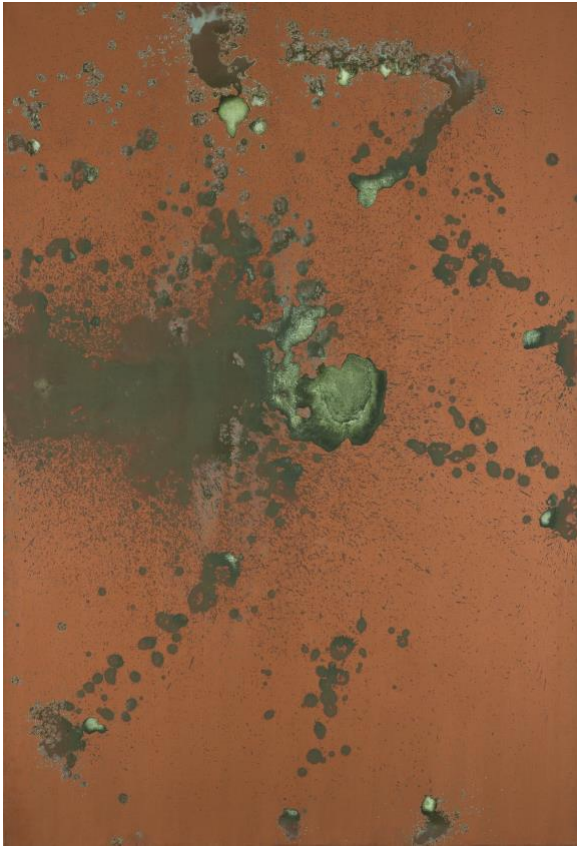


Andy Warhol: *Oxidation Paintings*

By [Ekin Erkan](#)



Skarstedt's *Andy Warhol: Oxidation Paintings* collates an array of Warhol's 1977–78 "Oxidation" abstractions, which Warhol created by exposing a layer of undried metallic paint to urine. The exhibition is excellently curated and can be considered a study of this enormously interesting series. It is demonstrative of a recent welcome tendency of focused exhibitions homing in on particular facets of Warhol's varied and prolific art practice. These include the Brooklyn Museum's 2021–22 *Andy Warhol: Revelation*, which analyzed the influence of Warhol's Byzantine Catholic upbringing and his lifelong religiosity on his work, and Galerie Gmurzynska's ongoing *Warhol/Cutrone*, a study of the two artists' collaborative series from 1972–83 and the emergence of Ronnie Cutrone's cartoon-addled neo-Pop appropriations.

Skarstedt's show includes ten smaller-sized works, several medium-sized canvases, and a sprawling 78 by 204 1/2 inch linen work. The various "Oxidations"—which, it should be noted, are distinct from Warhol's "Piss" paintings—evince a diversity in facture. The motley palettes are a byproduct of the variable priming methods Warhol undertook and the urinators-cum-painters' wavering hydration levels, with the vitamin-enhanced content in their urine causing different corrosive forms in shades of teal, green, burgundy, brown, and black. Where the "Piss" paintings consist of washy amber urine blotches on white gessoed backgrounds and are less optically engaging (as Warhol himself recognized), the "Oxidations" involve a wet-into-wet technique allotting such coruscating oxidized surfaces. Warhol's priming involved metallic powders produced from copper, copper alloys, and gold mixed with acrylic and diluted with water. Consequently, Warhol, his Factory technicians—chiefly, Ronnie Cutrone and, in one or two instances, Victor Hugo—or various so-called "ghost pissers" would directly urinate onto the canvases. In his Tuesday, June 28, 1977, diary entry, Warhol writes excitedly about Cutrone taking vitamin B complex "so the canvas turns a really pretty color." In his interviews, Cutrone confirms

SKARSTEDT

that, alongside coffee, vitamin B was key to achieving the rust-copper color. Bob Colacello's Warhol biography *Holy Terror: Andy Warhol Close Up* and Cutrone's autobiography and studio narratives also involve the "Torsos" series in the "Oxidation" series' making, as models for the former would, after Factory lunches, often be invited to urinate on the expeditiously primed canvases. The consequent varying surface texture reveals shifting multihued moss patinas stained into turquoise rivulets and dark jade bleeding arks meted by burnished flaxen fields. Many of the "Oxidation" works include malachite pools flanked by blotted droplet-riven serpentine twists recording the urinator's stream.



As the Andy Warhol Foundation's catalogue raisonné observes, "the giant *Piss* and *Oxidation* paintings ... were produced unstretched, the canvases unrolled on the floor of the painting space at the back of 860 Broadway." The works on view at Skarstedt evidence the full variety of techniques that Warhol experimented with, including directly urinating on the canvas, pouring urine onto the canvas from vessels, and sweeping the urine against the canvas with a brush. One can make out where the latter technique, which Warhol soon abandoned, was utilized in the upper-right corner of a medium-sized copper-toned work. Here, angular triangle sweeps edge out a serpentine, dribble-demarkated trail of Stygian blots.

The works invite myriad interpretations, no shortage of which have been offered by venerable art historians and critics ranging from Rosalind Krauss to Benjamin Buchloh. At first pass, one might, like Krauss, read the works along a parodic register, taking Warhol to have produced a pastiche of Jackson Pollock's Action painting that simultaneously exacerbate and undermine the Abstract Expressionist's mythos. Famously, Harold Rosenberg's "The American Action Painters" had theorized American abstraction as the domain of the "lone artist" who liberated himself "from the 'nature,' society and art already there" by creating "private myths." As Krauss observes in "Warhol's Abstract Spectacle", Hans Namuth's photographs of Pollock immortalized the myth of "Pollock as Existentialist choreographer ... puddling ... the floor-bound paint and ... pulling and scabbing ... its surface as it dried." In his 1988 interview with Daniel Blau, Cutrone details that, "Andy and I would take turns peeing on the canvas. Or sometimes I would bring in a girl. ... Andy would always say: 'Gee, Ronnie she has no brush stroke!' So he liked boys better to make the art." By demonstrating that the

SKARSTEDT

phallus—*any* phallus, at that, be it Warhol's, Cutrone's, or an anonymous "ghost pisser's"—can exact splatter-skeins akin to those produced by Pollock's putatively exactly controlled gestures, the "Oxidations" distill Action painting into male chauvinism, allegorized by the phallus-as-paintbrush, while sardonically undermining the Action painter's coeval self-involved Romantic mythos. In his 2016 doctoral thesis, Mark Loiacono also provides such a reading, according to which both Warhol's 1978–79 "Shadows" and "Oxidation" series evidence social critique. But this ironic reduction both understates Warhol's sustained, genuine interest in abstraction and overstates the satirical aspect of his art practice.



Notably, both the "Shadows" and "Oxidation" series render abstractions that remain anchored in empirical, worldly referents. One might argue that the same principle obtains for action paintings, insofar as the gestures are archived by painterly marks. Indeed, Warhol's "Oxidation" paintings similarly archive urinary figure-eight streams and post-void dribbles. But, by dint of their titles, which contrast to Pollock and company's Jungian allusions, Warhol's abstractions make their material referents blatant. This interest also informed Warhol's earliest abstractions, including his series from 1961–62 where, as Cutrone recalls to Blau, Warhol would:

put white canvas out on the street and people would walk by [and], after a while he would run in and out of the house like a little boy and pick the footprints off the street. In the end they were white

SKARSTEDT

canvases with footprints on them. It was the transformation between “Abstract art” and what we know as “Pop art.”

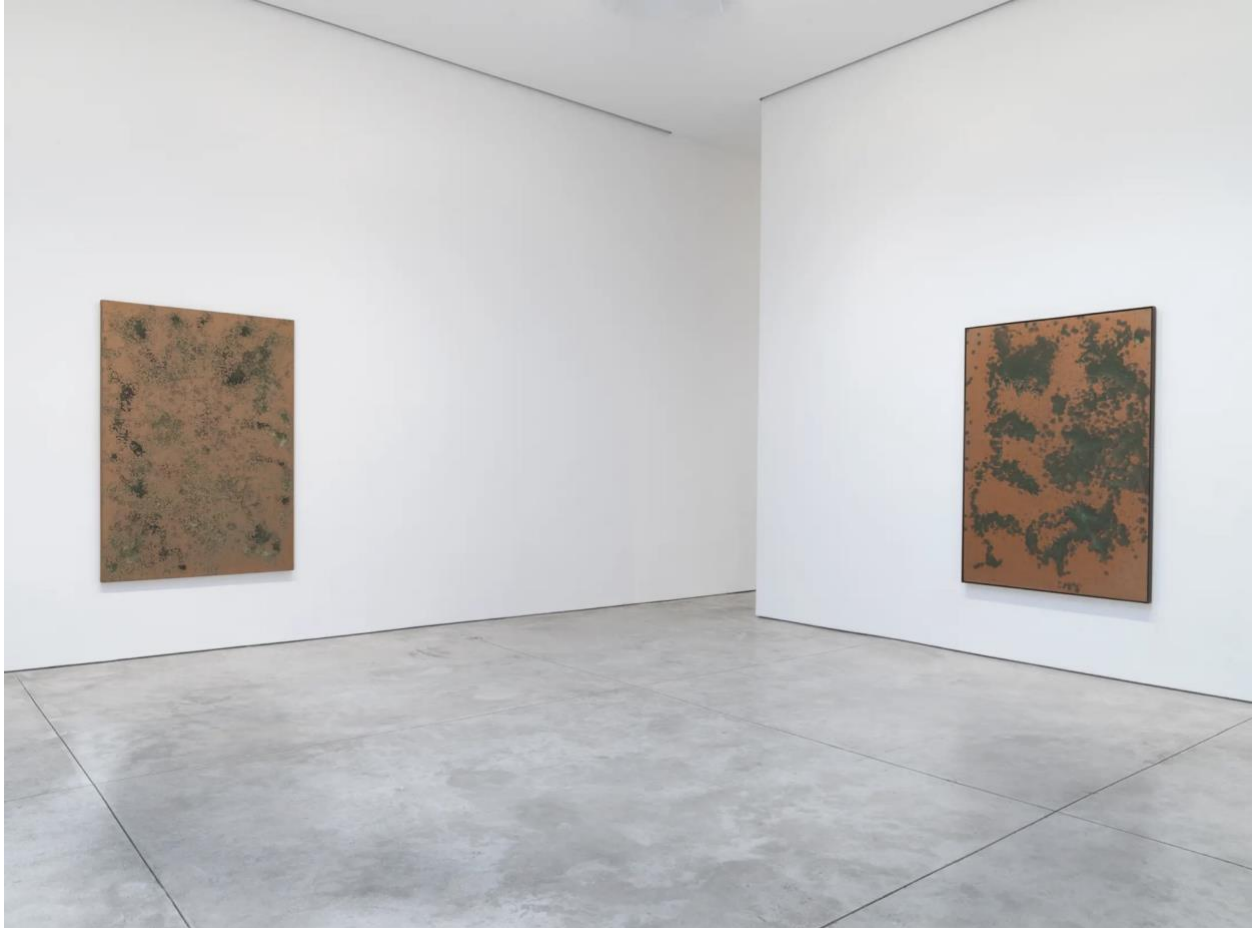
This speaks to Warhol’s admiration of indices repeated in abstract patterns. In an interview with Patrick Smith, Cutrone remarked that Warhol “had always admired the corner of his paintings, which is where the [silk]screen falls off and becomes just broken dots. ... this scattering of dots. He would always say ‘Oh, that looks so pretty.’” In the same interview, Cutrone recounted that Warhol’s use of golden backgrounds in the “Oxidation” paintings “came from the Russian icons,” speaking to the sustained influence of the painted wood panels lining St. John Chrysostom Byzantine Catholic Church, which Warhol attended throughout his youth.



Given their methodology, the “Oxidation” paintings also betray Warhol’s penchant for voyeurism and the broader epochal zeitgeist of downtown Manhattan gay culture. Cutrone described how he and Warhol “invited men in to stand on one end of the canvas and pee against the wall. It was like a urinal in a toilet. ... There would be four or five guys peeing against the wall in the studio.” According to Colacello’s *Holy Terror*, the “Oxidation” paintings were influenced by gay clubs like Plato’s Retreat, the Anvil, and the aptly named Toilet, which included “tubs and troughs where naked men lay for other naked men to urinate on them.” In his diary entry for Sunday, March 19, 1978, Warhol writes that Salvador Dalí likened his “idea of piss-paintings” to Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Teorema*, which includes a scene of an artist urinating on a painting; musing over Dalí’s comparison, Warhol wrote, “[it] is true,” illuminating another line of possible influence. According to Loiacono, while Warhol had

SKARSTEDT

executed a series of “Piss” paintings well before the 1970s, Pasolini’s film factored into his “decision to revive the series in the late 1970s.”



In her 1986 review of Gagosian’s show, *Andy Warhol: The Oxidation Paintings 1978*, Roberta Smith quipped that, “it’s hard to be serious about these random, perverse creations, yet they are seriously beautiful,” due to the tonal complementarity of the elegant “greens and golds.” Certainly, the shimmering cross-field runoff drips, which flow from lustrous axial puddles, engender pleasing forms compounded by the textural intricacy of the many impastoed rakings. But were the “Oxidation” paintings surreptitiously presented as Action paintings, proper, retitled, and anonymized so as to deracinate the canvases from Warhol’s subtending fetishistic-biographical context, they would hardly be as intriguing. All of these background elements—art historical, formal, biographical, methodological—are critical to the full meaning of the series and, *pace* Smith, licenses our taking them seriously. By presenting the works as a unified body and punctuating their curation with quotes by Colacello and Vincent Fremont, Skarstedt assiduously ensures that the series’ critical background is not treated as a surplus.

SKARSTEDT

Images:

Andy Warhol, *Oxidation*, 1977–78. Urine and copper paint on linen, 76 x 52 1/4 inches. © 2025 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Skarstedt.

Andy Warhol, *Oxidation*, 1977–78. Urine and gold-colored paint on linen, 78 x 204 1/2 inches. The Brant Foundation, Greenwich, CT. © 2025 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Skarstedt.

Installation view: *Andy Warhol: Oxidation Paintings*, Skarstedt Chelsea, New York, 2025. © 2025 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Skarstedt.

Andy Warhol, *Oxidation*, 1977–78. Urine and copper paint on linen, in two parts, each: 40 x 30 inches. © 2025 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Skarstedt.

Installation view: *Andy Warhol: Oxidation Paintings*, Skarstedt Chelsea, New York, 2025. © 2025 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Skarstedt.