

Richard Hamilton



RICHARD HAMILTON *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?*
1956 (reconstructed in 1992)
Cibachrome. Collage
26 x 25 cm
Private collection

DATES: 27th June 2014 / 13th October 2014

PLACE: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid)
Sabatini building. 3rd Floor.

CURATORS: Vicente Todolí and Paul Schimmel

COORDINATOR: Rafael García

From June 27 to October 13, 2014, Madrid is to host the largest retrospective held to date on the British artist Richard Hamilton. The exhibition, **organized by the Reina Sofía**, was designed specifically for the Madrid museum by Hamilton himself, who became directly involved with the work when he visited the city in the early months of 2010. This is the last project in which this pioneer of Pop Art and prophet of postmodernism was directly involved before his death in September 2011. The show is therefore the first full retrospective of the work of the artist, who affirmed: "I would like to think of my purpose as a search for what is epic in everyday objects and everyday attitudes".

The exhibition to be seen at the **Museo Reina Sofía includes some 270 works created in the course of more than sixty years (1949 to 2011)**, and shows both the extraordinary variety of media, techniques and genres that characterizes Hamilton's production, and the importance, influence and relevance of his revolutionary work. It is curated by **Vicente Todolí** and **Paul Schimmel**.

The exhibition is made up of **paintings, engravings, drawings, photographs, computer printouts, industrial designs and replicas**. In these pieces, the artist tackled genres like the still life, the portrait, figurative representation, landscape, interiors, historical painting, political propaganda, religious iconography, and the appropriation of elements from popular culture and art history.

The exhibition is further distinguished by the important presence of **five large-scale installations**, which recreate exhibitions that the most influential British artist of the 20th century organized, designed or took part in.

The installations on display are *Lobby*, 1985-7; *an Exhibit*, 1957; *This Is Tomorrow*, 1956; *Man, Machine and Motion*, 1955; and *Growth and Form*, 1951. The last of these is on view for the first time since it was created 61 years ago. Three of them can also be seen at the Tate. Besides the fact that they may be considered precursors of the happenings of the late fifties and early sixties, these installations also anticipate the abandonment of hierarchies in artistic milieus and the emergence of an international creative sensibility in the nineties which gave rise to the concept of the artistic installation in contemporary art.

The retrospective also looks at the importance of Hamilton's relations with design, painting, photography, technology and television, as well as his collaborations with other artists, examples being the portraits of himself which he invited other artists to take with a Polaroid camera, among them Francis Bacon, Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein.

The sources of Hamilton's inspiration were very diverse, ranging from mechanical drawings to popular culture, and from the work of old masters like Fra Angelico and Giorgione to modern artists and authors like Marcel Duchamp and James Joyce.

The plurality of his work, heterogeneous but at the same time coherent, built a bridge between the modern and postmodern eras, making him a major figure for the new generation of artists influenced by conceptual art. Indeed, Hamilton is internationally recognized not only as one of the founders of Pop Art but also as a precursor of appropriationism, the installation, and other trends that have since been cultivated.

The exhibition

The exhibition has been established depending on thematic areas and not in a strictly chronological order.

Reapers, 1949

In 1949, while studying at the Slade School of Fine Arts in London, Hamilton produced *Variations on the theme of a Reaper*, a series of etchings impregnated with a dadaist aesthetic that demonstrate his interest in mechanics and scientific diagrams. Hamilton studied the morphology and function of these machines in order to convert them into an instrument for conceptual investigation. The reapers suggest a link between the organic world of the earth and the industrial world of mechanised agriculture, a reflection of his youthful interest in bonds between the artificial and the biological.

Growth and Form, 1951

Hamilton's early interests found form in exhibition design. The first was *Growth and Form*, conceived as a collage, partly scientific and partly artistic, which presented a dense network of visual, formal and spatial relations. Juxtaposed with photographs and diagrams of elements of nature were the grid structures of the exhibition furnishings, characteristic of architectural modernity. The superimposition of irregular and biomorphic forms on others that were mathematically determined blurred the distinction between artistic and natural form, appearance and reality.

Paintings, 1950-54

The alteration of organic matter was one of the first issues addressed by Hamilton through a painting framed within contemporary debates on abstraction and figuration. These paintings develop some of the interests in organic and spiral growth and other natural structures that began with *Growth and Form*. His train journeys meanwhile led him to use painting to investigate movement and the individual viewpoint from a means of transport that was crucial to modern visual perception. He noticed that the nearby objects he saw from his window seemed to move in the opposite direction to the train, whereas more distant ones appeared to move in the same direction. This paradox gave rise to *Trainsition*, a title referring both to the word 'transition' and to the phrase 'Train sit I on'.

Man, Machine and Motion, 1955

In the exhibition *Man, Machine and Motion*, Hamilton reflected his fascination with the history of technology and the way means of transportation had altered everyone's vision and experience of the world. It was made up of photographs and photographic copies of drawings mounted on open grid frames and arranged at different heights according to whether their nature was "aquatic", "terrestrial", "aerial" or "interplanetary". He thus joined the debate on the role of the grid in contemporary culture, as studied through a variety of disciplines like engineering, art theory, history or city planning. In spite of the rationalist appearance of the installation, there was also a surrealist poetic underlying it.

Pop, 1957-63

The role of sensuality in contemporary design and advertising was the central element of Hamilton's first incursion into popular culture. The relationship between consumption and visual pleasure is suggested by the curves of american auto design (as *Hommage à Chrysler Corp.* points out), or can be associated with the lips of a screen icon like Voluptua in *Hers is a Lush Situation*. Hamilton's focus on pop culture is sophisticated and objective, sober and at the same time sensual, but far from the irony of Roy Lichtenstein or Andy Warhol. During those years, Hamilton listed the characteristics of pop art: popular (designed for a mass audience), transient (short term solution), expendable (easily forgotten), low cost, mass produced, young (aimed at youth), witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous and big business

Hamilton / Duchamp

Duchamp's work was a constant referent throughout Hamilton's career. In the fifties, he studied his work at length and made an English translation of the notes of the *Green Box*, in which Duchamp compiled the details of his great project for *The Large Glass*. When he organised an anthological exhibition on Duchamp in 1966 at the Tate Gallery in London, Hamilton made a replica of the work because it was too fragile to travel from the United States. This room gathers some of the results of Hamilton's detailed study of each and every element of that complex work, together with *Five Tyres*, connected with the poetics of Duchamp in its interest in marking the trace left by an everyday technological object like a tyre.

This is Tomorrow, 1956

For the exhibition *This is Tomorrow*, Hamilton collaborated with other artists on the design of *The Funhouse*, made up of images from Hollywood cinema, science fiction and advertising, and completed with various sensory stimuli. The result wavers between enthusiasm and criticism for the central role played by the mass media in popular imagery.

For the poster and catalogue of *This is Tomorrow*, Hamilton created his celebrated collage *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* It brought together his interest in design and in the effects of interiors on people's lives, his concern over the impact of television and, above all, his appropriation of images from the media, which acquired new contents when recontextualised. A tape recorder, a body builder, a topless model or a poster for a cheap novel pointed to the beginning of pop and its approximation to mass visual culture.

People, 1965-69

Towards the mid-1960s, Hamilton investigated the limits of the different forms of representation. He experimented with the enlargement of the photographic detail to the point where the image ceases to transmit a precise message to the viewer. The application of oils to a selected area of each photograph gives the scene different degrees of intelligibility. The double deterioration or distortion of the image (through enlargement and the application of paint) reveals the grain of the photo and brings the final result close to abstraction.

Interiors I, 1964

As matter for plastic investigation, the interior, whether domestic or otherwise, soon became a subgenre which Hamilton worked on throughout his career from different points of view. The artist once claimed that every detail of the interior of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* "bears a testimony to Spanish history." The same can be said of his own interiors in relation to the contemporary world, altered forever by the presence of objects, like the telephone or the television, that are ready to invade the private space with information.

Swinging London, 1968-1969

In his design for the album "*The Beatles*" (known as the "*White Album*"), Hamilton conceived a monochrome cover with no distinguishing mark except for the band's name in relief. In numbering each of the 5 million copies released, he managed to effect an eloquent internal critique of Beatlemania and the consumerism associated with it as a mass phenomenon. In the series *Swinging London 67*, Hamilton altered a photograph of Mick Jagger handcuffed together with the art dealer Robert Fraser after their arrest for

drug possession. By turning “Swinging London” into “Swingeing London”, Hamilton was referring to the “swingeing” sentence.

My Marilyn / I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas, 1964-71

A magazine feature about contact sheets on which Marilyn Monroe had scratched out the images that failed to correspond to the construction of her public image, the artist translated Marilyn's marks into paint, and in some cases completely covered the images with layers of colour. He was thus interrogating the visual pleasure offered by Hollywood cinema to the male gaze, and the confusion between the persona and its representation for mass consumption.

I'm dreaming of a white Christmas, a film-still, a colour ‘positive’ prompted investigation with oils to produce a ‘negative’ in colour on canvas. It follows from a duchampian idea about everything's having an opposite.

an Exhibit, 1957

an Exhibit allowed Hamilton to display his aesthetic and conceptual preoccupations in a more concise way. Conceived as a “game”, an “artwork” and an “environment”, it called for the interaction of the viewer and investigated the relations between vision and movement. The hermetically abstract works meant that the viewer's gaze was not focused on the thematic content but on the exhibition's structure. The methacrylate panels from which the pieces hung generated reflections and created indeterminate spaces similar to those offered by film and television.

Polaroids

Hamilton asked numerous artists to take portraits of him with a Polaroid camera. He discovered that the choice of setting, the context, the framing, the angle and the lighting conditions reflected the sensibility of each artist. This was especially paradoxical in a medium like the Polaroid, with barely a few seconds elapsing between the taking of the picture and its development on paper.

Fashion-Plate (cosmetic study), 1969

In *Fashion-Plate*, Hamilton took photographs of models in illustrated magazines to make collages that reflected upon the portrait genre from a perspective looking ironically towards cubism. Each face is formed by photographic fragments retouched with makeup and other paints. While they must originally have been the epitome of beauty for advertising purposes, they now veer between the glamorous and the grotesque, betraying the artificial and constructed nature of this type of image, and foreshadowing the digital retouching of advertising images which is such common practice today.

Portraits / Self-portraits

Among the Polaroid portraits taken of him, Hamilton was particularly intrigued by the one by Francis Bacon, and he imitated the marks peculiar to Bacon's painting on a print of it. This was the origin of *Portrait of the artist by Francis Bacon*, an essay in manipulation in two senses: the alteration of the original appearance of the photograph, and the successful emulation of the style of another painter.

Two decades later, he repeated the process of pictorial alteration of a photographic portrait by means of a few simple brushstrokes. Also displayed in this room are other portraits like those of the artist Dieter Roth and the film director Derek Jarman.

Guggenheims 1965-66

In the series dedicated to the edifice of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, it is possible to see a challenge to Pop artist serial works, and at the same time a tribute to the iconic and material aspect of a building that connects with his interest in the organic spiral. The treatment of the building's colour and texture and its apparent conversion into an object tie in with his attention to the brilliantly polished surfaces of domestic appliances.

Products

Hamilton's fascination with the designs of the brand Braun stemmed from visits to the Design School in Ulm, the heir to the spirit of the Bauhaus. Forms, materials, finishes and processes were the object of rigorous study, making Braun products into the quintessence of a sober and imposing industrial design, and also into cult objects for Hamilton. In 2008, Hamilton replaced the Braun logo with his surname in Toaster deluxe series. This resembles his earlier ironic game of converting the logo of the French pastis Ricard into his first name, "Richard".

Shit & Flowers

In an unexpected scatological volte-face, Hamilton drew inspiration for a new work from postcards celebrating the laxative virtues of the waters of the French town of Miers. He associated these images of people relieving themselves in the open air with a new format found in the fashion magazines, that of the squatting model, which allowed the whole body to be shown in a posture that combined provocation and modesty. To this he added the floral aesthetic proper both to advertising for toilet paper and a certain type of traditional painting. He thus reflected irreverently both on the world of glamour and on the cheap sentimentality of certain standardised images in painting and advertising.

Lobby

Lobby was first shown at the Fruitmarket Galery, Edinburgh, in 1988. It reproduced the lobby of a Berlin hotel in various formats and media, from the initial drawings to a collotype and a large oil on canvas. It reflected the interest of his late work in the revival and analysis of Renaissance perspective and the creation of impersonal and claustrophobic spaces in what was supposed to be the welcoming environment of a hotel lobby.

Site-referencial paintings

Hamilton used computer tools to treat images of different spaces in an art gallery and in his Oxfordshire house. Although apparently hyperrealist, these were in fact digitally modified photographs with a few painted features. He thus played with verisimilitude by combining real and virtual spaces.

Protest images

Hamilton tried to introduce a pause into the flow of information offered by television by taking a frozen image and enlarging it. In *Kent State*, Hamilton forces the viewer again and again to see the image of a student seriously injured by the police during a protest. Through this strategy of detaining and "pigmenting" an instant, he was denouncing the indifference of the media and the impassivity of the spectator towards the incessant flow of images. In later stages of his career, Hamilton returned to current political affairs such as Tony Blair's government.

The citizen, The subject, The state

Hamilton alludes in these works to the different sides in the conflict in Northern Ireland. *The citizen* originated with a television report on IRA prisoners who had smeared the walls of their cells with faeces as a sign of protest. The Christ-like appearance of an unshaven prisoner wrapped in a blanket produces a powerful visual impact. *The subject* shows a member of the Orange Order in Northern Ireland during one of their parades in front of a disturbing burst of light that suggests a context of urban political violence. *The state* shows a British soldier warily patrolling the streets while in the opposite direction runs a blurred lane whose end is indiscernible, a reference to the state's perplexity at the situation.

Interiors II and last works

Hamilton would alter the original nature of his images of interiors by adding new elements to them. He returned to the collage as a strategy, resuming his dialogue with the work of Duchamp through the introduction of nudes, which in the cases of *Descending Nude* and *The Passage of the Bride* constitute explicit references to works by Duchamp.

Hamilton began to work on a series inspired by Balzac's story *Le chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* [*The Unknown Masterpiece*], which tells of a painter who is determined to produce a perfect female nude, but manages only to fill the canvas with an unintelligible tangle of lines. This has been interpreted as a precursor of the formal liberty of art in the 20th century. Behind the woman in a reclining pose, Hamilton incorporated the self-portraits of Poussin, Courbet and Titian, establishing a kind of genealogy of artists locked in an unresolved duel with the practice of painting.

CATALOGUE

For this occasion, the Museo Reina Sofía has brought out a catalogue with reproductions of the works on display and texts by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Hal Foster, Mark Godfrey, Richard Hamilton, Alice Rawsthorn, Paul Schimmel, Fanny Singer and Victoria Walsh.

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