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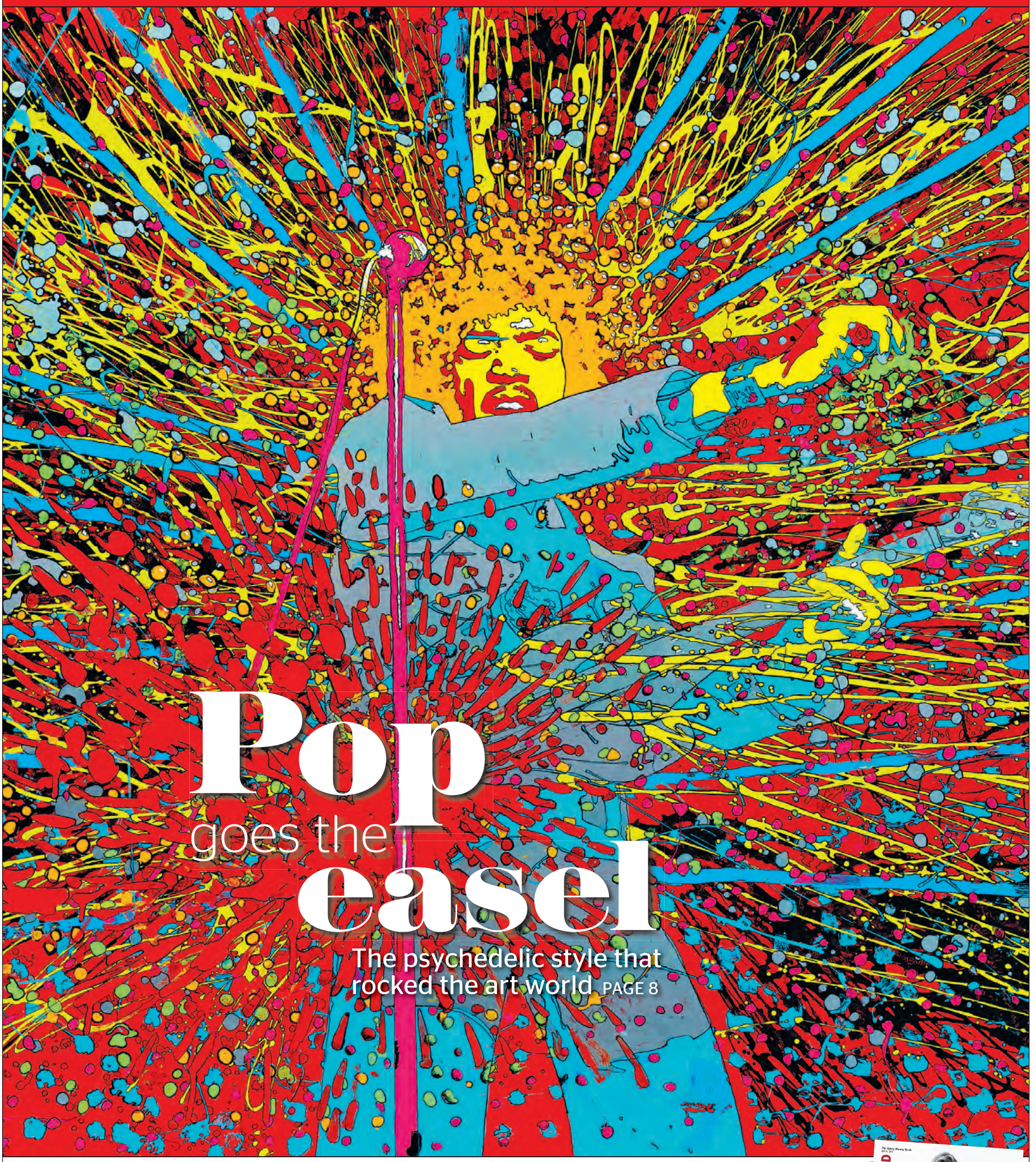

Pop goes the easel

The psychedelic style that rocked the art world PAGE 8

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COVER STORY

Pop on top

The radical style that shocked the art world's stuffed shirts returns in full technicolour glory, writes **JOYCE MORGAN**.

A pensive cartoon girlfriend sheds a tear down a two-metre canvas. Gun-slinging Elvis Presleys stand with six-shooters at the ready. The Beatles in faux military uniforms rub shoulders with a motley crew, from Karl Marx to Mae West.

They are among the icons of pop art, the brash movement that erupted on the art scene like a fractious teenage gatecrasher. For some, the jumble of images – of soup cans and celebrities, comic-book characters and collaged cut-outs – were fun, sexy, expendable and, above all, popular.

Others sniffed the winds of change and detected the stench of crass commercialism pervading the citadels of high art.

"Art galleries are being invaded by the pin-headed and contemptible style of gum-chewers, bobby-soxers, and worse, delinquents," fumed influential US art critic Max Kozloff in 1962.

But with its effervescent imagery and kids' colours, was it simply all surface and no substance? Pop art arose at the beginning of the electronic age, but does it have anything to say to us in a digital age? These are among the questions being considered as pop art returns to the spotlight.

Pop to Popism at the Art Gallery of NSW is the first of three pop art exhibitions opening internationally in the next year. The Sydney exhibition spans three decades, from pop's beginnings in the late 1950s to its highpoint in the late 1960s and revival of interest in the 1980s.

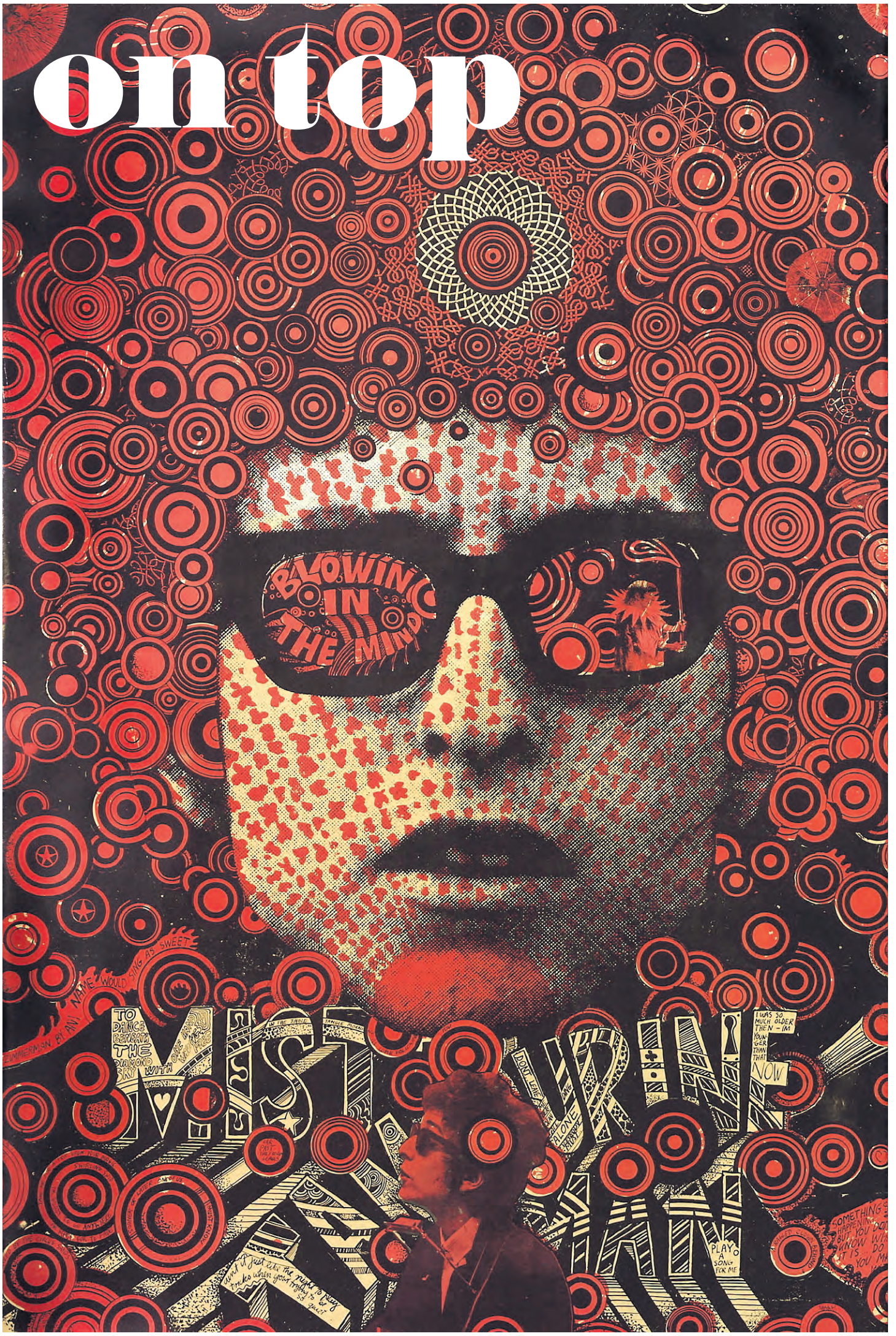
With more than 200 works on display, it will also look at Australia's engagement with pop art by placing images by Australian artists for the first time alongside international works, by Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, David Hockney and others. In doing so, curator Wayne Tunnicliffe has taken a broad-brush approach – Australia produced few pop artists – but many have been or continue to be influenced by the movement, he argues.

"I was interested in pop art as a movement globally," Tunnicliffe says. "It really did have manifestations in many countries around the world, including Australia."

Yet the movement's impact beyond the pop art meccas of London and New York has rarely been considered. It is a view shared by Jessica Morgan, curator of the Tate Modern's forthcoming *The World Goes Pop*. She argues that artists around the globe in the 1960s – from Buenos Aires to Belgrade – were responding to a post-war shift in image culture and a world transforming around them.

"The history of pop was written almost at the time of its making, but it was written largely by American writers, and they were not even aware of pop in other places," Morgan says.

Pop art erupted in a grey, grim post-war Britain, where citizens carried ration cards not credit cards, and in the United States where mass media and youth culture began to emerge. Transistor radios, movies, vinyl records and especially television – with its ceaseless stream of ever-changing images and bold, enticing advertisements – became affordable and available.



In Britain, Richard Hamilton reflected much of this in his prescient 1956 work *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* His collage of a lounge room, often considered the first pop-art work, includes many of the elements that pop artists would later draw on. There is a framed *Young Romance* comic on the wall, a movie theatre visible through a window, an advertisement on the television and a semi-naked body-builder holding a paddle emblazoned with the word "pop".

In the US, the high priest of pop was a fey man in a silver wig who alluded to a future in which everyone would be famous for 15 minutes. Andy Warhol's fame has lasted somewhat longer and his prices today are as eye-watering as some of his images. His grisly 1963 work *Silver Car Crash (Double Disaster)*, in which a body lies amid the wreckage of an automobile accident, sold last year for a whopping $US105 million ($119 million).

Warhol created the work when rebellion was in the air, socially and politically. For artists, that included a rejection of the dominant art movement of an earlier American generation, abstract expressionism, says *Herald* critic John McDonald.

"It changed our way of looking": Martin Sharp's *Mister Tambourine Man*, 1967; (opposite page, inset) Richard Hamilton's 1956 collage *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?*

Soap and soup: (From left) Roy Lichtenstein's *Woman in Bath*, 1963; Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Suite 1*, 1968; an untitled work by Keith Haring, 1982.

"Abstract expressionism was an art of vague, bold, tragic sentiments. It was something which had operatic pretensions and little to do with life, death and the universe," says McDonald. "To a lot of people it was unapproachable. It was elitist. It was the very epitome of a kind of refined taste, an elitist taste. Pop came along as a reaction to all of that."

Pop embraced a new world of consumer goods and mass media, Tunnicliffe says. "So you can see young artists thinking, 'This is my world. I'm listening to Elvis Presley. I'm dancing to Chubby Checker. I'm watching Liz Taylor in movies. You know, I'm eating Campbell's soup. Why can't this be art?'," he says.

Sydney's Peter Kingston, with a love of American comics, came up with a uniquely Australian answer. His 1976 installation *Checkout Chicks* was based on a soap-opera spoof that ran as part of the satirical *Norman Gunston Show*. He continues to draw on pop's imagery.

"I loved the colours and the fact that [anything] could be art. The fact that Dick Tracy comics could be art – high art, really – was thrilling," Kingston says.

In Melbourne, artist Jenny Watson recalls the impact of Pete Blake's collage for the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's* album, and magazine images by Warhol, Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist and Claes Oldenburg, when she first saw them as a teenager in her city's sedate suburbs in the late 1960s.

"[These] affirmed for me that an artist could use ordinary or everyday things, works, labels, in fact a lot of elements I still use today," she says. "I loved the immediacy of the use of ordinary objects. I understood this given my life experience was shopping malls, supermarkets, ordinary houses and television."

The very ordinariness, banality even, of much of pop art's subject matter transformed ideas of what constituted art. And that is perhaps its most significant contribution, says McDonald. "Pop art changed our perceptions of what art could be," he says.

"In many ways it changed our way of looking at art. It made us feel as though art can be something that is instant, that was accessible, that related to things in everyday life that the grand paintings that you see in the gallery do not."

Australian pop drew on the painterliness and collaged elements of British pop and smooth surfaces and cool irony of American, says Tunnicliffe. Such artists as Richard Larter, Mike Brown and Peter Powditch were among Australia's most prominent, but only Martin Sharp shot to international attention, he says.

Sharp's images of Bob Dylan – which cleverly inverted one letter and turned *Blowin, in the Wind* into *Blowin, in the Mind* – of Jimi Hendrix with his guitar a forcefield of energy, and fluorescent pink cover for Cream's *Disraeli Gears*, captured the psychedelic spirit of the late '60s.

Pop had more to it than retina-burning images, says pop-influenced artist Gareth Sansom, a former dean of the Victorian College of the Arts. He found in it a way to comment on the Vietnam War in his 1968 collage *The Great Democracy*. With its juxtaposed images of distorted bodies, a bomb blast and George Washington, it is his only overtly political work.

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>
> MAX KOZLOFF, ART CRITIC, 1962

"It's not that subtle in terms of what I might do now," he says. "But almost left field, if you like, the painting evolved. When you're relying a lot on your subconscious and images are striking you as you're looking through a magazine or a book, you suddenly think, 'My god, I can use that image juxtaposed with that image'. And when you've got the particular images juxtaposed, it becomes a very charged statement."

Pop art had a darker, unsettling side. It was not simply an exuberant celebration of popular imagery. Sansom singles out Warhol's early work, especially his Day-Glo images of electric chairs and series of car crashes as ground-breaking in presenting gruesome images of death and horror in a decorative way.

"People think of Andy Warhol as Campbell's soup cans, but when you see him in depth, his work was much more serious than that," says Sansom.

In pop art's response to the bombardment of images that accompanied the arrival of television and mass media, some see parallels and a new relevance to our own image-saturated world as digital technology – smartphones, tablets and other devices – overwhelms us 24 hours a day.

"When we think about pop, we're often thinking about images that come from news culture, whether it's images of celebrities, or news events, or demonstrations," Morgan says.

"It's a visual analysis that is engaged with the contemporary world … arguably the same culture that we live with at an even more increased pace now. As a strategy, pop is still entirely relevant for approaching the image-based environment that we live in. In fact, arguably even more so."

Pop to Popism is at the Art Gallery of NSW until March 1. Joyce Morgan is writing a biography of the artist Martin Sharp.