Upon first glance of Roy Lichtenstein’s Sleeping Girl, one sees a simple sleeping facial expression that can be interpreted in a multitude of ways. Although the painting’s title is Sleeping Girl, the image comes from a scene in the Girls Romance comic books where the character in question has just had a fight with an unfaithful boyfriend and is not sleeping. In the original image, the girl is crying and her hands are contorted in an image of clear distress. Lichtenstein in his painting has cropped the image close to her face, so all we see are her closed eyes. Her crooked eyebrows are the only detail that gives any evidence that she is in distress. With the original text removed, a pattern of Ben Day dots added, and zoomed in on her face, the painting is made more superficial, and yet more free to be interpreted as the viewer sees it. The image has been stripped of the panels, dialogue, and quick actions that characterize the structure of comics. It is simpler, yet arguably more perplexing.

While comics are formed around words, Lichtenstein’s works were formed around simple images. Even when he sometimes kept fragments of conversation in the paintings, his works were intended to unify an idea, to extract their purest forms. Sleeping Girl is bold and visually intense, but also simple in its depiction of a normal part of life. Pop art is an intensification of every day images; it was, as Lichtenstein said, an “anti-art” depiction of the other. ¹

Sleeping Girl can be used as a clear window into the world of pop art. The movement arose after World War II and represented a more democratic form of art. Simple images and clear, legible pieces of art were easier to digest by the public and less perplexing than the preceding abstract expressionism that had already taken the art world for a whirlwind ride of critique. Shockingly new, pop art was immediately accessible to any viewer, trained or untrained in art history and interpretation. It was easy for pop art to be, literally, “popular.”

Pop artists used mass-produced commercial images in fine art. Lichtenstein, in his acclaimed Girls series, used images taken from comic books to stress their place as graphic, violently emotional images. The artist worked to transform the images not to become more like “fine” art, but even more like the comic books that they came from. The paintings centered around the very existence of graphic storytelling, frozen in time, elicit a perspective on one detail or emotion of the character. These simple yet powerful works were a huge success for the artist; as soon as he started presenting them, he was met with astounding approval from critics and patrons alike. Sleeping Girl, a classic image from this series, came out in 1964. The early 60s were a very successful time for the artist – in 1962, Lichtenstein had 15 shows, many of them one-man exhibits. The paintings remain just as valued today, if not more so– in 2012, Sleeping Girl was sold for almost $45 million. ²

Is the title Sleeping Girl a joke played on the viewer? The original image in the comic hardly depicted her sleeping. The painting may be showing us the weakness in the validity of our assumptions about what we see versus what is cropped out of the picture. By depicting sleep alongside his other pop works that revolve around every day life, sleep is shown as normal while being elevated to a level at which it can be appreciated. Although she may be dreaming, there is so much that is left out of the painting that we are led to make conjectures, hypotheses, and an endless amount of queries about her. The girl in the painting is as mysterious as the science of sleep.

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