



Mike Bidlo shows off his re-creation of Andy Warhol's Campbell's soup can paintings at the Piezo Electric Gallery in Venice.

Mike Bidlo is proud to be a copycat

To this artist, imitation is the sincerest form of publicity

By Hunter Drohojowska

Mike Bidlo has an attitude that is considered typical of artists in the '80s: Unlike artists of the past who shunned publicity, Bidlo courts it.

Bidlo, 32, has made his reputation by reproducing exact replicas of masterpieces. Last year, he re-created Picasso's "Guernica" at the Larry Gagosian Gallery — and he was in town last week to re-create Andy Warhol's exhibition of Campbell's soup can paintings originally shown at L.A.'s Ferus Gallery in 1962, now at the new Piezo Electric Gallery in Venice.

Where did his career as an imitator begin? "It started with the cult of originality I was taught in

college at the University of Illinois in Chicago," Bidlo explains, adding that he received his master's degree there in 1975. "It didn't matter where I was in school, because everybody was still sitting in dark rooms and seeing the same images from art history. It worked as a pressure cooker on me. Even as a student, it was frustrating to see a certain precedent, within my own work and in others. After I moved to New York, I saw precedents everywhere. I'd see David Salle's show and think of Picabia. I'd see Keith Haring and it was so much like Penck. It was increasingly frustrating because I also saw these precedents in my own work."

The precedent that brought Bidlo to the attention of the art

world occurred in 1982, when he re-created the celebrated incident in which a rebellious Jackson Pollock urinated in Peggy Guggenheim's fireplace. That stunt launched Pollock onto the pages of Life magazine. But such publicity only further tormented an already troubled genius. Pollock died in a drunk-driving accident in 1953, only five years after beginning his landmark drip paintings.

Bidlo's re-creation was acclaimed in all the right magazines, but such publicity never bothered his conscience. He is of the generation of artists who most admire Andy Warhol, whose mantra is made up of the letters "P.R."

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For Bidlo, his first solo show was an epiphany. In re-creating Guggenheim's apartment, he had to repaint her enormous Pollock mural, drip by drip. It was the sort of idea that was in the right place at the right time. Artists everywhere were involved in deconstruction, recontextualization and challenging the cult of originality. In short, they were questioning the biases of the art history they had been taught in school.

For the next year, Bidlo began to reproduce the classic canvases of Pollock's career: "Blue Poles," "Lavender Mist," "Autumn Rhythm." He said he was reclaiming Pollock from the art world of the elite and confronting us with our conditioned reflexes.

The blond, blue-eyed artist, originally from Chicago, lives on Times Square in New York, but still has a wholesome Midwestern appearance. In Venice, he wants to sit in the sun at the Sidewalk Cafe, talking about his art while watching the skaters pass. He doesn't look like the type who'd try to sell the Brooklyn Bridge or hoodwink sus-

ceptible art collectors.

Bidlo's belief that it was impossible to create something new led him to start re-creating the old. Other artists, such as Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince, were working along the same lines in photography, questioning ideas about originality and ownership. But Bidlo sees them as approaching the problem conceptually from the other side.

"Their work uses deconstruction, where mine is more of a reconstruction. They use photography, while I reconstruct pieces physically, in the same size, with the same materials," he says. "In my work, there is no transfer of materials."

When Bidlo found himself creating an altar to Pollock and about to have a retrospective of all his Pollock paintings, he wondered if things hadn't gotten a little out of hand. "I didn't want to turn this thing into more commercialization," he recalls. "My dealer said, 'But this thing is really taking off!' But I decided 'enough,' and went on to do the Schnabel piece."

Since Bidlo's targets were the icons of contemporary and modern art history, it made sense to copy Julian Schnabel's plate painting "The Death of Fashion" — espe-

cially after the Village Voice reproduced the piece, claiming that Schnabel had copied a work by Rodchenko. That gave Bidlo's piece an added interpretation. Was it a Schnabel or a Rodchenko once removed? "It was a brash gesture," Bidlo admits, adding he only copied one Schnabel, fearing he might add validation to that artist's career.

Bidlo went back to modern art history, doing a Leger that took a month and a half, then Picasso's "Demoiselles D'Avignon," which took two months. When Sherrie Levine came out with her copies of Leger watercolors, Bidlo suffered a moment of self-doubt. "Is this too much?" he wondered. By 1983, appropriation, borrowing from the vast image bank of art history and pop culture, was threatening the two-year-old supremacy of the neo-expressionist painters. Bidlo was suddenly, and uncomfortably, part of a movement.

He plunged on. In 1984, he re-created Warhol's silver-lined "Factory of the '60s" and began copying his mentor's silk-screens. He also reproduced a series of Giorgio Morandi paintings for a much-assaulted show in Italy.

When Bidlo is asked why anyone should take his work seriously, why one shouldn't dismiss it all as an

obvious hoax, he is momentarily given pause. "For a while, I didn't know why I was doing it," he says thoughtfully. "Then I realized I was interested in art that was political, like that of Hans Haacke, that is subversive. But it was also important that the art be seductive. It has to draw people in. Seduction and subversion make up what good art should be.

"It's a personal exorcism as well. When I'd go into the Museum of Modern Art and see 'Demoiselles

"It's not what you do, it's how far you take it, how obsessive you really are."

Mike Bidlo

D'Avignon,' I'd think, 'How beautiful.' Then wonder, 'Is that because we're conditioned to think that it's beautiful, and an important piece of art?' This work liberated me from that thinking. It changed my relationship to the piece. I can go now and see it as totally original and new without feeling that burden, the burden that makes people whisper in museums as if they were in a church.

"Everyone has to deal with those feelings in their own way and this is mine," he adds. "These images from art history become icons. The tradition of the avant-garde artist is to deflate the previous generation, like the impressionists going against the Salon in Paris. This is like rebelling against your mother and father in a way."

But past generations responded with new, not copied, forms of art. "A totally original piece of art is impossible today," Bidlo says. "Our

amalgamations, pastiches of style, are called original. Mimicry is an instinctive human function. You can redo plays, music and ballets. In traditional Oriental art, the artist is best who can imitate the master." Does Bidlo tire of making reproductions? "I think about it, but I still have so much to do. I've been working on Duchamp's 'Nude Descending a Staircase' for three years now."

Bidlo has been accosted with plenty of criticism for his work, but he shrugs it off. "If it causes disgust or outrage, then it's working. If you don't have convictions about it, it's not going to be convincing." Then he adds what might be a motto for the young artist today: "It's not what you do, it's how far you take it, how obsessive you really are."

Bidlo sells his work for between \$5,000 and \$10,000, "depending on artist and scale." That makes the paintings a bargain if a collector doesn't bother telling viewers that his Pollock is really a Bidlo/Pollock. The young artist seems incensed by such an observation. "I wouldn't want anyone like that to have one of my works, and I don't know people like that," he snaps. In fact, all of his works are signed on the back with his hand print as well as his signature.

Nonetheless, Bidlo returns to Piezo Electric to talk to a group from the L.A. County Museum of Art, led by curator Howard Fox. As 30 minutes of slides are shown, from "Peg's Place" to the artist's studio crammed full of copies of paintings by Lichtenstein, Warhol, Pollock, Gottlieb, Leger, Picasso, even a sculpted head by Brancusi, members of the audience gasp in awe, not in shock. One woman raises her hand. In a tone of voice that is only half-kidding, she asks, "How would you like to stay at my house for about a year and a half?"

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.