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## ‘Pop Art’ at the MCA showcases plastic, whimsy, commercialism

By Steve Johnson  
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Pop art wasn’t just happening in the galleries, as a new show opening Saturday at the Museum of Contemporary Art makes clear.

It was happening in design studios, in furniture stores and on the streets, and the results included such tweekers of convention as a sofa shaped like a garishly lipsticked mouth and a chair in the shape of a foot.

Andy Warhol’s soup cans counted as pop — uber-pop, even — but so did a garbage can shaped and painted like a Campbell’s soup can, produced by a design firm in homage to Warhol, the new exhibition “Pop Art Design” argues.

So, too, did Tupperware designs such as four colored plastic nesting bowls with lids, shown here under museum casing even as items very similar might be found in the MCA employee break room refrigerator.

“Pop had such long tentacles into all kinds of aspects of culture,” said Michael Darling, MCA’s chief curator and curator of “Pop Art Design” plus a concurrent, adjacent, more fine-art-focused show, “The Street, the Store and the Silver Screen: Pop Art from the MCA Collection.”

On both sides of the museum’s fourth floor, the fine art half and the mostly furniture half, the galleries this week were awash in color and in vibrant, playful, often plasticky ideas as the shows were being installed.

Italian-designed chairs, one with a bicycle seat for its perch, one with a tractor seat, dared people to think more closely about the idea of furniture.

Floor lamps that look like rocks asked, Why not? Nobody would question the notion of carving stone into a lamp.

A sofa dressed in American flag colors and built of cardboard arrived in a puzzle of sturdy little pine boxes bedecked with metal clasps.

“The crates are way more elaborate than the couch was ever designed to be,” said Darling.

But whimsy is a big part of pop art, toying with the idea of what is artful. It’s one of the reasons the museum is optimistic about the shows drawing crowds, as “Pop Art Design” has done at European museums. (It originated at the Vitra Design Museum in Germany; Darling curated its installation here, which includes MCA artworks on the walls in dialogue with the furniture.)

“Pop art still is a viable kind of language,” Darling said, stressing the “colorful slickness” and continued “accessibility” of the work. Not many of us will hang anything like one of the Lichtensteins featured here, or even the Warhol prints, but many of us did hang the Milton Glaser Bob Dylan poster, the one with the rainbow-colored hair. We’ve all used a vintage Coke machine, and we’ve all sat in an aggressively designed chair that made us wonder whether Aunt Ethel was cooler than we realized, or completely off her rocker.

The shows are neat complements to the two recently mounted exhibitions on the MCA’s main (second) floor. “Kathryn Andrews: Run for President” showcases an up-and-coming artist with overt pop sensibilities, a conscious choice, Darling said. “Surrealism: The Conjured Life,” like the new pop art show upstairs, features works from the MCA collection and includes the work of Chicago painter Ed Paschke.

(Paschke represented a Midwestern pop sensibility, Darling said, which was more “funky and sleazy” than the warmer West Coast and cooler East Coast versions.)

Meanwhile, down Michigan Avenue at the Art Institute, the new Edlis/Neeson Collection relates to all this pop, as well, with its batch of modern and contemporary masterworks. A centerpiece is the gallery of 10 works by Warhol, who really is the godfather of pop art, Darling said.

A big Rauschenberg that collectors Stefan Edlis and Gael Neeson gave the MCA is part of its own pop art shows. And there’s a lot of Warhol on display at the MCA, too, from a soup-can-print dress to a row of soup-can prints.

“You really can’t extinguish his influence. It keeps going and going,” said Darling. “It’s still so radical. He’s cozying up to banality so strongly that it’s still shocking people today. ‘Why is a picture of a soup can art?’”

Such questions are engaged with throughout the pop art shows. Because an exhibition about furniture and ideas needs appropriate places to sit down and think, Darling has bought some modern versions of the very seating implements on display: a George Nelson Marshmallow sofa, for instance, some Eames chairs.

On the “Street, Store and Silver Screen” side of things, MCA has brought out of storage some of its “classic pop pieces,” said Darling. Highlights including a Claes Oldenburg fried egg soft sculpture, a 1964-65 Christo sculpture, Orange Store Front, and photos of the original MCA building on Ontario Street, wrapped for a Christo project in 1968.

The part of Darling’s exhibition titled “The Store” is explicitly about the embrace of commercialism by pop art, but you can see that influence living on merely by going downstairs at the MCA to visit the museum store, which was especially bustling at holiday time. Like an extra gallery in the pop art exhibitions, it’s packed with items that straddle the line between commerce and art.

“These artists were so unabashedly interested in commerce and consumption,” Darling said. “It feels like they were the first people to embrace that and accept it as a true expression of the modern era.”