Blake Gopnik

Growing up gay in homophobic Pittsburgh, where queer-baiting cops stood ready to shoot, Andy Warhol found that relationships were vital for figuring out who and how to be. In high school, there was his friendship with Nick Kish, a rare fellow aesthete who helped Warhol resist the roughneck culture of their working-class world. In his college art department, Warhol learned from gay teachers who showed how aesthetics and erotics might form a secret alliance. Among the window dressers Warhol worked with one summer, he discovered colleagues who weren't afraid to fly their fag-flag. From such friends, mentors and role-models he learned how to take power when you weren't supposed to, and how to cede it—or pretend to—when you had no choice, turning that surrender into a power all its own.

The portraits in this exhibition reveal Warhol's peculiar relations to the people around him, and how he sought power over and from them.

Yet even before he turned to painting faces, his pioneering Campbell's Soup paintings found a place in his power dynamics. Asked about them in 1961, when the paintings were barely dry, Warhol smiled slily and said, "I think they're portraits," and that makes a kind of obscure sense. They offer up their labels, face-like, to our eyes, and seem both laden with meaning and refusing to yield it—not revealing character, as that useless cliché about portraits would have it, but holding it close even though it's clearly there. In the terms of Warhol's gay New York world, the camp curlicues of the soup's Victorian label hide behind the can's persona as a sober mass-market product. In portraying one of those cans, that is, Warhol might have been depicting his own concealment. Yet as its portrayer, he gains the power to reveal it.

When it came to the people he depicted, Warhol longed to be close to those whose powers he most admired, and yet always risked feeling small beside them. The anxiety of influence ran quick in his veins. It's there in his portraits, as well.

Robert Rauschenberg was one of Warhol's power figures. His 1960s Pop Art descended direct from Rauschenberg's innovations of the previous decade, as no one knew better than Warhol himself. (When a suite of store windows were unveiled in January of 1956, they featured one of the first of Rauschenberg's pioneering Combines, alongside some weak, pre-Pop drawings by Warhol that clearly stood in its shadow.) In the fall of 1962, Rauschenberg came to Warhol for a lesson in his new photo-silkscreen technique, and Warhol can only have been pleased to see the influence moving in the other direction—but also must have worried that, after teaching his technique, he'd have ceded power the lesson had claimed for him. The photo-silkscreened portrait he soon did of Rauschenberg—the very first true portrait of Warhol's Pop years—counts as both a paean to his predecessor and as an assertion of a kind of priority, displaying Warhol's ownership of the means that would let Rauschenberg move forward in his art.

There's also a kind of cancelling-out going on in that painting, in Rauschenberg's almost disappearance into the dark-blue ground—it seems a deliberate attempt to make a portrait that conceals more than it shows. (In using a color so close to Yves Klein's famous blue, Warhol may also have been diluting one important predecessor by merging him into another.)

Warhol admired and envied Bob Rauschenberg, but more than anything he wanted to cast the shadow of his own art over his rival's.

Whenever Warhol went on to depict a fellow artist—from a revered predecessor like Man Ray to potential rivals among up-and-comers like Francesco Clemente, Keith Haring and

Jean-Michel Basquiat—there was always a suggestion of both admiration for someone else's talent and of domination, as marked by Warhol's unique power to portray.

The most complex relationship Andy Warhol had with any portrait sitter was with a man born as Pittsburgher Andrew Warhola, not worthy at first of portrayal at all.

From "André" Warhola, the cuddly "bunny" of the Carnegie Tech art department, to Candie Warhol, the fashion-forward ephebe of 1950s gaydom, to Andy Warhol, at last a world celebrity known, in the 1960s, as the vampiric undergrounder in leather and shades, the artist's personas were always as constructed and artificial as could be. Portraits-in-the-flesh, you might call them. Warhol lost himself in them, while always knowing there was no there, there, where he could truly be found.

The famous finger-on-lips self-portraits that Warhol launched in 1966 depict him as unrevealing and absent, while implying that he's busy revealing himself to be just that in portraits which, like all portraits, can't themselves be trusted to reveal. In the version of that self-portrait on view in this exhibition, only faint traces of the person survive, as Warhol's face dissolves into flat fields of color. But that means the persona-as-absence is all the more intact, in a portrait whose shadows glow brighter than the features that catch the light.

If Warhol's feelings toward his rivals were always complex, his relations with dealers were fully vexed. He longed for the approbation and support of such great taste makers, and especially deal makers, as Sidney Janis, Bruno Bischofberger and Thomas Ammann—all featured in this show's portraits—but was acutely aware of the power they wielded over him and his art, and the ways in which their social status outdid his. Warhol's dealers held a place in elite culture that an eccentric gay artist could never hope for. Their status helped them bring sales and commissions that meant a great deal to Warhol, but that always left him worried as well about his own authenticity as a creator. "Guess I'm a commercial artist," Warhol said, after getting several high-paying commissions from dealers. "I guess that's the score."

Warhol's portraits of the truly great, in politics and culture, might be the ultimate example of him asserting his power as an artist.

In the early 1970s, when Warhol offered up his thousands of paintings and screenprints of Chairman Mao, there's a sense that the sheer extent of the project had a kind of diluting effect. It's as though Mao's real-world potency was being parceled out among all those varied portraits, which in the normal course of things should have reinforced his unitary presence and unique power. Mao's very iconicity—his easy descent into image and art—reduced him to the level of modernity's other mass productions, like soup cans and Brillo boxes and even dollar bills. The particulars of Mao's treatment by Warhol just reinforced the effect: Having lost control of his image by having it so eagerly multiplied, Mao can now be subject to an artist who, in some paintings, gives him lipsticked lips and rouged cheeks or, as in the canvas in this show, almost erases the Great Leader under smears of green paint, as though he's nothing more than a support for a painter's clichés of expression.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe fares rather better, in the 1981 painting in this show. Warhol's college textbook thought fit to launch its first chapter with a long quote from Goethe, and then cites him throughout; the Pop artist's portrait treats him with equal respect, underlining his features with a classic drawn line.

Even Warhol, as competitive as anyone, can't count the great writer as a rival to be cut down.