

# Gerald Stern

## Andy



Andy Warhol at the Carnegie Institute of Technology (circa 1947). photo: Philip Pearlstein

I first met Andy Warhol at a Carnegie Biennial in Pittsburgh in the late '40s. He was a classmate of Philip Pearlstein and Pat Miller, who would later become Pat Stern, and the three of them came into the front door and up the marble stairs together. I knew Phil from high school and he introduced me to the other two, Andy and Pat, but a little reluctantly in Pat's case since he was apparently in the process, long and slow at the time, of inducing her to remove her clothes and "model" for him. He saw that I was attracted to her and warned her against me since "I hung out at pool halls, flunked courses, and got into fights," which attracted her to me immediately. Of course I had changed since high school but Phil didn't know that. I was by this time a self-declared poet, arrogant beyond belief, reading and writing a good ten hours a day.

Andy, whose name was Warhola then, was thin, quite, and friendly. He was the youngest in his class since most of them, certainly the men, were veterans of the war and were going back to school, or starting over, in their early twenties. He was well-liked and seen as a superb draftsman and colorist. I don't know how many words we exchanged with each other, precious few I think, though we were in each other's presence a number of times, at picnics, in drugstores, in living rooms, at parties. My single favorite memory of Andy

is of him sitting with his legs almost wrapped around each other, with an ice cream cone in his hand and a smile on his face. He was, even then, an observer, detached, a little ironic, but a participant nonetheless, and not superior but interested. We talked about him, even then, as a “voyeur,” but in a general sense and without reference necessarily to his sexual habits. I remember having a lot of affection for him and for the group of which he was a part. I have always had a soft spot for art students, their bohemianism, their group loyalty, their commitment to an idea, the very clothes and colors and smells that permeated their lives, almost a kind of envy that we poets could not have that, that we had only dull pencils and paper and a few books, that the overriding romantic idea was not a constant unless we deliberately introduced it, as I did with my sacred items, books, rugs, special paper, bowls, clocks, photos, pens, plants, statues. And the computer—my God— it only further debased the poet as he joined the company of scholars, secretaries, and petty businessmen and made his or her position, tenuous as it was, only more so as he stared at the screen and moved his rodent around.

I can't remember anything about that Biennial, except that it was either altogether, or mostly, abstract stuff, probably some Rothko, some Guston, some Rheinhardt, maybe Pollack, Kline, or Gottlieb—certainly some lesser-knowns, and we went from painting to painting rubbing our chins, desperate to understand, nodding our heads, positioning our bodies, the way you do. At the time, I wore expensive double-breasted suits, which I got from the credit store my father managed on Liberty Avenue or on upper Fifth Avenue from one of the wholesale houses. And white on white shirts, with elaborate cuff links, pointed shoes, and a rich tie. I was familiar with the bohemian ideal of dress but I was instinctively opting for the idea of the dandy, easy enough since my clothes were free. By the early '50s I would abandon that idea for the costume, the clothes, that have stood me in good stead for the last half-century, corduroys, sweaters, boots, old fedoras. When Pat met me she thought I was rich. She certainly knew before long that I was disdainful of the slow-minded and was a kind of dictionary of partial knowledge—though maybe I'm being too hard on myself.

Andy and Phil went to New York City to find work in commercial art when they graduated from Carnegie Tech. Andy, who already had a stunning portfolio, would in a matter of weeks get major assignments in freelance illustration and design in *Glamour*, *Mademoiselle*, *Vogue*, and other publications whereas Pearlstein got nowhere. Their teacher at Tech, Balcome Greene, who walked around the quiet college neighborhood with his two aristocratic Russian wolfhounds and an aristocratic wife, used his influence to find them an apartment just off Tompkins Square Park, on St. Mark's, for the summer, and that fall (1949) they found an apartment together on Twenty-first Street in Chelsea. I found out later that Andy, after he and Phil went their separate ways, lived in an apartment on West 103<sup>rd</sup>, the same street I lived on, a block or so away and probably at the same time. But I didn't know it at the time, nor did we ever see each other.



Arthur Elias (front left), Philip Pearlstein (back left) Andy Warhol and Leonard Kessler (right), all classmates at Carnegie Institute of Technology (circa 1948/49).

The biography I used has Andy and Phil making several forays to New York before they left for good in the summer of 1949. It describes them boarding a train “late one evening” and arriving at the Pennsylvania Station “around dawn” certainly a perfect time to arrive, just as the light was pouring into the vast hall. They may have planned to meet on the train but it was I who drove Andy—alone—to the East Liberty train station (no longer in existence) in my father’s new 1949 Ford and said good-by on one of the platforms. He had one of those flimsy cardboard suitcases in one hand and a painting maybe twenty-four inches by eighteen in the other, which he apparently intended to take with him to New York. He suddenly gave me the painting, in a gesture of friendship or indifference, which he cemented with a quizzical smile, as if to say, “Do you really want such a thing?” He clearly didn’t hold it dear or he didn’t want to be bothered with it or he was showing his cosmic detachment or he just wanted me to have it and take care of it. I was delighted with the gift, maybe the first painting I ever owned, and treasured it. My only private place in my parents’ apartment, I am a little ashamed to say, was a long closet in which I had built bookcases for my fast growing collection. I nailed the painting to my wall, the right on the door when you entered alongside the pull chain, and it gave me a secret pleasure when I walked into that closet to retrieve my sleek new Auden or my huge Rabelais.

The painting was grey, blue, and white, with a firm black line, a representation of an older woman, extremely well done, glasses on her nose, a kind of wen on her chin. I had met Andy’s mother—Julia—once and the painting reminded me of her. It also looked like Andy himself just as the 1974 portrait of Julia at first blush looked shockingly like him, a stouter, older female Andy, the same face. At least I thought so, his own hand at work this time, the painting less mechanical, more expressive, more vulnerable and emotional, than the other things he was doing. Less detached or ironic. Julia was born in 1892 and Andy in 1928, so she would have been approaching sixty in the earlier painting, an older mother, certainly an older

mother for the time, particularly in the Slovak or Carpatho-Russian culture she came from; Slavic Andy.

When I left Pittsburgh for New York I gave the painting to my mother to take care of, along with my boxes and my old drawings and poems and she put it in a bin or locker in the basement, along with her other treasures, which we protected with a padlock. It wasn't that it had any value over and above my own connection with the artist and my attachment to the work itself. It was 1949 and Andy wouldn't be doing his tin cans, dollar bills, and comic strip characters for another decade. I took a full-time teaching job in the fall of 1956 and Andy Warhol was the farthest thing from my mind. Even when he became a world-famous figure I paid little attention, I was so busy with my own life, trying to stretch the money and find the right words. Nor was I much interested in pop art itself. It was Soutine I loved, and the Apollo of Veii, he of the large eyes and shattered arms, and I rather loathed art that was ephemeral and facetious and mocking. Even when it occupied the whole of what was once Volkwein's Music Store across the river on the Northside, once a separate city called Allegheny, where good Gertrude Stein was born, one of the famous Jews in his series of paintings called *Ten Portraits of Jews of the Twentieth Century*, including Einstein of course, and Freud and Kafka and Buber and the Marx Brothers, such a zeal he had for exploitation, such an opportunist he was, the saintly simpleton.

When Andy died in 1987—on my birthday—my mother had been living in Miami for nineteen years, and she would continue to live there till her death in 1993; she was born in 1900, eight years after Julia, probably three hundred miles away. I began obsessing about the painting, a ghost by now, and when I went to Miami a few weeks later from my annual visit I immediately started to ask her about it. She had a huge closet off her bedroom where her things were stored, certainly as large as the dark bin in Pittsburgh. I called him Andy Warhola to identify him and she remembered “the thin, raggedy Polish boy with pimples,” whom she had met once, I told her he was not Polish but Slovak, that yes he did have bad skin and that he was a millionaire, the term I used instead of “famous painter” or “underground filmmaker” to draw her attention.

We both went rushing off to the oversize closet to search for the painting. There were heavy leather suitcases covered in dust, a couple of ratty old fur coats, rows of ancient dresses, some with the tags still on them, twenty pair or so of shoes, some dreary books, a couple of lamps, a broken-down Hoover, and a large unfinished painting of me, age sixteen or seventeen, posing in a chair, my muscular legs painfully crossed, the painting covered with a yellowed sheet, the painter my cousin, Schimmy Grossman, done the four or five months he was an “artist,” for which my father gave him probably twenty dollars, some time in 1941 or '42—but no Warhol. We unpacked boxes, we went through thirty years of large stiff pocket books with tarnished clasps, we breathed in dust, some of it gathered into small balls, but Andy's painting wasn't there.

We went back to the living room to take stock, I sitting in my accustomed chair, my mother in hers, both of us sneezing. She was full of remorse and desperately tried to remember how the painting got lost. But it was small, maybe it leaned against the wall and the movers didn't see it. As usual, I found myself consoling *her* for my loss, though she was responsible for it. It wasn't that it was a great painting, it was only a student

work; the *value* was partly in the money and partly that it was the early work of a world famous artist as well as being a link to my own relationship with Andy. I ask myself how I would feel if it was an early Pearlstein I had lost and not that of a cult figure like Andy. Would I have reclaimed it years ago and nailed it to the wall? Do you leave a Pearlstein in a bin?

I sat there thinking that I not only conflated the ghost painting with Julia but I was beginning to include my own mother as a companion piece and I would then have compounded all three of them, though no one had ever painted her; and what it would have been like if Andy had taken a polaroid of her, and caught her girlish beauty—though she was eighty-seven—and did something with her heavy makeup and her blue hair and her eyes that were full of grief and fear. I made her tea, as I always did, and she cleared her throat by way of forgiving herself and the world its careless and destructive ways, and to show her gratitude.

I was in Iowa City when Andy died and I took his death in stride, more bemused than shocked, and I wondered at the time, with the details of his life so much in the news, why I hadn't ever visited the Factory, why I didn't knock on his door even once, he who was as cunning and resilient as the other Pittsburgher, Andy Carnegie, who also got other people to do his dirty work for him, who also had his own elaborate explanation and who also put a crown on his own head, like Napoleon. My guess is that when I drove Andy to the train station in 1949 he sat in the front seat looking straight ahead, maybe hugging his knees. He was probably impressed by the car, the gearshift knob, the curved front window. When we said good-bye, there may have been a cursory shaking of the hands, a brief touch, with no pressure from his side. I was doing him the simplest of favors, saving him from taking several streetcars, or, God forbid, a cab, which could have cost him three dollars, a sum he couldn't afford—which, ah, makes me think for the first time that he was possibly "paying" me for the ride with the painting. For which I owe him much change and a worthy receipt. Though then, as later, it was hard to know *what* was in his mind. Probably nothing. Probably it just was what it was and had no poignant or metaphysical aspects about it. I thank him though for the painting; I'm sorry I lost it.

Andy Warhol during a reception for inaugural portfolio artists, 1977.

