Review: 'The Trip' by Deborah Davis

By Scott Porch

AUGUST 27, 2015, 9:01 AM

Andy Warhol made his first trip to the West Coast in the fall of 1963 for a solo exhibition of his silk-screen prints. The trip — a two-week stay that included a party in his honor at actor Dennis Hopper's house, an event with French artist Marcel Duchamp, and a lot of beach time for Warhol to experiment with his new Bolex camera — was a great success. The exhibition was not.

The only sale was a silk-screen portrait of Elizabeth Taylor from a series called "Silver Liz," and the buyer actually tried to return it two weeks later. ("My husband hates the painting, my children hate the painting, my friends hate the painting," she told the gallery owner.) Celebrities were a bit crass in 1963 as a subject for fine art — too much like advertising or movie stills. And too ordinary for a Hollywood crowd that didn't have to look very hard to find pictures of Liz Taylor.

The hallmarks that would come to represent the pop art movement — the clean lines and bold colors, the depiction of celebrities and consumer culture — were already all around, and Warhol saw many examples of it on his road trip from New York to Los Angeles. The stack of oversized magazines like McCall's and Look he brought along for the ride were full of Hollywood starlets and couture. The billboards along Route 66 advertised consumer goods like shaving cream, and the restaurants and motels along the way had giant neon signs.

Warhol's fortunes would change in the mid-1960s as pop art transformed the art world. His silk-screens today fetch auction prices on par with Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, friends and peers who became famous a few years before Warhol did (to Warhol's annoyance). Another "Silver Liz" from the L.A. exhibition in 1963 sold for $24 million in 2011. "Eight Elvises," a huge canvas of overlapping Elvii and the centerpiece of that show, sold for $100 million in 2008.

Deborah Davis' "The Trip: Andy Warhol's Plastic Fantastic Cross-Country Adventure" is both the story of Warhol's life at the moment just before stardom and a clever history of America during that period. In the chapters that cover Warhol's road trip down the long stretch of Route 66 from St. Louis to Los Angeles, the book detours into mini-histories of the Gateway Arch, the Ford Falcon, credit cards, photo booths, Jack Kerouac's "On the Road," Palm Springs and Route 66 itself. Those excursions come at the expense of a tighter narrative, but who doesn't love a quick history of America's mid-century obsession with tiki torches?

Davis has written similar books about other historic slivers, including Booker T. Washington's White House dinner with Teddy Roosevelt ("Guest of Honor") and a star-studded 1966 New York society ball ("Party of the Century"), the latter included Warhol, by that time a huge celebrity in and out of the art world.

Warhol, a New Yorker who didn't know how to drive, made the cross-country trip with his assistant Gerard Malanga, the painter Wynn Chamberlain and actor Taylor Mead. The drive itself has not received much attention from previous Warhol biographers, and Davis was able to determine a lot of the specifics from the trip — what city they were in on which day, where they ate, etc. — from receipts she found in Warhol's archives.

Hollywood wasn't ready for Warhol in 1963, but New York was getting closer. After the L.A. trip, Warhol shed his nebbishy artist look and reinvented himself as the hipster in skinny jeans you see when you Google "Andy

Warhol." He started wearing sunglasses in photos and diving headlong into the shallow end of his new persona. "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol," he said in an interview, "just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it."

There was more to him than that, of course, but not as much as you might think. In the early chapters of "The Trip," as Warhol is becoming a highly sought-after and highly paid illustrator in the late 1950s and early 1960s, he is earnest and approval-seeking, self-doubting as an artist, pining to befriend Truman Capote, who was already a famous novelist. In the chapters that cover the long ride and the two-week stay in Hollywood, though, Warhol is passive and a little dull aside from filming a jokey Tarzan movie with his new camera.

Years later, when Capote said Warhol was "a sphinx without a secret" he meant it as an insult. Maybe Warhol was shallow and self-possessed — or maybe he just didn't share much of what was going on behind those sunglasses — but it's clear from "The Trip" that he was always watching, always processing, always channeling the consumer culture into his work. If Warhol was shallow, he was truly ahead of his time.

Scott Porch is writing a book about social upheaval in the 1960s and '70s.

"The Trip"

By Deborah Davis, Atria, 324 pages, $26

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