Roy Lichtenstein’s *Time* Magazine Cover of Robert F. Kennedy: His Working Method

**Background**

The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery (NPG) holds approximately 2,000 objects of original art created for reproduction on the covers of *Time* magazine. In 1968 *Time* commissioned pop artist Roy Lichtenstein to make two covers at the same time: a portrait of Robert F. Kennedy during his presidential campaign and picture of a smoking gun for a feature story on gun violence. Lichtenstein rarely accepted commissions or made portraits, but Kennedy had mobilized the antiwar movement with his campaign and the artist admired his energy. Lichtenstein accepted the magazine commissions although he thought the process a bit too commercial. This amused him because some critics thought his art work too commercial.1 Kennedy appeared on the May 26, 1968, *Time* cover and was assassinated a few weeks afterward. Ironically, the image of the gun ran on the cover shortly after.

A copy of the issue of *Time* and the color proofs created for the *Kennedy* cover were selected by Portrait Gallery Chief Curator Brandon Fortune and Senior Curator of Prints and Drawings Wendy Wick Reaves for their exhibition “Face Value” (April 2014 to January 2015). This selection prompted further examination of the preparatory drawings and the color proofs, and the magazines’ cover.

The Lichtenstein Foundation did not have detailed information about the drawings for this image and was interested in documenting the process and materials used in creating the *Time* magazine cover of Robert Kennedy. The various material and printing techniques used to produce the cover are described here. The artist's method was similar to the way he approached his paintings where the drawings described the final design and color choices for the artwork.

**Process**

The artist worked from photographs of Robert Kennedy, enlarged and projected onto a wall to create his primary drawing. There is one black-and-white primary drawing on illustration board and two black-and-white overlay drawings on translucent paper executed in felt-tip markers over graphite, some with brushed matte paint and collage elements. The primary drawing was used to create a photo reproduction that served as the underlay image for the overlay drawings created for each separate color. The sixth object is a collage mock-up of two photographs with hand-applied colored markers and a sample of Lichtenstein’s printed dot paper. The drawings were photographed with a large-format graphic arts camera. The film was used to make the printing plates for the magazine. The color proofs, four sheets of acetates and dyes, were processed, overlaid, and registered for the artist’s approval prior to making the printing plates.

**Photograph of Kennedy on p. 22 of the magazine.**

Primary drawing, dimensions: 23 15/16 x 18 5/8”.

Media: Two types of felt-tip marker, one blue-black and one black over graphite pencil with adhered paper corrections and erasures on clay-covered, paper-faced illustration board. Printer’s registration tapes, pencil marks, and instructions in margins in pencil: BLACK LINES SOLID Y IN BURST: AROUND HEAD.

The photo reproductions of the key or primary drawing serve as underlays to the overlay drawings. All underlay reproductions are adhered overall to four-ply matboard.

**Mock-up photographs with collage and sample of printed dot paper adhered to matboard.**

Media: Two types of felt-tip marker, one blue-black and one black over graphite pencil on light-medium weight white wove paper. Strikethrough is visible on the verso in the corresponding area of the markers on the recto.

**Photographs taped on studio wall (one collage mock-up with felt-tip marker) and the other with Time logo.**


Notes:

2. E-mail communication with Octavia Co, Lichtenstein Foundation.