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From Surface to Air to Marcel Duchamp

By: Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

After seeing the many exhibitions about LA artists and the Sixties that have evolved since 2011 and the Getty's PST, you'd think the air would be getting thin. Robert Dean, however, has come up with some fresh material and compiled a snazzy new exhibition at Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Surface to Air: Los Angeles Artists of the '60s.

All the usual suspects are here but represented by exquisite and in some cases unfamiliar pieces. Take the smaller gallery: A doll-sized Larry Bell cube on a hip-high plexiglass pedestal, a John McCracken cube in lavender, both placed in front of a Ron Davis triptych, a three-part 1969 composition that reads as three dimensional despite being entirely flat, covered in expressionist splatters of color. Big wow. Why has no one given this man a retrospective? That is my thought whenever I see his early work.

And facing this piece is a cruciform study by Judy Chicago composed of interlocking squares of fading pastel colors. The whole impact of this selection is so great you might look past the ever-perfect standing plexiglass column of Robert Irwin or wedge by Peter Alexander.

In the larger gallery, a more controversial point is expressed. Despite the attempts of art historians, including myself, to distance this art from its connection to surfboards and hot rods, the cliché remains hard to budge. Hence, Dean has included Big Daddy Roth's aqua custom car with zippy white pin-striping. There is also a Hobie surfboard in the show, but it is the car that has the most floor space and impact.

I had never seen such pin-striping in close proximity to the similar techniques used by Billy Al Bengston on his painting Busby or the beyond beautiful scarlet wall relief, with pale striping, by Craig Kauffman. Since I have previously emphasized the great intellectual distance that stood between Kauffman and anything to do with hot rods — he was motivated by more high-brow influences like Lázló Moholy-Nagy and architect John Lautner — it was still startling and, let's face it, fun to see that crazy car. It isn't that the artists always shared the philosophical or intellectual views of car culture enthusiasts but that they were able to use those modern technologies — airbrushing, pin-striping, molded plastic — to create their own new forms of art.



Billy Al Bengston, "Busby," 1963
Oil, polymer and lacquer on masonite
Photo by Kayne Griffin Corcoran
Courtesy of Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles



Ed Roth, "Obitron," 1960-64
Car
Photo by Kayne Griffin Corcoran
Courtesy of Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles



Craig Kauffman, "Untitled," 1966
Acrylic on vacuum formed colored plastic
Photo by Brian Forrest
Courtesy of Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles