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“Howlin’ At The Moon Doggie”

by Michael Slenske



# HOWLIN’ AT THE MOONDOGGIE

For 60 years, Billy Al Bengston has maintained his larger than life rep as the bad boy of the L.A. art world, but this fall he's offering a glimpse into the softer, celestial side of his ever-soulful practice at Various Small Fires.

BY **MICHAEL SLENKE** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **STEVE PERILLOUX**

AS HE WAS PREPARING FOR “VENICE IN Venice,” a satellite exhibition to the 2011 Venice Biennale featuring works by a broad group of art legends from Venice, California, Billy Al Bengston and I had a long-winding (and gut-busting) conversation. We talked about the glaring similarities (and differences) between the two cities’ canal cultures, old legends of California surf and European motorsport history and the man who inspired his slick contributions to the show, Italian MotoGP racer Valentino Rossi.

Invoking some of his earliest fetish finish tropes—and borrowing the iconic sergeant stripe chevrons he famously painted on masonite and aluminum sheets with auto lacquer in the ’60s (and on countless other surfaces in the decades thereafter)—Bengston embellished a pair of traditionally black Italian gondolas in day-glo hues to mimic the leather suits worn by Rossi and American motorcycle racer Nicky Hayden. As he told me at the time, “By turning this slug in the water into something that’s not camouflaged... I’m hoping what I bring to this is a new sensation, not an advertisement for myself.”

So when the curator informed him that the Italian authorities wouldn’t allow the vessels into the canals as a result of their Ducati-invoking paint jobs, Bengston didn’t take it sitting down. “Put the fucker in the water and let them arrest you,” he shot back, adding, “If you’re going to act like a Venice, Californian that’s what you do. Then you won’t have to come back again and you’ll be happy. You’ll be permanently banned!”

The gondolas eventually made it into the canals and Bengston, ever the provocateur, goaded me at the conclusion of our interview to “Just write whatever you want, Michael.” Paying little mind to the comment, I blithely replied, “Sure, Billy, I plan on it.” Then he stopped me cold, “No, I mean make some shit up.”

Perhaps it was his prankster past resurfacing or just a cheeky challenge from a stubborn Kansan who was notoriously competitive

with his famous band of brothers—the renegade Cool School group of Angeleno artists including Larry Bell, John Altoon, Ken Price, Don Bachardy, Craig Kauffman, Ed Ruscha, Ed Moses, and Robert Irwin—that comprised the pioneering Ferus Gallery of Walter Hopps and Ed Keinholz in the 1950s and ’60s. Whatever the case, this gauntlet of Bengston’s always stuck with me over the years. Probably because he meant it. And probably because far too many artists these days—typically the commercially successful, emerging-to-mid-career set—attempt to maintain some PR-managed image of themselves that doesn’t allow for any interpretation, introspection, or, god forbid, fun. Surely not the type of fun that might come in the form of a writer they just met weaving fictions about their life and art. But here’s the thing about Billy Al Bengston: fun is (and always has been) his *raison d’être*.

“I don’t think I made a living doing this until I was at least 50, and a living back then was making \$50 at a time,” explains Bengston, now 82, who was born in Dodge City, Kansas to a tailor father who owned a dry cleaning business and a musical mother, who once sang for the San Francisco Opera. Raised with a sartorialist savvy and Midwestern work ethic, after moving permanently to California Bengston worked as a beach attendant by day at Doheny State Beach in Dana Point California—where he met Price—and by night he studied (i.e. mixed tons of clay in bread mixers) with Peter Voulkos at Otis College of Art & Design. Sometimes he manned the high ladder on construction sites with Ed Kienholz, other times he taught part-time at art schools (stretching from UCLA to Norman, Oklahoma) to make ends meet. “I didn’t give a shit,” he recalls. “I was just having fun surfing.”

As you might imagine, the challenge in embellishing his outside life—as Bengston well knows—is daunting in the sense that any myth or conspiracy you might think to add to his CV has already “been there, done that” by the artist—decades ago. When he wasn’t red lining his BSA motorcycles at the old Ascot Park speedway on



Billy Al Bengston standing before his 1989 moon painting, *Difourdi*, inside his Venich Beach studio.

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—Billy Al Bengston

Friday nights with Bell as his one-man pit crew he was making naïve, pop abstractions of his 350cc Gold Star—and its sculptural parts—for a seminal show at Ferus (reprised last year at Venus Over Manhattan). When his *nomme de surf*, Moondoggie (after the New York street performer), wasn't inspiring a character in "Gidget"—novelist Frederick Kohner's daughter Kathy was one of countless surf legends who considered Bengston a dear friend—he was creating poetic watercolor paintings of the flora, fauna and fruity drinks native to his beach haunts in California and Oahu, his second (if not spiritual) home. (They presage the work of Jonas Wood by nearly four decades.) And when his ever-evolving live-work space on Venice's Mildred Avenue, a block from Muscle Beach, wasn't playing home/studio to the likes of Moses, Price and Irwin, it served as a backdrop—with some help from his old pal and neighbor Frank Gehry—for his 1968 painting survey at LACMA. In other words, for Bengston, living is an art form (and great living yields the greatest art).

"Whatever he got himself into he put a lot of passion in it, whether it was motorcycles, bicycles, running," says Bell, who would scour thrift stores with Bengston for natty threads to maintain the aristo alter-egos—Bengston was known as Dingy Bingy and famously nicknamed the cigar-puffing, tuxedo-wearing Bell, Lux—which they inhabited at art openings and late night revels at Frank & Musso's. "For a long time he was running everywhere," adds Bell. "He ran miles and miles every day and if he had an opening to go to he didn't get in his car, he got into his running shorts and went running to downtown L.A. He'd be all obnoxious and sweaty when he got there, but he'd look very cool. The guy just had impeccable taste and total style."

That incomparable style trickled over into the Mildred Avenue building, which was previously home to a bank, a dentist and a newspaper before Bengston took over and filled it with countless artworks and furniture pieces—be it original Paul Frankl rattan chairs sourced from a thrift store or a resin table made from one of his Chevron paintings—that charted an eclectic trajectory over the years.

"I started in the basement in 1962 and then I got the kitchen, which was a full apartment at that time," says Bengston. "There has never been a master lease. This is a handshake, month-to-month deal."

It turned out to be the deal of a lifetime: just as Bengston was becoming "the social director of the scene," according to Bell, Mildred became the hotspot for the L.A. cognoscenti—as well as New York counterparts like Andy Warhol and Divine—who would trek out to the then-wasteland of Venice for Bengston's famous parties.

"Billy liked to entertain in his own scene more than he liked going out," explains Bell. "He was a very good cook, he made very stylish dinner parties and invited great people. He had a lot of fancy people in the film and fashion business, record producers, theater

people, models, fancy hookers, who liked to come over. He knew 'em all."

Ruscha, a frequent reveler at the Mildred building, who famously collaborated with Bengston on his sandpaper covered 1968 monograph, "Billy," considers the space one of his friend's longest running works. "The building was kept up as a sort of Winchester Mystery House-South. Sarah Winchester believed she would live forever if she always constructed and added new rooms to her house," says Ruscha. "Bengston has managed to do the same, always remodeling, adding this or that, moving a wall three inches, building lofts and half-lofts, partitioning blind spots—no part of that building escaped his face lifts. And, like the storyline, Billy lives on to do more sawing and hammering. It is in his eternal bloodline."

Of course, as a place where so many creative forces converged, Bengston also clashed, famously, with many of his cohorts.

"There was a lot of arguments about girls and spaces," recalls Moses, who hilariously traded barbs with Bengston during the LA Legends artist talk at the Broad Stage with Bell and Ruscha in February. This summer Bengston showed alongside Moses and Ruscha as part of the "California Dreaming" survey at Connecticut's New Britain Museum of American Art. At 91, Moses doesn't remember every detail of his Mildred days, but claims back then his old pal was "sort of an asshole." That is to say, they didn't always see eye to eye. "You said up, he said down. We got close to a lot of fights" Moses says. "But he was a very talented, very inventive guy and very competitive. That's the thing we all had in common."

Indeed, the art and architectural saga of Mildred is a complicated layer cake, one which Bengston has been smart to mine for various exhibitions over the years. In fact, it was supposed to be the focus of his September solo debut at Various Small Fires, the budding Hollywood gallery run by Esther Kim Varet that was named, fittingly, after Ruscha's 1964 photo series turned artist book.

As one who considers her gallery's role to be "a revisionist voice for a new generation"—one that has given contemporary platforms for the works of pioneering eco-artists Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison, Mernet Larsen, and Jessie Homer French, whose paintings and rugs (including ones that read "Billy Al's Eats" and "Don't Shit Where You Eat") can be found in nearly every room of the Mildred building—Varet was intrigued by the possibility of recreating Bengston's funky milieu in her gallery after spending a long, martini-soaked afternoon at his Venice digs two years ago.

"We became friends and what kept me going back was that I was doing all this research on the '60s and I was reading about Billy's participation in the '65 Sao Paulo Biennial, where Walter Hopps brought his work with Larry Bell and Robert Irwin and that's the move that put L.A. on the map internationally," explains Varet. "I think he's one of the most central characters from that time and it feels fresh again."

When Bengston learned that he couldn't demolish Varet's skylit, Johnston Marklee-designed space to make windows for an



installation of his furniture, they opted instead to present a selection of his bright, multimedia Moon Paintings—originally shown four decades ago and conceived after he and Ruscha took a moonlit motorcycle ride along the Sea of Cortez and Bengston called dibs on painting the moon. At VSF new and old examples are installed in idiosyncratic positions on the walls for a show that is now titled “It is the Moon Doggie” (open through October 28).

“I just hate the way museum shows look. When I’m looking at a painting, I like the outside element,” says Bengston, who built a sitting room for the guards at LACMA during his 1968 survey so that he could work (and stay) overnight in the museum to insure his installation with Gehry was a success. Short of demolition, Bengston painted strips of sea green into the recessed skylights at VSF—“To alter the perception of light,” says Varet—and added pieces of rust-colored carpet cut into moon shapes throughout the space to create a decidedly Bengstonian *mise en scène* for the works, many of which haven’t been exhibited since he originally completed them.

A 1989 review by a Los Angeles Times critic compared these lunar compositions to “Barcalounger art” and “fancy gift-wrap next to the amazing freshness and devil-may-care delight of his experiments of the early 1960s” and went on to say that, “although in other hands the image might serve as a meditation on the cosmos or the mutability of time, Bengston seizes it simply as another way to fill a canvas with luminous color and pleasing pattern. As relaxed and cheerful as happy hour on the lanai, Bengston’s work has lost all its bite.” Varet simply calls that assessment “a dumb and cheap analysis.”

“It totally missed the point that these works are a return to nature, composition, subjectivity—a new political horizon that moved beyond the machinic logic of the ’60s,” she says.

“Why don’t you take the elevator,” says Wendy Al, Billy’s second wife who chose to take his middle name when they were married in 1982, as I enter the voluminous foyer for a peek at his half-century-in-the-making *gesamtwerk* this summer. Struck by her radiant blue aloha shirt and precision coiffed, salt-and-pepper bowl cut, it takes me a minute to realize Wendy is serious about the offer until she gestures toward a pneumatic vacuum-powered glass elevator resembling those deposit tubes employed at drive-thru bank tellers. Once I’m secured inside the tight chamber, Wendy presses a button and I’m lifted (albeit leisurely) off the checkered floor, past a couple flags of Bengston’s design hanging from the double height ceiling. Suddenly, a hazy flood of California beach light rushes through all sides of the glass tube and I’m surrounded by a gallery of Bengston’s moon paintings that appear to trace a lunar cycle from a set of windows overlooking Mildred Avenue to a windowless sanctuary that Wendy asked Bengston to build for her on her 51st birthday in 2013. A John Altoon abstract resides on the wall behind the elevator, and a few tables are topped with beguiling “travel art”—miniature versions of Bengston’s chevron Dentos on Tijuana aluminum—that sit on sheets of velvet intended to wrap and display



Billy Al, Wendy Al, and their dog, Pappy Raku, enjoying happy hour in the glass elevator.

the works when he’s on the road. (A selection of Dentos from 1965-1970 will be on view at Parrasch Heijnen Gallery this fall.) The popcorn ceiling—a geometry of intersecting trenches—bares the scars of countless walls (and studio configurations) toppled to make room for this sprawling rumpus room.

“The lines on the ceiling are from various reconfigurations of the space based on his whims. He’s always needing change,” says Wendy. “In fact, at the moment, I think he is contemplating another major floor plan.”

“Aloha,” says Billy as I step out of the chamber. Dressed in a customized Hawaiian shirt, lime green wide wale cords, and some Birkenstocks, his island greeting is carried by an undertow of fluted country twang betraying his Kansas roots. These days he doesn’t concern himself with too much studio time—at least not in Venice; he prefers to make watercolors in Oahu—but keeps a pretty solid routine of an early morning coffee on a lavender velvet sofa in a light-and-art-filled corner room (off Bachardy Hall, which is filled with Don Bachardy drawings of the Cool School). He follows this with a family style lunch with Wendy and his aide de camp, Luis, in the living room, then a short afternoon nap before a round of happy hour martinis in pink crystal glasses to close out the day.

“You know what it’s like being 83 fucking years old? I wake up every morning and say, ‘Again?’” says Bengston just before he heads into the kitchen to make a pitcher of cocktails for today’s crowd, which includes Wendy, Varet and her gallery director, Sara Hantman, both of whom stay way past their one drink maximums.

While it may not be the rollicking scene of yore, with Moondoggie entertaining a steady stream of icons at wild Oscar parties, between the Pilates, a retired fighter “laying hands” on him and Wendy taking the reins of his robust exhibition schedule, he still manages to cut an athletic figure that is once again looming large over the contemporary art world. Probably because he just doesn’t give a damn whether it happens or not.

As his old friend Bell, puts it, “Billy Al Bengston has never done a fucking thing that he didn’t want to do, ever, and he’s my hero because of it.”