

## Pay It No Mind



A



B



C



D

Glenn Ligon

Our country knows how to concern itself with these huge figures in black America—people who are long gone, or alive but well out of reach. This same America, however, has no idea what to do with the average, ordinary black American. It's those black people many hear about but never see socially, professionally, running errands, relaxing, leading. Or it's those black people you see but never speak to, because how? Or it's those black people you speak to, but never actually get to know, because why?

—Rembert Browne, “Everyday Excellence,” *New York Times*, February 3, 2018

## 1

I got some questions. Did Warhol know any ordinary black people? What black folks were in his orbit? He knew the legendary ones: Michael Jackson, Diana Ross, Jean-Michel Basquiat, O. J. Simpson, but did he know Jim-Jim, or Elton (who everyone called Tossy), or Florence, or Julia Mae? Zora Neale Hurston once said, “The *average, struggling, non-morbid Negro* is the best-kept secret in America.”<sup>21</sup> Did Warhol know any of them?

Warhol had a factory where he made superstars. There was Viva, Ultra Violet, and Baby Jane Holzer. There was Edie Sedgwick, Brigid Berlin, and Candy Darling. There was Nico, International Velvet, and Holly Woodlawn. Were there any black superstars?

There was Dorothy Dean, a black woman who appeared in a number of Warhol films and who thought up his nickname Drella (a portmanteau of Dracula and Cinderella). Radcliffe and Harvard educated, the first black fact-checker at the *New Yorker*, a bouncer at the downtown club Max's Kansas City, immortalized by authors such as Robert Creeley, Darryl Pinckney, Lynne Tillman, and James McCourt, and photographed by Robert Mapplethorpe, Dean, the self-described “Spade of Queens,” was sui generis, and, to borrow the title of Hilton Als's searing *New Yorker* profile of the legendary African American *Vogue* editor André Leon Talley, “The Only One.”<sup>22</sup> Was Dorothy Dean a superstar? Not sure. I can't find anyone who ever called her that, despite the fact that she was glamorous. Blackglama, as they used to say, “becomes a legend most,” but in Warhol's universe Blackglama does not a superstar make.

## 2

At a press conference at the Palazzo dei Diamanti, Ferrara, in 1975, just before the opening of an exhibition of Warhol's *Ladies and Gentlemen*—a series of commissioned portraits of colored trans women—Warhol stated that the subjects depicted in the paintings were people he knew in New York. “I see them all the time,” he said. “They're friends of mine.”<sup>23</sup>

Right.

Did Warhol know Marsha P. Johnson?

Marsha P. Johnson was both ordinary and extraordinary. Born Malcolm Michaels Jr. on August 24, 1945, in Elizabeth, New Jersey,

she was one of seven children in a working-class family. By age eighteen she had gathered her few belongings and whatnot and moved across the river to New York, joining a community of transgender folks, queers, and queens who gravitated toward Greenwich Village, the West Side piers, or the bars, SROs, and movie theaters near Times Square. Marsha was an integral part of the uprising that followed a police raid at the Stonewall Inn in June of 1969, having thrown a shot glass into a mirror inside the bar while shouting, “I got my civil rights!” (an act that would later be referred to as “the shot glass that was heard around the world”). In 1970 she joined her friend the trans activist Silvia Rivera in founding Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) to fight for the rights of transgender and queer youth. Throughout her life Marsha pushed for greater visibility and acceptance of the trans community, inspiring a generation of activists who came after her.

Marsha P. Johnson, Saint Marsha, Black Marsha, or sometimes just Malcolm came to the Factory—Warhol's studio space, then on Union Square—late in the summer of 1974. Warhol studio assistant Ronnie Cutrone would remember her as the one with the “Mary Hartman wig,” recalling the hairpiece actor Louise Lasser wore on the satirical TV soap opera *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*—although that show premiered in January of 1976, almost a year and a half after Marsha's photo shoot. I think her wig served as more of a Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz*, or a vintage Etta James, but whatever. Marsha had a lot of looks: baby's breath, feathery parrot tulips, day-old roses, and plastic fruit in her hair, going-out-for-the-night wigs, going-to-church wigs, everyday wigs, turbans, hatlike things, little tops, furs, and what have you. Sometimes she just rocked her own hair, a modest Afro that suited her wide, expressive face. For the photo shoot at the Factory, Marsha wore her blond bouffant Judy Garland/Etta James wig with tresses that hung down onto her shoulders, red lipstick, a rhinestone necklace, a string of red beads, a pair of dangling earrings, and a black top with a plunging neckline.

Neil Printz, throwing shade in Warhol's catalogue raisonné, explains the paucity of images of Marsha in *Ladies and Gentlemen* (pages 309–11)—a mere two canvases out of the hundreds Warhol produced—by analyzing her photo session with the artist. “If Warhol had a problem with Johnson,” he wrote, “perhaps it was that she was not charismatic enough as a model. Apart from a handful of poses, where she performs her role as ‘Saint Marsha,’ Johnson does not really vamp. Her celebrated outlandish style and outsized character, so striking on the streets, diminish in front of the camera.”<sup>24</sup> Shade. As Marsha would have said, “Pay it no mind.” To me, contrary to Printz's assessment, the Polaroids showcase Marsha's joy, her negro sunshine, and her broad theatricality (fig. E). She seems to be having a good time—well, as good a time as she was willing to deliver for the \$50 she was likely paid for the session. Not to say that \$50 wasn't a lot of cash back in the day, but considering Warhol was being paid nearly a million for the commission, Marsha's payment was just knickknack money. That Warhol even used models he found outside of the Factory, instead of using the drag queens and trans women he already knew, was a cost-saving measure, for he was certain that the models for *Ladies and*

A. Marsha P. Johnson, Christopher Street Liberation Day, New York, June 20, 1971. Photograph by Diana Davies. Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library  
B. Johnson, n.d. Photographer unknown. C. Alvin Baltrop, *Marsha P. Johnson*, n.d. Gelatin silver print, 4 1/2 x 6 3/4 in. (11.3 x 16.8 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Photography Committee. D. Johnson (left) and Sylvia Rivera (right), cofounders of the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), Christopher Street Liberation Day Gay Pride Parade, New York, June 24, 1973. Photograph by Leonard Fink

*Gentlemen* wouldn't return to ask him for more money every time a painting using their image was sold. Business is the best art.

Here is Reina Gossett, transgender artist and activist, who teamed up with filmmaker Sasha Wortzel to create a brilliant film project celebrating the life of Marsha P. Johnson, *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, speaking about the visibility of trans people:

Her image and ideas were extracted throughout her life, while she experienced so much violence—from the police, the outside world, and often from lesbian and gay activists and artists. It is this kind of violent extraction—of black life, trans life, queer life, disabled life, poor life—that leads so many of us to hold our ideas close to our chests; to never let the world see how brightly we shine.<sup>5</sup>

Marsha was already a star. No need to shine for Warhol, to give him her light, although she did, as if she couldn't help herself. Since there isn't an audio recording of her photo sessions we can't really know what transpired in the Factory that day, but what we do know is that Marsha made her money and it was cute for a minute but then "back to life, back to reality."

### 3

The idea for the series *Ladies and Gentlemen* came from Luciano Anselmino, an art dealer based in Turin. After commissioning several portraits of Man Ray, whose work he represented in his gallery, he approached Warhol about a commission of 105 paintings in four sizes depicting trans women. Anselmino suggested that instead of using images of Candy Darling, Holly Woodlawn, or Jackie Curtis, drag queens and trans superstars already within Warhol's orbit, he use ones of a "completely anonymous and impersonal travestite [*sic*]."<sup>6</sup> Bob Colacello, long-term Warhol associate and editor of *Interview* magazine, wrote that Anselmino didn't want portraits of trans women who could pass for women but "funny-looking ones, with heavy beards, who were obviously men trying to pass."<sup>7</sup> The first model Warhol used was Colacello himself, who was photographed and filmed during the summer of 1974 in a halter top or sleeveless turtleneck and various wigs. The results were not cute. Warhol then decided to send Colacello and some other emissaries out to find some real talent.

There was a club called the Gilded Grape near Times Square, on the north side of West 45th Street just off Eighth Avenue, where the trans women used to hang out. Warhol had been there once with jewelry designer Kenneth Jay Lane and a "bunch of titled Parisians, sightseeing." "But the people they had come to stare at," Colacello said, "stared at them."<sup>8</sup> Fearing they were going to be preyed upon, they hid their valuables. It was at this bar that Colacello later recruited models for *Ladies and Gentlemen*. Cutrone and Corey Tippin, a freelancer at the Factory, found the rest of the models through personal contacts they had and by scouring the area around the Christopher Street piers, offering cash in exchange for a sitting. Warhol used fourteen models in all for the series.



E



Here's how it's done: Take a lot of Polaroids of trans women. Choose the images you like. Have them made into acetates at the size of the paintings you are going to make. Do line drawings based on the acetates. Use transfer paper to place those drawings onto canvases with a background color already painted on them. Paint in local color corresponding to the transferred drawings, or ignore the drawings, using phthalo blue, raw sienna, cadmium red, dioxazine purple, pale pink, and every color that comes to mind to depict areas of flesh, hair, clothing, and background. Print silkscreens made from the acetates in black or other colors on top of the multicolored canvases you have just painted.

4

*Ladies and Gentlemen* are portraits and not-portraits. They are portraits in that they are images of particular people. They are not-portraits in that the images of colored trans women are used as a chance to play-play, to use color without regard to resemblance or verisimilitude. Warhol had done this earlier in his career with his riotously colored self-portraits from the 1960s, but contrast the painterly abandon in *Ladies and Gentlemen* to his mid-'70s portraits of Mick Jagger, Muhammad Ali, and art dealer Leo Castelli, or his commissioned portraits from the same period, where colors are kept within a somewhat naturalistic framework. He toned it down for paying customers. The models in *Ladies and Gentlemen* are, after all, not paying customers, they have been paid. Doowutchyalike. And besides, as the paintings are to be packed off to Italy, most of the models will never, it is assumed, see the finished products, and even if they did, are certainly in no position to read Warhol's depictions of them.

Ironically, perhaps this freedom to play with the representations of colored folks was a reaction to the (relative) freedom Warhol saw in the trans women before him, the freedom, despite the violence and trauma that marked their daily existence, of a self-invented life. In an essay on my own forays into portraiture—a group of paintings based on coloring-book pages drawn on by young children—Wayne Koestenbaum writes, “Color is the star, and s/he arrives with tiara-and-boa hoopla, a giddy sense of the unfettered and the disallowed.”<sup>9</sup> Color is disruptive of depiction, of orthodoxies, of boundaries. Warhol looked at the trans women in front of him, faces done, wigs, hats, and the like, and he was freed up to use all the colors in his arsenal. Let me, too, feel freed up to make a leap: from “color” to “colored.” Let me imagine that Marsha was a colored star who arrived at the Factory both “unfettered” and “disallowed.” Let me say that Warhol was—even from Marsha, whose images he used the least—“feeling it,” and his “feeling it” awakened a kind of abandon in his painterly practice, a desire to see color out of place. Let me say that joy works in mysterious ways.

In a famous television interview, James Baldwin was asked if being “black, impoverished [and] homosexual” made him think, “How disadvantaged can I get?” To which Baldwin responded fiercely, “Oh no, I thought I hit the jackpot. It was so outrageous, you could not go any further. So you had to find a way to use it.”<sup>10</sup> How did Marsha find light at the bottom? How did she shine, sitting under those hot

lights at the Factory, as Warhol posed her this way and that in order to take her image? How did she pick herself up, push on, rise up? How did she use what she had, which was almost nothing, and make something fabulous out of it, make it echo around the whole world? I am ending with more questions than I started with but I am praying to Saint Marsha, hoping she will give me guidance and wisdom, or at least come to me with her hats and wigs and grin and a roll of the eyes to tell me to “pay it no mind.”

Notes

1. Zora Neale Hurston, “What White Publishers Won’t Print,” *Negro Digest*, April 1950.
2. Hilton Als, “The Only One,” *New Yorker*, November 7, 1994, p. 99. See also Als, “Friends of Dorothy,” *New Yorker*, April 24, 1995, pp. 85–95.
3. Andy Warhol, quoted in Neil Printz and Sally King-Nero, eds., *Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 4, *Paintings and Sculpture Late 1974–1976* (New York: Phaidon, 2014), p. 59.
4. Neil Printz, in *ibid.*, p. 43.
5. “Reina Gossett on Transgender Storytelling, David France, and the Netflix Marsha P. Johnson Documentary,” *Teen Vogue*, October 11, 2017, available online at <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/reina-gossett-marsha-p-johnson-op-ed> (accessed March 28, 2018).
6. Luciano Anselmino, quoted in Printz and King-Nero, *Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné*, 4:24.
7. Bob Colacello, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 25.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
9. Wayne Koestenbaum, “Color Me Glenn,” in *Coloring: New Work by Glenn Ligon* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2001), p. 11.
10. See, e.g., Hilton Als, “The Enemy Within: The Making and Unmaking of James Baldwin,” *New Yorker*, February 16, 1998, available online at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1998/02/16/the-enemy-within-hilton-als> (accessed April 2018).