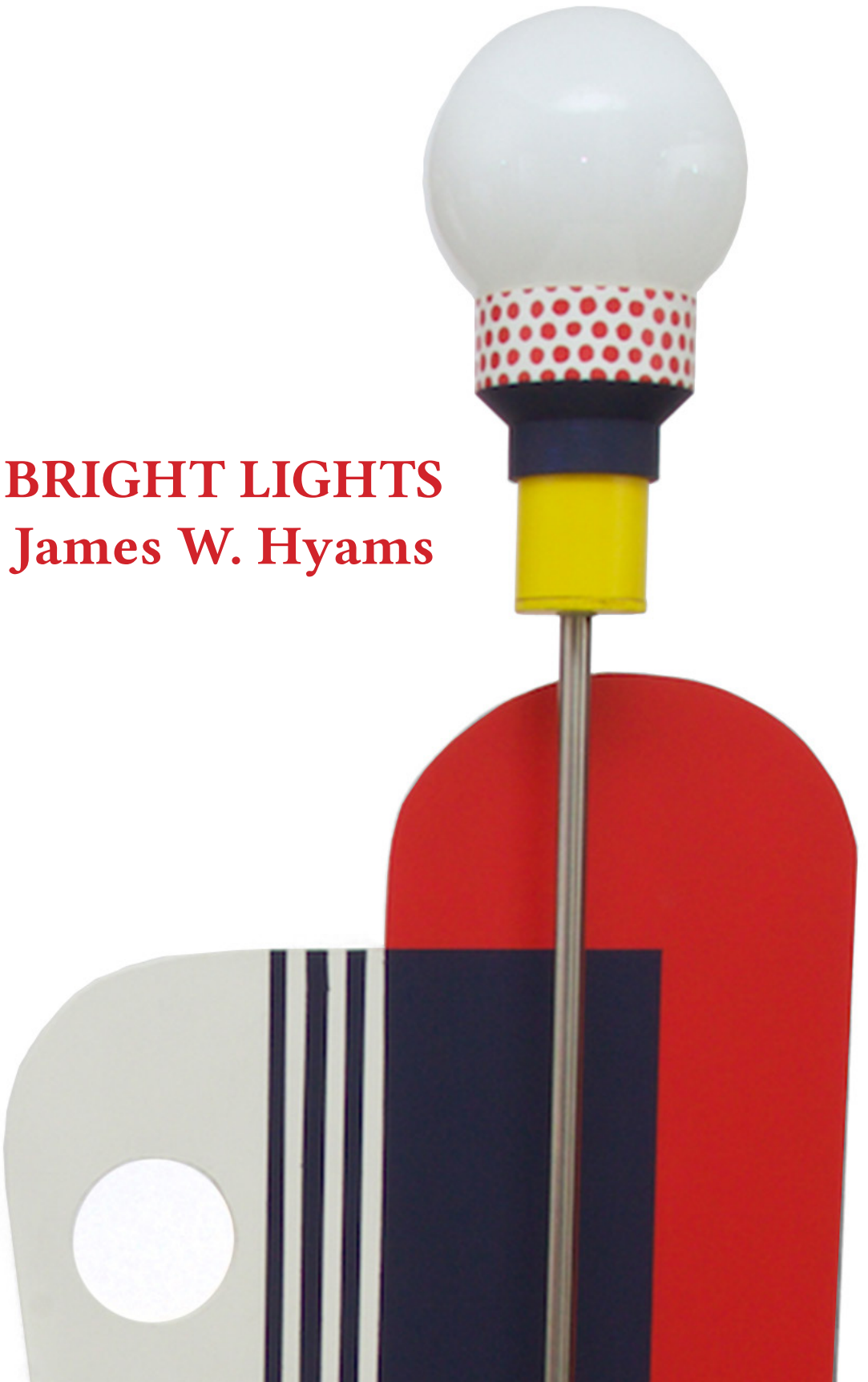


BRIGHT LIGHTS
James W. Hyams



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THE ELEANOR D. WILSON MUSEUM

HOLLINS
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BRIGHT LIGHTS
James W. Hyams

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Director's Note

Jenine Culligan

The art-collecting bug bit Jim Hyams early and hard. Over his lifetime, he has carefully chosen an astounding collection of prints by the most important international contemporary artists.

Surrounded by art in his museum-like home, Jim absorbs—and is inspired by—this work on a daily basis. Living with and loving art can be an end in itself, but sharing your collection and educating people about art is another; in this, Jim has been deeply thoughtful and generous.

The Eleanor D. Wilson Museum has enjoyed a close association with Jim since the summer of 2005 when *Photorealist Prints from the James W. Hyams Collection* was displayed, followed in 2008 with *Print as Muse: Reflections on Vanitas from the James W. Hyams Collection*. Jim has been generous in donating art to the museum's collection as well, with a print by Ron Kleeman and a mixed media work by Robert Kushner.

The Eleanor D. Wilson Museum is pleased to exhibit these ten sculptures created by Jim Hyams, displayed in homage alongside the work that inspired him.

How to Become an Accidental Art Collector and Alleged Artist

James W. Hyams

It all began in 1968. I was a senior at the University of Richmond and a dormitory counselor in a freshman barracks. These old wooden buildings were left over from World War II when they served as housing for a V12 Navy College Training program. They housed forty students. I received a stipend of seventy-five dollars per month.

Although I was certainly not an art collector, I had taken a studio art class and enjoyed creating somewhat mediocre artworks. I also made visits to the galleries and museums. And I was certainly aware of the cultural changes of the times including the rise of a new art movement that replaced the abstract expressionist view with a new realism that reflected our consumerist society. The work of these new artists was called Pop Art and the most notable and publicized practitioner was Andy Warhol.

On one of my trips to Church Hill in the east end of Richmond, I discovered a gallery that I had never before visited. My eye fell immediately on a red soup can. The silkscreen had been recently published. It was by Andy Warhol and priced at three hundred dollars. Compelled to own this exciting work of art, I reached an agreement with the gallery owner to accept four monthly payments of seventy-five dollars each. In addition, I was told I could take the print home that day. A shake of hands and the deal was consummated.

As I excitedly hauled my prize to the bus stop for the long ride to the west end, it occurred to me that I had just spent my

entire income for the next four months. Quick thinking and an exit from the bus near midtown solved the problem. After a short walk to the Department of Social Services to obtain an application for food stamps, I was once again on the final leg of this momentous journey. Not long after, I received word that I would not starve. The payments were made on time and after the final one, I cancelled the food stamps.

One print is a wonderful addition to your home. More than one print is a collection. A few years after the first purchase, I came across another Warhol soup can for sale in a gallery in Washington, D.C. It cost one hundred dollars and I happily purchased it. Whether I knew it or not, I was an art collector.

Now, fifty years later, those two Warhols have grown to over four hundred prints by the best national and international artists.

I should have quit while I was ahead but like a few misguided collectors, I decided to resurrect my own artistic leanings. What you will find in this exhibition are a series of sculptures that were designed to honor and have a bit of fun with a few of my favorite artists. They are all “bright lights” in the history of contemporary art. I hope you enjoy them.



Andy Warhol, *Vegetable Soup*, 1968. Screenprint. Courtesy of the collection of James W. Hyams.



Casual Observations of an Interested Neighbor Bill Rutherford

In this essay my remarks are not scholarly, but simply the casual observations of an interested neighbor. I have known Jim Hyams for twenty-seven years, and in that time enjoyed watching the growth of his contemporary art collection. In addition to being a collector, Jim is also an artist who has made ten sculptures that I think of as totemic beacons, marking the intellectual terrain of his collecting journey. These objects light up and support compartments containing evocations of important works of “post-war” contemporary American art.

When my wife, the painter Beth Shively, and I lived a half block from Jim we were entertained by a 12’ metal sculpture of a galvanized common nail mounted high on the outside of his house. It was positioned to look as though a giant carpenter had driven the nail at an angle through the side wall, subsequently emerging violently through the front wall. We knew that whoever lived there had to be more than a little interested in art. That nail was the first object of Jim’s making that I saw.

In time Jim added works to his contemporary art collection while revealing his own interest in making images and objects, including an impressive postmodern wardrobe cabinet. The colossal nail puncturing the side of his house was a totem to the idea of making, a principal by which he, a self-taught artist, enthusiastically lives while voraciously collecting works on paper by world-class, blue-chip artists.

details from *Bright Lights: Robert Rauschenberg (with a nod to Jasper)*,
Bright Lights: Keith Haring (with a nod to Jenny),
Bright Lights: Damien Hirst



Christo is famous for wrapping things. He and his wife Jeanne-Claude collaborated on enormous environmental projects until her death in 2009. Since then, Christo has continued solo.

The umbrella on top of Jim's Christo sculpture evokes a project in which yellow umbrellas were set up in California while blue ones simultaneously appeared in Japan. These structures were enormous, requiring strong anchoring technology to secure them against powerful winds. Nevertheless, in California one person was killed and others injured by an umbrella uprooted by high winds. In excess of three thousand umbrellas were made for the project which, as in all Christo and Jeanne-Claude enterprises, was financed by the artists through the sale of preparatory drawings.

Included in Jim's sculpture are a wrapped bottle, a pink shape and a bound building, pointing to respectively: 1. ordinary domestic objects transformed by wrapping, 2. eleven islands in the Bay of Biscayne, Miami, Florida, surrounded by pink polypropylene fabric, 3. a number of shrouded architectural monuments including the Pont Neuf and the Reichstag. Never intending that his works be permanent, Christo has said, "I think that it takes much greater courage to create things that will be gone than to create things that will remain." Because of the temporary nature of Christo's projects, art journals were central to documenting his wrapping events in the pre-internet age. To this end Jim's sculpture includes a bundled *Artnews*.

Bright Lights:

Christo

2017

Mixed media



Keith Haring, a prominent street artist in New York, first came to notice in the city subway system. Jim references this context in a tableau format, the only departure from his other totemic sculptures. In this sculpture he presents a tiled environment with a bare fluorescent bulb illuminating a subway platform, complete with bench, subway map, advertisements, and Haring drawings, one on an empty black advertising board along with various figures drawn directly on the walls. On the platform pavement is a crumpled paper placard by activist artist Jenny Holzer who, like Haring, began her career as a street artist.

Haring was a social activist whose signature image was “the radiant baby.” This crawling infant with emanating light rays was the inspiration for the critic Rene Richard’s best-known 1981 article for *Artforum*, “*The Radiant Child*,” in which he discusses Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Judy Rifka. These and other artists of the late 70s through the 80s were intent on breaking down the barriers between high and low art carrying on Warhol’s Pop agenda in their own idiosyncratic ways.

Haring’s activism embraced the crack epidemic, which Jim indicates with his inclusion of Haring’s drawing bearing the “Crack is Wack” slogan. Gay rights and the AIDS crisis were important causes he addressed through his art as well as the Keith Haring Foundation, which provided funding to a range of AIDS-oriented social agencies. Succumbing to an HIV infection, Haring died in 1990.



Bright Lights:
Keith Haring (with a nod to Jenny)
2017
Mixed media



Damien Hirst is an English artist identified with the YBAs, the Young British Artists group that emerged during the 1990s. Hirst has always been preoccupied with mortality and is best known for his presentation of dead animals suspended in elaborate tanks of chemical preservatives.

Jim's sculpture includes a plastic bottle of formaldehyde, alluding to the most famous of the dead animal series, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, a tiger shark that can be viewed fully in the round through the glass tank. Hirst subsequently created a titanium skull, encrusted in diamonds, which was allegedly purchased by an investment consortium for a staggering price. This infamous sculpture was called *For the Love of God*. Pharmaceuticals are also on Hirst's subject matter list, and to that end Jim has incorporated a medicine cabinet in his sculpture.

Damien Hirst, trafficking in elephantine irony, has said, "Immortality is really desirable, I guess. In terms of images anyway." Jim's inclusion of a toy electric guitar, painted as though in a carnival spin-art booth, references Hirst's spin paintings as well as Hirst's interest in rock and roll, particularly his friendship with Joe Strummer, former art student and founder of The Clash.



Bright Lights:
Damien Hirst
2017
Mixed media



A plastic lobster, a basketball, the Incredible Hulk, the Pink Panther, a vacuum cleaner, and Play-Doh are all subjects that Jeff Koons has investigated. All of these are assembled together in one of Jim's sculptures. Jeff Koons emerged in New York City during the 1980s and is closely identified with Postmodernism. His interest in ordinary objects and industrialized approaches to art making bring him in line with Pop Art and particularly Andy Warhol. Both Koons and Warhol embraced banal subject matter and employed large numbers of assistants to fabricate their images and objects.

Koons is also associated with the readymades of Marcel Duchamp. In his early works, Koons, preoccupied with newness, enclosed brand new vacuum cleaners in dramatically lit plexiglass boxes. He, like Duchamp, simply chose and exhibited these found objects, declaring them art. In this way, both artists were able to simply declare the existence of art without actually making anything.

Jim's Koons totem is assembled from found objects in the spirit of Koons and Duchamp, but he departs from Koons by not employing fabricators to enlarge and translate the objects to other materials like bronze or stainless steel. Jim's objects remain in their humble vernacular state rather than becoming the luxury goods of a bloated art market in which Koons perversely revels, as suggested by his remark, "Abstraction and luxury are the guard dogs of the upper class."

Bright Lights:
Jeff Koons
2017
Mixed media



Sol LeWitt, often considered a minimalist, claimed not to be interested in objects but rather ideas. His favorite artist was Eadweard Muybridge, a 19th-century British photographer known for systematic studies of animals and people in motion. His approach was scientific with no thought of creating works of art, however his photographic method yielded images of remarkable beauty. Their beauty was a residual effect of his methodical process. This appealed to the orderly mind of LeWitt.

Jim's luminous homage to LeWitt's systemic grid structures references an early body of work in which the simplest increment of LeWitt's structures (he refused to use the word sculpture) employed a 12" linear square of welded square stock steel tubing. This square could be used exhaustively to produce variants of freestanding, three-dimensional grid structures, spray painted white. In keeping with the minimalist tradition of removing the artist's hand from the art-making process, LeWitt would submit his specifications to an industrial fabricator. This eliminated craft, placing emphasis on the concept. For him, idea transcended skill.

With painstaking skill, Jim made his LeWitt grid by hand, which interestingly subverts the idea of beauty as the residual effect of a system.

Bright Lights:
Sol LeWitt
2017
Mixed media



Roy Lichtenstein, an early pioneer of the Pop Art movement, is best known for his enlarged cartoon images. This practice of enlargement emphasized the industrial nature of printed images. His paintings enlarged the Ben-Day dots used in standard newspaper printings, forcing the viewer to see them as though for the first time. In this way, image and method of facture were given equal emphasis.

The mechanical appearance of his paintings stood in opposition to the New York School's emphasis on the expressionistic gesture. Lichtenstein began painting cartoon-style brush strokes made up of heavy black outlines filled in with flat primary color and superimposed on fields of Ben-Day dots. Lichtenstein described Pop Art as "industrial painting. I think the meaning of my work is that it is industrial, it's what all the world will soon become. Europe will be the same way, soon, it won't be American; it will be universal."

Jim's totem to Lichtenstein's industrialism utilizes a commercial palette of primary colors with strong black and white sections. The planar construction supporting a white bulb is structured as Lichtenstein approached sculpture. While it is a free-standing object, its primary references are to discoveries Lichtenstein made as a painter. The four perforations in the blue and white panel are a negative version of Ben-Day dots.

Bright Lights:
Roy Lichtenstein
2016
Mixed media



Louise Nevelson, a sculptor active from the 1930s through the 1980s, is best known for her assemblages of found wooden shapes arranged within adjacent compartments presented as walls. These were usually black, because she liked its unifying effect and dramatic power. Occasionally Nevelson used white and even gold in what she called her Baroque period. Though she made freestanding works, the imposing black walls remain her signature.

Jim's totem to Nevelson is freestanding; with its rectilinear compartment on top resembling an abstract head, this particular *Bright Light* becomes a portrait of Nevelson's dark theatrical persona, mitigated by the flip of a switch, revealing her interior luminosity. She credited the Cubist movement of the 1930s and 40s with providing an approach to presenting planar forms, which she adapted for her own purposes. To have specifically acknowledged Picasso, infamous for his cavalier treatment of women suggests heavy irony, considering Nevelson's place in feminist art history. She claimed she was "not a feminist. I'm an artist who happens to be a woman." She also said, "The freer that women become, the freer men will be. Because when you enslave someone, you are enslaved."

Bright Lights:
Louise Nevelson
2016
Mixed media



Claes Oldenburg is a charter member of the Pop Art movement, which began in New York City during the late 50s, peaking during the 60s, and to a significant extent remaining present in the work of younger artists like Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst.

Oldenburg is best known for reversing expectations of scale. He would often select an ordinary object small enough to be held in the hand and then enlarge that object to monumental scale. He's done this with shuttlecocks, clothespins, and typewriter erasers, to name a few.

Jim's creamsicle is an object of the sort that Oldenburg was drawn to as he often enlarged food items and had a particular interest in sweets. The two-sided creamsicle supports an alphabet that has autobiographical significance for Jim. The letters are arranged in a way that refers to his family members and friends. The reverse side is a low-relief representation of an Oldenburg print in Jim's collection.

"I am for an art that imitates the human, that is comic, if necessary, or violent, or whatever is necessary," said Oldenburg. "I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life itself, that twists and extends and accumulates and spits and drips, and is heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself."

Bright Lights:
Claes Oldenburg
2017
Mixed media





Robert Rauschenberg had a self-imposed house rule limiting his collecting of discarded flotsam and jetsam to whatever he found during a walk around the block on which he lived and worked. If that didn't yield enough material to work with, he allowed himself one more block in any direction. Rauschenberg felt that art would look more like the real world if it was literally made of the real world. Part of that real world included a painting by his friend Jasper Johns.

Johns was known for encaustic paintings informed by the American flag. They were painted flags but not paintings of flags. They were not representations but objects in their own right. One of his famously terse journal entries reads, "Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it." That is precisely what Rauschenberg did when incorporating Johns' encaustic flag within a large construction. These works were called "combines."

In the spirit of finding and assembling disparate elements, Jim has constructed a totem to Rauschenberg and Johns, the top of which carries an allusion to *Monogram*, Rauschenberg's famous taxidermied goat encircled by an automobile tire. Jim's version uses a small duck and a miniature tire, perhaps a reference to a Johns work called *Decoy*. However, the clear Johns reference is the small flag contained within the winged box supporting the duck. The wings and bottles in Jim's sculpture point to Rauschenberg's *Coca-Cola Plan*.

Bright Lights:
Robert Rauschenberg (with a nod to Jasper)
2017
Mixed media



Ettore Sottsass was an Italian architect interested in furniture design as well as office machinery and jewelry. He founded the Memphis Group with several other designers all active during the 1980s. While his work is informed by Bauhaus design and Pop Art, he wryly aspired to remain as naive as possible in regard to his profession. Towards this end, Sottsass avoided design magazines. This claim is probably tongue in cheek because his designs, while extravagant bordering on absurdity, are clearly informed by modernist concerns.

Jim's columnar assemblage of various found plastic objects catches the Memphis Group design spirit. His clever joining of utilitarian objects seamlessly camouflages their original functions, allowing an abstract reading of shape and color. There is humor and craftsmanship in this sculpture along with a genuine appreciation of Sottsass's contribution to Postmodern design.

Bright Lights:
Ettore Sottsass
2016
Mixed media

Acknowledgements

There are always many people to thank for the mounting of an exhibition. The artist does not act alone in creating what the viewer beholds.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum and to Hollins University for helping to make this exhibition possible. In particular I would like to thank Jenine Culligan, Director, Laura Jane Ramsburg, Assistant Director and Janet Carty, Preparator.

An artist could hope for no more than to have a catalog essay written by one of art's most perceptive and articulate critics. I am fortunate to thank Bill Rutherford for fulfilling that role. I also appreciate the fine opening essay by Jenine Culligan.

Others who were gracious with their time and assistance are the Huntington Museum of Art, Jordan's Custom Framing, Beth Shively, Ruth Epstein who suggested the title of the exhibition, Jeff Hofmann whose fine photographs grace the catalog, Dr. Paul Sorrentino who provided editing and to my wonderful family and friends.

Finally I would like to thank each of you who took the time to visit the museum and experience the "Bright Lights."

James W. Hyams
Portrait by Jeff Hofmann



Checklist of Prints and Multiples in the Exhibition

Christo, *Two Lower Manhattan Wrapped Buildings – Project for New York City*, 1985. Lithograph on paper.

Keith Haring, Untitled from *Three Lithographs*, 1985. Lithograph on paper. Courtesy of the Huntington Museum of Art, Huntington, West Virginia.

Damien Hirst, *Valium*, 2000. Color gloss finish lambda on paper.

Jeff Koons, *One Ball Total Equilibrium Tank*, 1995. Lithograph on paper.

Sol LeWitt, Untitled (from *Doctors of the World*), 2001. Linocut on paper.

Roy Lichtenstein, *Bicentennial Print*, 1975. Lithograph and silkscreen on paper.

Louise Nevelson, *Landscape*, ca. 1955. Etching on paper.

Claes Oldenburg, *Fagends Carved in Rock*, 1975. Lithograph on paper.

Robert Rauschenberg, *Autobiography*, 1968. Lithograph on paper.

Ettore Sottsass, *Carlton Miniature Cabinet*, 2017. Wood and laminate.

All works courtesy of the collection of James W. Hyams unless otherwise noted.

Don't think about making art, just get it done. Let everyone else decide if it's good or bad, whether they love it or hate it. While they are deciding, make even more art.

Andy Warhol

