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ART NOTES

A Heavyweight Art Fight Grips Houston: It's Picasso Versus Warhol — and It's Time to Choose an All-Time Champion

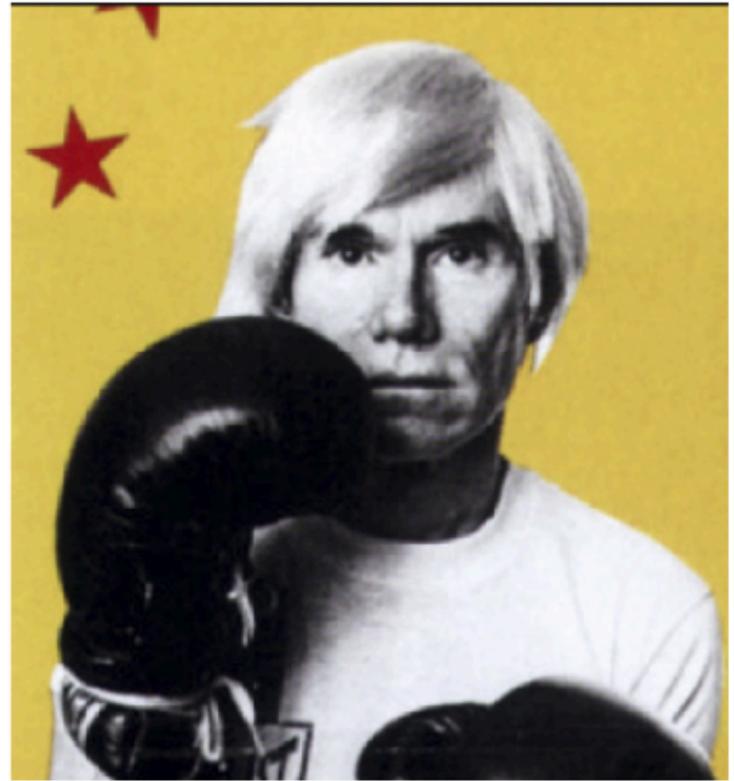
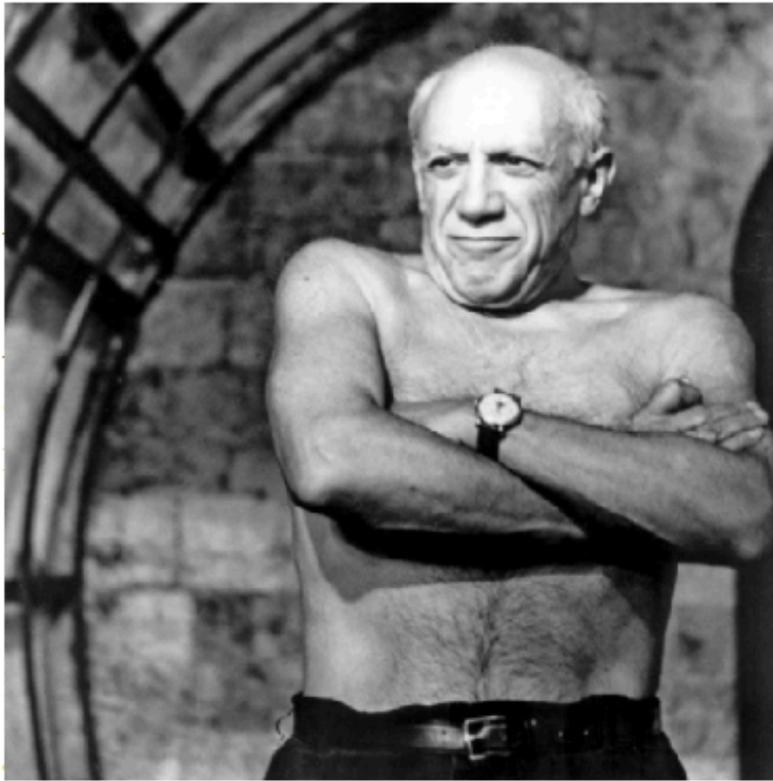
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Sculptural elements of "Weeping Woman," 2016, were recently created from materials — reclaimed tires and poured concrete — found on Smith's family estate, the famed Yturria Ranch in Raymondville, Texas.



Picasso versus Warhol plays out in Houston this spring.

Two exhibitions, concurrently on view at [McClain Gallery](#) and newcomer [Cindy Lisica Gallery](#), feature headliners who raid art history, appropriating specific images from the masters they emulate. Who's coming out standing in the showdown? We'll let the viewer decide.

In real life, Picasso's favorite nemesis was **Matisse**, and each painter famously kept track of what the other was doing; Picasso outliving Matisse, to be declared the winner by default. Decades later, Warhol's closest rival might have been the gentleman of the Benday dots, Pop comic painter [Roy Lichtenstein](#). When Warhol discovered Lichtenstein had beat him to cartoon imagery, he immediately abandoned it to mine other, perhaps richer territory.

One wonders, what would it have been like if Picasso and Warhol had each been of the same generation? So it's left for contemporary painters to riff on their legacy. Cue **Ray Smith** and **Travis K. Schwab**.

At **McClain Gallery**, the illustrious mid-career Smith, a veteran of the Whitney Biennial, stands in one corner of the ring with his series, “Unguernica.” His is a prodigious talent that straddles the tradition of Mexico’s magic realism and Surrealism, then adds a punch of political commentary. Smith takes as his point of departure for this exhibition Picasso’s most ambitious work of art — **Guernica**, 1937, an icon of 20th painting, which serves up a searing indictment of the horrors of the Spanish Civil War, executed in somber shades of black, white, pale blue and gray on a grand scale. (The 11-foot-by-25-foot canvas, a national treasure, is now in the permanent collection of the Reina Sofia in Madrid.)

The fact the Smith succeeds — creating a body of work in *Unguernica* that comes off with power, married to a raw physicality of materials — is remarkable. He avoids a sense of parody, which would have been the province of a lesser painter. Smith, who grew up in a fabled family with multicultural roots spanning Texas and Mexico — the **Yturria** ranching dynasty of South Texas — conjures imagery that crackles with unrest and outcry. This series can be read as a contemporary critique of border politics and U.S. relations with Mexico, a topic that crackles throughout the fraught air of this election year.

Across town at **Cindy Lisica Gallery**, in the 4411 Montrose Building, self-taught Pittsburgh painter **Travis K. Schwab** is introduced to Houston audiences in a three-person show, “Over Time.” Schwab’s subject matter — film and photo media, celebrity culture and fandom — are all filtered through a very cool, even chilly, Pop culture of image-gathering. Watch for two riffs on scenes directly culled from stills in Warhol’s movies *Sleep* (1963) and *Couch* (1964). Both considered “anti-films” as well as brilliant forerunners of today’s video art, the former focuses on a pal of Andy snoozing for five-plus hours, while the latter records the often naughty antics on the Factory’s sofa. Both of Schwab’s takes on the original outtakes have been exhibited at the **Warhol Museum** in Pittsburgh.

You’ll also have an opportunity to see more of Schwab’s brooding realism-dissolving-into-abstractions sampled from media and moving images. Lisica mounts “Plastics,” opening next month, including a black-and-white head shot of Warhol fully wigged from behind that emits all the dispassionate glamour of the Pop master from Pittsburgh.

One is tempted to ask the CAMH or MFAH to stage a face-off, with artworks presented from both these shows, Smith versus Schwab ringside, side by side.

Until then, you’ll have to make due by visiting both galleries, back-to-back in one afternoon.

“Ray Smith: Unguernica,” at McClain Gallery, through Saturday, March 5, but most works in the exhibition will be held over, up through Saturday, April 30. Travis K. Schwab, in the group view “Over Time,” at Cindy Lisica Gallery, through Saturday, March 12; and in his solo, “Plastics,” at Cindy Lisica Gallery, April 22 through May 28