

COMMENT

The Andy Warhol Diaries: the big focus is the significant nature of Warhol's relationship with two men

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In the final episode of *The Andy Warhol Diaries*, a six-part biopic mini-series on Netflix, the American artist Glenn Ligon muses on making and understanding art: “In some way it’s the way we figure out who we are rather than express who we are . . . the making of the work is an exploration of what we are, rather than like, ‘I’m this, and I just put it on the canvas’.” Ligon is talking not just about how we read art, and the fact that Warhol’s sexuality was broadly ignored by popular art history, and in most public-facing readings of his work for many years after his 1987 death. When the Irish Museum of Modern Art held its significant Warhol show in 1997, *Andy Warhol: After the Party, Works 1958-1986*, none of the publicity material mentioned he was gay.

The Netflix series, written and directed by Andrew Rossi, is based on the 1989 book edited by Pat Hackett, a friend to whom Warhol dictated diary material over the phone. The big focus and to some, revelation, is the significant nature of Warhol’s relationship with two men: Jon Gould and Jed Johnson. Anyone interested in Warhol’s personal life will already know these names. In her 1989 book, *Famous for Fifteen Minutes, My Years with Andy Warhol*, Ultra Violet (the professional art persona of Isabelle Dufresne) is matter of fact. Of Jed Johnson, “baby skin, blue eyes, an innocent look”, she writes, “he is devoted to Andy and they stay together for ten years.” Of Jon Gould, “a

handsome black-haired young executive with Paramount [who] met Andy in 1981”, she notes “they were together on and off until Andy’s death.” Gould actually died five months before Warhol in 1986. Dufresne writes, “Even though Andy is open in his own circle about his homosexuality, he tries to keep it secret from the public.”

The motivation behind *The Andy Warhol Diaries* is a determined exploration of this gap. It also offers new reading of later works as a response to the Aids epidemic. One of its most aptly Warholian aspects is the use of an AI voice so it sounds as though Warhol is narrating his diary entries (it’s the actor Bill Irwin morphed to sound like Warhol).

It’s easy to agree Warhol would have loved this use of technology as a neat realisation of his oft-expressed maxim “I want to be a machine”. But it’s not easy to know how he would have felt about the intimate revelations. Curators tend to link that statement to his use of commercial, mass-reproduction methods including screenprinting and film-making, but Dufresne noted in 1989 it’s also a clear if cleverly veiled public comment on his approach to intimacy. Warhol told her he preferred phone sex because he didn’t like to be touched and that he recorded “sex-phone” conversations, including with the writer Truman Capote, with whom he also had a physical relationship.

Posthumous biopic making is tricky territory, but Warhol left ample documentation behind, possibly anticipating its future use.

One artist who has embraced the potential of the living biopic with admirable vulnerability and honesty is Seán Hillen, the Irish collage and photomontage artist. *Tomorrow is Saturday*, directed by Gillian Marsh, is a truly personal and intimate portrait of the Newry-born artist who was diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome late in life. The film explores his mental state as mirrored in his seemingly chaotic physical environment, and the potential for a relationship with a woman called Amy, with whom he has only ever spoken online. Already available on the RTE Player, it’ll soon be rubbing shoulders with Warhol, as it’s set for a Netflix streaming release this summer.