Olsen Twins Hiding from the Paparazzi,” Collins paints a large number of paparazzi photographs of twins Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen, sometimes alone and sometimes together, as they attempt to avoid public attention and hide from the paparazzi. Collins’ specific choice to paint the Olsen twins likely comes out of the commonly known fact that the Olsen twins are two of the most elusive and hidden away celebrities of contemporary history, while simultaneously having had their entire lives documented on television from a very young age. The twins represent exactly what draws the masses to celebrities in the first place; by becoming enigmas and avoiding the paparazzi and any other public appearances, the Olsen twins only further cement their status as celebrities who, by not

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<sup>36</sup> Courtesy of JTT Gallery, <http://www.jttnyc.com/artists/sam-mckinniss> (accessed on July 15th, 2020).

overexposing themselves to the masses, become highly sought after by media and fans alike. Collins comments on the irony of photographs taken of celebrities who so clearly do not want to be seen or photographed, although in many of their photos they fail to disguise themselves or obscure their identities enough not to be recognized. In one portrait from the series (see Fig. 10), one of the Olsen twins is leaving a vehicle, daintily shielding her forehead with her hand. Collins fails to name which twin is pictured in each of her paintings, rather labeling them as “an Olsen twin”, which only further cements the elusive nature of the twins, but also attests to the public’s complete disregard for which twin is being spotted as long as they are in the presence of or witnessing a celebrity. Collins maintains the same dark, cold range of hues as in the original paparazzi photograph, not deviating much from the photographic qualities aside from her signature, very painterly style of calling forth contrast through various linear shapes. The shapes in question function as perspective-emphasizers, centralizing the Olsen twin as the focal subject matter of the painting. The main detractors from the Olsen twin within the painting are the pops of red from her heeled pumps, which although fashionable do not do much in terms of disguising the twin and keeping her from the waking eye of the paparazzi. In all, Collins’ entire series is a chaotic selection of random paparazzi photos of the twins, showing the magnitude of photographs taken of them throughout their careers thus far in which they have somehow hidden themselves or attempted to obscure their identities in equally futile ways. Keeping in line with McKinniss’ tongue-in-cheek style, Collins exposes various characteristics of celebrities of the twenty-first century that speak to the way the audience who will understand her work place celebrities on pedestals of idolization whilst regarding them as a part of a sort of nostalgia and inside joke of their generation. This is further evidenced by the fact that the Olsen twins have also served as the subjects for a painting by Sam McKinniss entitled *The Olsens*, which was also

executed for his 2019 exhibition at JTT Gallery (see Fig. 11). *The Olsens* is another example of a painting by McKinniss drawn from an internet-sourced photograph, and depicts the Olsen twins seated in the front row of a runway show, in which they are only identified by their similar appearances, hair and dress. However, as Rachel Wetzler explains for her review on McKinniss' JTT Gallery exhibition for the publication *Art in America*:

McKinniss perfectly captures Mary Kate and Ashley's icy mien as they sit front row at a fashion show in severe black pantsuits, but not their faces, which would matter less if their recognizability—their status as quintessential child stars whose every move since infancy has been documented—wasn't the point here.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, then, to what Collins achieves with her paintings of the Olsen twins, McKinniss targets the performative nature and characteristics that surround the Olsen twins. Both artists call attention to the fact that the twins are not interesting subjects necessarily for their specific personalities or participation in any film or television series. Instead, they become the center of public fascination simply by being recognizable yet so elusive.

Karen Kilimnik's *Marie Antoinette Out For A Walk At Her Petite Hermitage, France, 1750* is the only painting of this chapter to feature an imagined subject that appears to be sitting for a portrait rather than being drawn from a found image taken from a photograph or film still (see Fig. 12). The painting belongs to Kilimnik's series of merging historical portraiture with recognizable contemporary celebrities, many of which capture the mood of a certain era such as the 1990s or early twenty-first century. In the case of Fig. 12, the subject of this painting is a result of the merging of socialite and reality television star Paris Hilton with Marie Antoinette. Kilimnik turns notorious socialite and party girl Hilton, widely considered a pioneer of the

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<sup>37</sup> Wetzler, Rachel. "Sam McKinniss's Child Star Portraits Mine the Culture of the 1990s." *ARTnews.com*, ARTnews.com, 2 June 2020: <http://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/aia-reviews/sam-mckinniss-jtt-jonathan-taylor-thomas-lindsay-lohan-olsen-twins-1202689450/> (accessed on June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

popularization of reality television in the early twenty-first century into a fictionalized, ladylike countryside character set in a romantic environment. Depicting Hilton as two characters in one allows Kilimnik to invent her own mythology. With Hilton being known for her opulent and wild lifestyle, Kilimnik evidently mirrors this public perception of her with that of the remarkably similar perception of Marie Antoinette during her reign. Additionally, Kilimnik intertwines the physical identities of the two, as both have often been remembered for their beauty and blondeness. Kilimnik's representation of Hilton paints her as a quite innocent-seeming, soft young woman, with a girlish purple dress and matching hair accessory, and the countryside backdrop further cements the quite demure, romantic scene in which Kilimnik has staged the Marie Antoinette/Paris Hilton crossover. The main identifiers which make it evident that it is truly Hilton's head which Kilimnik has painted onto the physical embodiment of Marie Antoinette is the signature yellow-blonde platinum hair, long slim nose and piercing blue eyes, though it is not immediately clear that the girl's face belongs to Hilton were it not for added context. The queen's infamous penchant for lavish expenses, and this laissez-faire attitude can also be applied to similar scenarios featuring Hilton, who is known both for her public displays of debauchery and for flaunting her sizable wealth. Similarly to France's hatred of Marie Antoinette's excess, Paris Hilton has often been snubbed and looked down upon in the press. Kilimnik's *Marie Antoinette* therefore represents a remarkable case study examining the public treatment of celebrities similar to the ways in which historical figures such as Marie Antoinette were elevated to a platform laid bare to the public eye, ruthlessly examined and critiqued for every action and reaction. As Hilton and Marie Antoinette were both very young women at the peak of their careers, Kilimnik captures the public's merciless disregard for the age of the celebrities or members of higher social hierarchies in their treatment of them through the press or

otherwise. Kilimnik also thereby emphasizes the inherent misogyny and ridiculousness of holding young women overly accountable for certain reckless actions. By stripping down her character to a natural state, Kilimnik exposes both Hilton and Marie Antoinette for who they really are—just young women. Kilimnik's *Marie Antoinette* in a way serves as a reminder of the stripped-down body that lies within the recognizable public persona and detracts from the usual demeanor in which we would find someone like Paris Hilton. As Hilton, Lohan and the Olsen twins shared the same decade in which they were most prominent within the public sphere and their overall careers, it is extremely relevant to consider paintings of them which were executed in similar time frames as having comparable characteristics or intentions behind their conception, which is certainly the case with Kilimnik, McKinniss, Collins, as well as Elizabeth Peyton.

Elizabeth Peyton's *Twilight* (see Fig. 13) encapsulates a period of the early twenty-first century where found images and stills from cult favorite movies were extremely referential of a generational inclination towards capturing and evoking feelings of nostalgia. Sam McKinniss' attitude towards nostalgia in his recent series of drawings and paintings of celebrities can be likened to Peyton's interest in the heavily reminiscent scene of actors Robert Pattinson and Kristen Stewart in the roles of Bella and Edward as seen in the movie *Twilight*. In this scene, the two characters are locked in an embrace following the climbing of a tree. *Twilight* was painted by Peyton only one year following the release of the film in 2008, and is therefore reflective of a significantly romantic moment representational of Young Adult literature and film. Peyton's reference to this particular film and its scene therefore speaks to a large audience of the Young Adult genre who have the ability to comprehend the significance of the context captured in Peyton's still. Peyton is known for the intensity and complexity of emotion that come across in her work, just as McKinniss is known for evoking high drama through saturation, vivid color and

the distortion of facial expressions. Additionally, Peyton's fascination with celebrity imagery and her inclusion of famed figures in her paintings is something which has gained her the reputation of having followed in Warhol's footsteps. The comparison between Peyton and Warhol is something which writer and academic Nadia Tscherny comments on in her article about Peyton's portraiture for *ARTnews.com*, where she notes:

Peyton does not like her works to be called portraits, and she does not take commissions. This distinguishes her from Andy Warhol, with whom she is often compared and whose influence she frequently acknowledges. Considering her interest in beautiful and famous people, Warhol is an obvious antecedent...However, the differences between Warhol and Peyton are more notable than their similarities. His portraits are blatantly detached, frankly commercial and meant to magnify their subjects' already larger-than-life qualities. Hers are more casual and motivated by a highly personal canon of celebrity.<sup>38</sup>

As Tscherny explains, there are a number of reasons why Warhol and Peyton's work do not fall within the same category despite both containing similar subject matter. Peyton does not seek to paint her celebrated subjects in order to highlight their fame or call attention to any tragedy or publicity surrounding them, but rather does so to come to terms with the personal reasons why she finds interest in celebrities. This is quite similar to the concept of "fanart", a type of media popularized in the twenty-first century and which involves the fans of celebrities, movies, characters and the like taking such interest in the celebrity or character in question that they draw or paint their image.<sup>39</sup> These are not works commissioned or created with then intention of display but are simply creations made by fans as a way to pay tribute to whomever they are a fan of. Of course, Peyton's work cannot be boiled down to the category of fan art as she does create her artwork with the intention of display and they exist within the sphere of the retail art sector.

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<sup>38</sup> Tscherny, Nadia. "Beautiful People." *ARTnews.com*, ARTnews.com, 8 June 2017, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/elizabeth-peyton-62764/> (accessed June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

<sup>39</sup> "Fanart." *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fan art](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fan%20art).

However, works such as *Twilight* embody exactly the kind of works of art that can be seen in a “fanart” context. What ties Peyton’s work to fan art is frankly the personal interest and passion for the subject whose likeness is being created with artistic purpose. However, it is precisely this aspect of Peyton’s work that has caused her to be so questioned in the art world for her artistic integrity and the significance of her subject matter. As Tscherny explains,

[Peyton’s] pictures—then as now—have a disarmingly simple and ingenuous quality, unencumbered by heavy theorizing. Add to that her celebration of physical beauty, another longtime taboo of most serious art, and you begin to understand how Peyton’s inclusion would cause rumblings at MoMA. But many critics...applauded Peyton precisely because of her retrograde yet refreshing determination to portray people she admired.<sup>40</sup>

What Tscherny points out as Peyton’s refreshing portrayals of celebrities are undeniably a signifier of how Peyton has contributed to the evolution of celebrity portrayal as a respected artistic practice. Peyton in this way becomes akin to a pioneer of the movement of painting celebrities just for the sake of one’s own personal interest, something which would make way for artists like Collins and McKinniss to follow suit with much less criticism and need for self-defense.

Peyton’s penchant for intensity and complexity comes across clearly in *Twilight*’s scene of two actors playing the fictional roles of star-crossed lovers in one of the film’s most iconic and climactic scenes. Though in this instance Peyton is technically not painting celebrity portraits and is rather painting characters played by celebrities in a film, McKinniss’ earlier words regarding the implied mythology surrounding celebrities and their public image still resonate. The 2009 film *Twilight* had an extreme soar of popularity with younger crowds, with

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<sup>40</sup> Tscherny, Nadia. “Beautiful People.” *ARTnews.com*.



actors Robert Pattinson and Kristen Stewart becoming involuntarily ingrained in their roles for many years to come, and are still to this day heavily associated with the characters Bella and Edward. As the actors themselves have become so tied up in the legend that followed the film's success, my earlier claims regarding nostalgia being one of the primary driving forces behind artists beginning to engage with celebrity imagery and portraiture hold true. However, as seen with *Twilight*, artists are tackling celebrity imagery on a new platform and wavelength, where knowing the celebrity personally and painting them from life has become replaced with the need to capture the vitality and atmosphere that the celebrity in question brings to the picture. The paintings instead speak to and engage with specific audiences who can understand and relate to certain moments of history or current events that the celebrities and characters who are being painted have largely contributed to. Evidently, McKinniss, Peyton, Kilimnik and Collins all play with celebrity imagery with the similar intentions of wishing to capture and add commentary to celebrities who have become fictitious representations of a certain era of fashion, reality television, tabloid media. Today, the public dwells on the early- to late-twenty-first century in the same way that older generations look back on the most significant incidents that occurred within their generational timeframe. This attitude is something which artists like McKinniss, Collins, Peyton and Kilimnik all have adopted in recent years, emphasizing the generational nostalgia of historically significant celebrities that attracts consumers and viewers that comprehend and want to participate in the memorialization and the celebration of celebrity mythology.

## Conclusion

What I sought to seek insight into through this written thesis was how celebrity imagery in the form of painted portrait has reappeared in the past three decades, as well as what this reemergence represents and how the works of art in question share thematic context. As seen in my earlier chapters on photography and Pop Art, the celebrity portrait is not exactly a novel concept, and celebrities and socialites alike have been featured in art for centuries. However, what differentiates recent celebrity portraits from any and all predecessors is not explicitly their subject matter, but the attitude with which the portraits are treated and the media that is being referenced. With artists like Sam McKinniss, Laura Collins, Elizabeth Peyton and Karen Kilimnik all featuring celebrities in their works of art, what has become most evident in my analysis is how all artists for the most part draw from paparazzi photography and pop culture films. Using film stills is also something which appeared in the work of Andy Warhol and Pauline Boty as demonstrated in my chapter on Pop Art, with quite similar intentions of referencing culturally significant moments specific to the introduction of Hollywood and the enduring American entertainment industry. The primary theme that ties together the celebrity portraits painted by artists of the late twentieth century by those of the early twenty-first century is generational nostalgia, a theme which is again echoed by the Pop Artists. This nostalgia is something felt by the entirety of the Western world who at times have no choice but to partake in a world where celebrities are elevated to a higher and more publicized status. While the way in which current artists engage with pop culture and tabloid media can be said to be an evolution of the work of the Pop Artists and their engagement with Hollywood and the press, the proliferation of media has been made all the more saturated with the help of the introduction of the Internet. Because of the Internet, artists now more than ever have insight into what viewers take interest

in, and young artists like McKinniss are able to capture the attention of their audiences by hand picking scenes that become popularized over social media platforms and with younger generations who have a unique fascination with memes and using images as symbols of history and legend. Additionally, the internet has allowed for artists to utilize the Internet as source material for their works of art in similar ways to how Warhol would use an image from a newspaper, being sure to keep up with socially relevant current events. A parallel can be drawn between Warhol's screen prints of Marilyn Monroe, which he created immediately following hearing news of her suicide, and Kilimnik's *Marie Antoinette Out For A Walk At Her Petite Hermitage* which features the fictitiously doubled character of Marie Antoinette and Paris Hilton, painted in 2005 during the peak of Hilton's reality television fame. What separates the work of Kilimnik and McKinniss, however, is that McKinniss has achieved a garnered interest in his work for his dedication to a period a decade prior to his painting of them. While Kilimnik's *Marie Antoinette* speaks of current events, McKinniss is placing more import in the nostalgia of the scenes which he references. This can similarly be seen with Collins' paparazzi paintings of the Olsen twins, where the twins are now recalled primarily for the height of their fame in the early twenty-first century, but are still famous due to the elusiveness they have carried with them over their years following their exit from the acting world. Now more than ever communities exist on the Internet that are dedicated to nearly everything, with nostalgia for the early twenty-first century having a major comeback over social media platforms such as *Tumblr*, *Twitter*, *Instagram* and *TikTok*.

The secondary thematic element that crops up across all of the artworks which I called attention to during my analysis of late twentieth and early twenty-first century celebrity portraits is the pervasiveness of the "it girl" over history. In all of the aforementioned works aside from

Peyton's *Twilight*, the it girl reappears in the form young starlets in a manner that echoes the Pop Artists' dedication to painting Marilyn Monroe. It is no secret that the world has for centuries had an obsession with young women, dating back to the early twentieth century when the term was unintentionally coined by Rudyard Kipling. Since then, the it girl has taken the form of Monroe, and even Warhol's protégée, Edie Sedgwick, as well as the more recent additions of Hilton, Lohan, and the Olsen twins, all of whom appear in the works I have examined in my study. The star factor contained in these celebrities is, of course, what have made them the subjects of public fascination, so it is no coincidence that artists should take up a similar fascination when finding inspiration for works of art that are loaded with symbolism and cultural meaning. More than anything, the portraits of it girls over the ages have captured not only what makes them a star but have the deeper intention of calling attention to the tragedy and downfalls that often afflict the lives of it girls as a consequence of being thrust into the spotlight at a young age. Recent it girls like Lohan, whose public downfall was consistently featured in tabloids and whose character was relentlessly attacked therefore are almost treated as a morality tale by an artist like McKinniss, who does not hesitate to capture the truth in an albeit dramatized fashion within his paintings.

## Illustrations



Fig. 1. Singer Sargent, John. *Portrait of Lady Helen Vincent (1866-1954)*. 1904. Oil on canvas. Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL. © Birmingham Museum of Art purchase with funds provided by John Bohorfoush, the 1984 Museum Dinner and Ball, and the Museum Store, 1984.121



Fig. 2 Avedon, Richard. *Marilyn Monroe, actress, New York*. May 6, 1957. Gelatin silver print, printed 1989. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2020 The Richard Avedon Foundation.



Fig. 3. X17Online. *Photograph of Britney Spears Wielding Umbrella*. 2007. Photograph.



Fig. 4. Leibovitz, Annie. *Vanity Fair Cover of Miley Cyrus*. April, 2008. Photograph for Magazine Cover. © Vanity Fair.



Fig. 5. Warhol, Andy. *Untitled from Marilyn Monroe*. 1967. One from a portfolio of ten screenprints. Museum of Modern Art, New York. © Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Fig. 6. Warhol, Andy. *Screen Test: Bob Dylan (ST82)*. 1966. 16mm film, black-and-white, silent, 4.6 minutes at 16 frames per second. © The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, a museum of Carnegie Institute. Film still courtesy of *The Daily Beast*: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/bob-dylan-filmed-by-andy-warhol-is-the-daily-pic-by-blake-gopnik> (accessed October 9th, 2020).



Fig. 7. Boty, Pauline. *The Only Blonde in the World*. 1963. Oil paint on canvas. © Tate, London 2020.



Fig. 8. Koons, Jeff. *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*. 1988. Porcelain. © Jeff Koons.





Fig. 9. McKinniss, Sam. *Lindsay*. 2019. Oil on Linen. © Sam McKinniss, JTT Gallery and Almine Rech Gallery. Photo courtesy of Charles Benton for Art of Choice: <https://www.artofchoice.co/sam-mckinniss-recollects-celebrities-in-their-golden-age-at-jtt/> (accessed: June 19th, 2020).

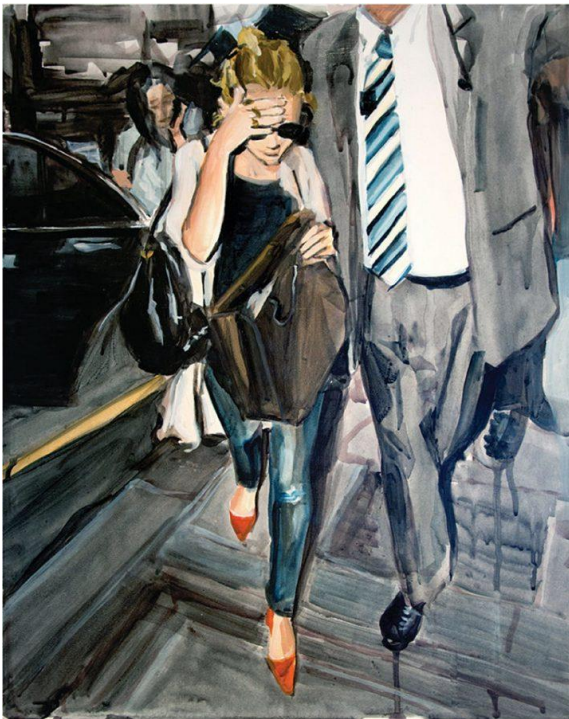


Fig. 10. Collins, Laura. *An Olsen Twin Hiding Behind Her Right Hand* from series “The Olsen Twins Hiding from the Paparazzi.” © Laura Collins.



Fig. 11. McKinniss, Sam. *The Olsens*. 2019. © Sam McKinniss, JTT Gallery and Almine Rech Gallery. Photo courtesy of Charles Benton for Art of Choice: <http://www.artofchoice.co/sam-mckinniss-recollects-celebrities-in-their-golden-age-at-jtt/> (accessed: June 19th, 2020).



Fig. 12. Kilimnik, Karen. *Marie Antoinette out for a walk at her petite Hermitage, France, 1750*. 2005. Courtesy of 303 Galley, New York; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich; Spruth Magers, Munich. © 2006 Karen Kilimnik



Fig. 13. Peyton, Elizabeth. *Twilight*. 2009. Private Collection. Courtesy neugerriemschneider, Berlin. © Elizabeth Peyton

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