

# TED CAREY: QUEER AS FOLK

MATTHEW NICHOLS

In April 1990 the artist Ray Johnson mailed an envelope from his home in Locust Valley, New York, to Sag Harbor resident Helen Harrison, who was then the museum curator at Guild Hall. Folded inside was the profile of a man's head, carefully cut from a sheet of gray paper to outline a curling forelock, a clipped mustache, and other particular yet peripheral features. As if to counter the internal ambiguity of the silhouette, Johnson labeled it TED CAREY in red capital letters, identifying the contours of one of his close friends and regular correspondents, who had died nearly five years earlier, in August 1985.

Johnson's adumbral cutout of Carey remains a fitting image for an obscure artist whose achievements are shadowed by those of his more famous peers. Born Edward Fawcett Carey in 1932, Ted, along with his two brothers, was raised in comfortable affluence in Chester, Pennsylvania. After serving in the US Army Reserve during the Korean War, Carey earned a BFA in graphic design from the Philadelphia Museum School of Art in 1955. Additional biography may be mustered but would not disprove that Carey became best known for his friendship with Andy Warhol. The two artists met in New York in 1957, when Carey began assisting Warhol on some of his commercial accounts. They forged an intimate bond through the early 1960s and famously commissioned a double portrait from Fairfield Porter that now belongs to the Whitney Museum of American Art.

In most accounts of Warhol's transition from commercial to fine artist, Carey is credited as a catalyst. In autumn 1961, when he first saw a comic book painting by Roy Lichtenstein at the Leo Castelli Gallery, Carey told gallery director Ivan Karp that Warhol was painting similar imagery, which prompted a visit to his friend's studio. Although Karp and Castelli declined to show Warhol's work, it was Carey; his lover, John Mann; and their friend Muriel Latow who later encouraged a frustrated Warhol to shift gears and paint soup cans instead. While less consequential for the history of art, Carey also influenced Warhol's collecting habits in the late 1950s. As Carey later recalled, "I was very much interested in Americana. I think that Andy got triggered off a little bit . . . by me because I had a lot of Americana. And we went to the country a lot, and we went to antique shops, and, so, Andy started collecting."<sup>1</sup> When asked about the impetus for his folk art collection, Warhol affirmed that it was "Ted . . . Ted got me interested."<sup>2</sup>



Above: Ted Carey, *Museum of Modern Art Sculpture Garden*, 1981. Oil on canvas, 16 x 24 inches. Tito Spiga Bequest. Photo by Gary Mamay.

Cover: Ray Johnson, *Untitled Mailing (Ted Carey silhouette with letter addressed to Helen Harrison)*, 1990 (detail). Mixed media in two parts, 30 ½ x 17 inches. Tito Spiga Bequest. Photo by Gary Mamay.

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## NOTES

1. Ted Carey, quoted in Patrick Smith, *Warhol: Conversations about the Artist* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1988), 93.
2. Andy Warhol, quoted in Smith, *Warhol*, 341.

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## PROGRAM SPONSORS

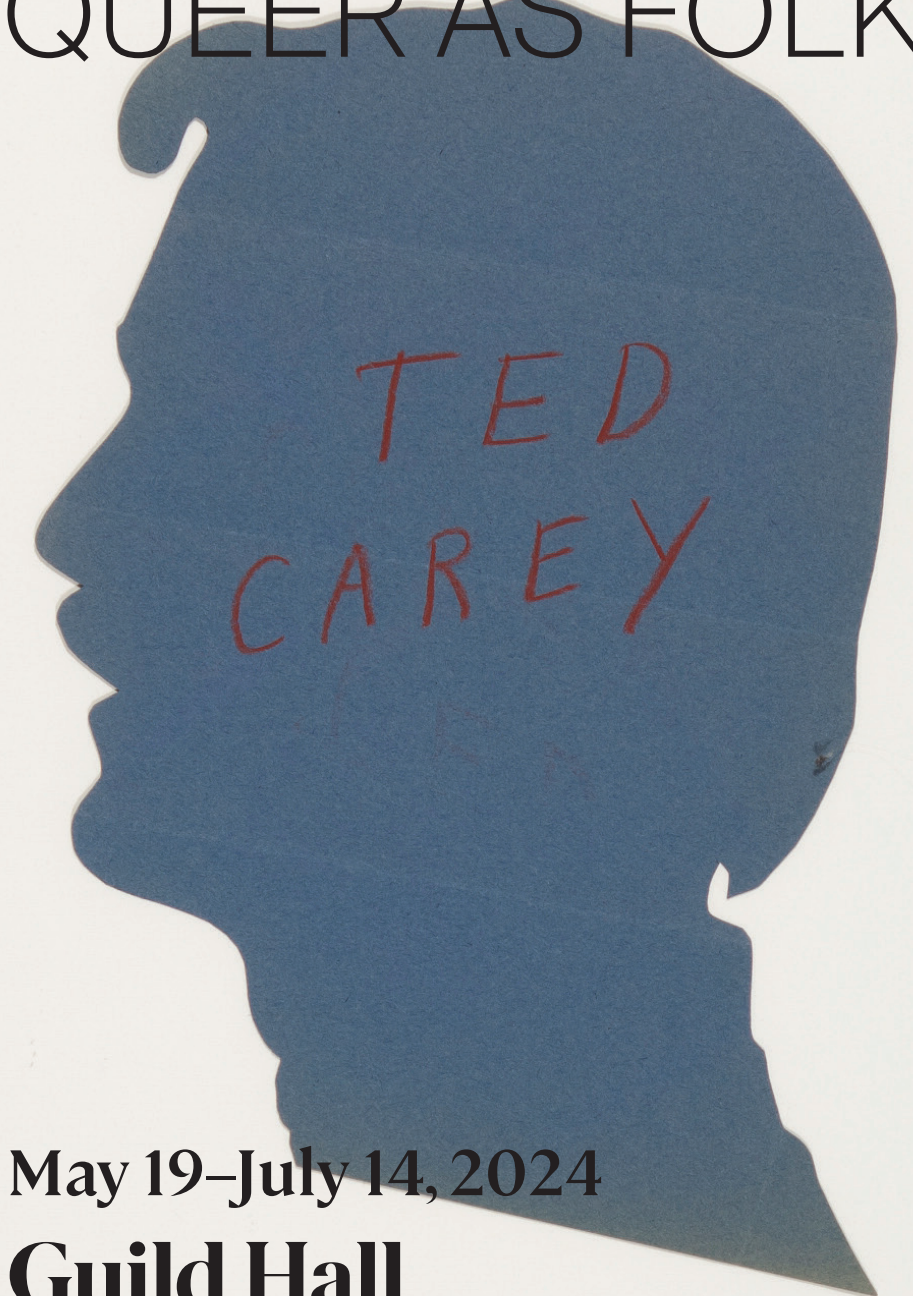
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**Guild Hall**





Ted Carey, *Boot Hill*, 1982-85. Oil on panel, 18 x 26 ½ inches. Tito Spiga Bequest. Photo by Gary Mamay.

Carey once stated that he stopped collecting antiques around 1960 and turned his attention to contemporary art. But as this exhibition demonstrates, his interest in folk art continued beyond that point and influenced the roughly fifteen paintings he produced in the 1970s and 1980s. Although he was a proficient draftsman, Carey chose to mimic certain aspects of American vernacular painting. His stylized forms and figures tend to be neatly organized into symmetrical compositions. Tilted ground planes skew perspective and flatten space. Light is even and diffuse and does not cast shadows. And like many of the folk artists who inspired him, Carey painted in meticulous detail, covered surfaces with patterns, and often massaged his medium into low relief.

Most of these qualities are already present in *Tribute to Miles White* (1962), an early painting that pays homage to the celebrated costume designer and some of the characters he dressed on Broadway. Although these leading ladies starred in five different musicals, they appear to share a stage inscribed with delicate floral designs. Performance is a leitmotif in Carey's other tributes to creative gay men, including *The World of Herman Costa* (1977-78), where the titular subject is pictured many times over, in various costumes and guises. White borders frame some of Costa's personae to signal his work as a photo booth artist in the 1970s. Using the studded straps of a chest harness as a framing device, Carey also painted Fernando Ascencio in multiple poses, in this case referencing his varied roles in the gay demimonde of 1970s New York, including S&M leather daddy, motorcycle club captain, and occasional actor in underground films.

The proscenium views common to folk art are cannily deployed in Carey's paintings of New York, creating stagelike settings that encourage viewers to see gender and sexuality as performative. In *Boot Hill* (1982-85), for example, the patrons of a western-themed gay bar that once thrived on Manhattan's Upper West Side wear flannel shirts, leather vests, and other macho garments that were fetishized by many gay men in the 1970s and 1980s. By contrast, the chorus of mannequin heads in *Paul's Bridal Accessories* (1980-83) seem to enact the feminine VEILINGS and ILLUSION spelled out on the shop's plate-glass window. In two other paintings of the city, Carey contrasts seasonal views of more highbrow cultural landmarks. His lively summertime scene of Lincoln Center pictures pedestrians enjoying the plaza and fountain, while his wintry window onto the Museum of Modern Art's sculpture garden shows a bevy of bronze statues silently weathering a snowfall.

Carey's New York paintings recall the work of Florine Stettheimer, whose eccentric pictures of the city fell out of favor at mid-century but circulated among its gay cognoscenti as an acquired taste. In 1960, when Carey and Warhol were constant companions, the curator Henry Geldzahler invited Warhol to see *The Cathedrals of New York*, a series of four Stettheimer paintings then in storage at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Parker Tyler's 1963 Stettheimer biography is credited with reviving interest in her art. It seems plausible that several years later, when Carey began painting the canvases in this show, he emulated Stettheimer's faux-naïf pictures of her family and friends and the insular world they inhabited. Both artists created portraits and genre scenes where stylized figures occupy shallow spaces embellished with patterns and impasto. Both artists amended their paintings with printed text and cursive script to identify people, label places, and provide titles.



Ted Carey, *Emak Bakia*, 1978-80. Oil on canvas, 21 x 31 inches. Gift of the Estate of Ted Carey. Photo by Gary Mamay.



Ted Carey, *The World of Andy Warhol*, 1985. Oil on canvas, 24 x 38 inches. Tito Spiga Bequest. Photo by Gary Mamay.

Carey's penchant for painting works of art also echoes Stettheimer's work. His pictures of New York reproduce in miniature the Marc Chagall murals in the Metropolitan Opera House and numerous bronzes in the MoMA sculpture garden. The most intriguing example may be *The World of Andy Warhol* (1978), a double portrait of his longtime friend surrounded by objects that he created or collected at two different stages of his career, including a stuffed peacock, a polychrome ship figurehead, and a large red *Skull* painting from 1976. Most of the works on the left side, brightened by the light of a Tiffany lamp, date to the late 1950s, when Warhol and Carey were especially close. In fact, the four framed Warhol pictures belonged to Carey when he died and later entered the Guild Hall permanent collection as part of the Tito Spiga Bequest.

Ted Carey met Tito Spiga in the early 1970s. They lived together for more than a decade, in New York and East Hampton, until Carey's death from AIDS in 1985. Following an AIDS diagnosis and before taking his own life in 1988, Spiga arranged the generous bequest that bears his name, which included all the art in this show and funds to construct a new gallery at Guild Hall. Carey and Spiga both appear in *Emak Bakia* (1978-80), a painting that documents a happier time when they shared a home at 20 Oyster Pond Lane in East Hampton. Descending from the boxy modernist house at upper left, a stone path leads to a patio in their manicured garden. Here Carey pours tea for his mother, Ruth, while Spiga cuddles their dachshund, Corfu, and a statue of Saint Francis attracts birds to their private paradise. The Basque phrase that names both their home and the painting translates as "Leave me in peace," alluding at once to the serene sanctuary and a desire to defend it. Brick by brick and branch upon branch, Carey painted this scene in devotional detail, creating an image of same-sex domestic bliss that was extraordinary for its day. But the arcadia he pictured in 1980 is tempered with retrospective poignancy. Not only was *Emak Bakia* painted on the cusp of an epidemic that took the artist's life, but it also anticipated hard-won privacy and partnership rights that Carey, Spiga, and an entire generation of queer folk were unable to exercise and enjoy.