

07 / 01 / 2017

“Billy Al Bengston: A Conversation with the
legendary Los Angeles-based Finish Fetishist”
by Oliver Maxwell Kupper

AUTRE



FINISH

FETISH

After our interview, Billy said I could write anything I wanted about him, so I will. These days, there is a softer side to **BILLY AL BENGSTON** - the renegade, motorcycle-racing artist who defined the masculine, high-octane art world in Los Angeles during the 1960s. He was amongst a stable of artists that showed at the storied Ferus Gallery, alongside the likes of Wallace Berman (who was arrested and charged with obscenity for his work shown there) and Ed Ruscha (who analogized the gallery to a jazz catalogue for its roster of boundary breaking artists). Bengston was different, because he wasn't just an artist; he was also a sponsored motocross competitor, Hollywood stuntman and a very skilled surfer. In his art making practice, his use of automotive enamel placed him in a unique aesthetic niche known as Finish Fetish - most of his work is inspired by the culture or mechanics of racing motorcycles. Indeed, Bengston exemplifies a Flash Gordon-like charisma and fearlessness - not to mention, he's handsome as hell. We got a chance to catch up with Billy at his apartment in Venice, California to talk about his halcyon days on the track and why he would rather be at his home in Hawaii instead of doing the following interview.

text and portrait by **OLIVER MAXWELL KUPPER**

OLIVER KUPPER: You've been here for a while, when did you move into this place?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: '62.

You've probably seen a lot of changes in the neighborhood.

Uh, yeah. If you looked out that window right there you wouldn't see any of those houses except the tall one at the end. No, it wasn't there either. There were a couple of bungalows that they knocked down.

So it was pretty remote. I mean, Venice was remote once upon a time. Extremely. When I moved in it was only old Jews and drunks.

Now it's just drunks, and a few artists.

Not many old Jews, maybe Larry Bell (Laughter)

Well, you seem to have a nice slice of paradise here.

It's okay. When I first moved in here - I tell you, there would not be more than one car that came by every 20 minutes.

Sounds peaceful.

And it was a two-lane road, barely two-lane road. I crossed the street and it was a gas station, at that time, yeah it was a gas station. Back behind was a big lot I used to ride my motorcycle around. That place across the street used to be called the Saucy Dog, it was a hangout for the Straight Satan's after they moved out of the bar here they went over there. Motorcycle gang.

Straight Satans?

Straight Satans they used to be called.

Wow.

And only about a third of them had motorcycles. You'd see them walking in with their jackets on.

All right. So, I guess let's jump into this thing.

Should I change clothes (laughter)?

You can get as comfortable as you want. So, I want to talk about your early days up in Kansas.

What about them?

Did you have any connection to the culture growing up in Kansas?
Did it exist?

Yeah, did culture exist?

If it did, it existed in my mother, who taught school, directed the church choir, sang solos for the church choir and various other places, and also directed the band.

Your mom really exposed you to the

creative side.

Yes. And she played piano, and when she came out here she sang for the San Francisco Opera.

She was probably practicing a lot when you were growing up.

Yes. It was endless. Endless. And my uncle was a musician, pain in the ass. He made me take clarinet lessons with him, and every time I made a mistake he would thump me in the head. I didn't like the clarinet after that. I had to play music and be in marching bands and...it made me hate music.

So, you wanted to stay far away from being a musician.

Yeah, and my brother is a professional musician. He managed to, first, become an alcoholic and then a drug addict, and then an alcoholic, and who knows what he is now.

Wow, wild.

He played for the U.S Army band for

a little while and then he got a little wild and he stole his horn and sold it, and then they put him in the slammer. So, I said, "I'm living a simple life."

But you're a little bit of an outlaw.

Not really, no. I only stole art supplies.

When did LA become your permanent home?

Uh, eighth grade.

And you were really into motorcycles and racing motorcycles?

Yeah, that was my job.

What was so romantic about motorcycle racing?

I got paid for it.

You got paid for it?

Yes.

But outside of that was there any-



Above: 1961, *Tachometer Drive*, 36 x 34", Oil on canvas
Opposite page: Billy Al Bengston on 250cc Bullitaco motorcycle, Ascot Park Short Track, Gardena, CA, 1965.
Photo: Courtesy of Billy Al

VSF

VARIOUS SMALL FIRES
812 NORTH HIGHLAND AVENUE LOS ANGELES 90038
INFO@VSF.LA / 310.426.8040



thing that drew you to it?

Well, I got to have a lot of scabs. Is that good? (Laughter)

You were into the danger?

No, it's not much fun falling down.

Or the excitement of it?

No, that's not much fun. No, the thing was, I was good at it. I was young and good at it and I got lucky and became a sponsored racer. When I was young and drove in Ocean Park, I only had to work one evening a week, racing.

So, who was your first sponsor?

I only had one sponsor my whole career, Lebard B.S.A Motorcycles. But I made enough money racing one night a week at Ascot to...

To not have to steal art supplies.

No, no. I was through with that a long time ago. I stopped using art supplies, I was using automobile paint.

It seems like in those days, motorcycle culture, along with surf culture, was sort of an art in and of itself.

No, you've got the words wrong. It wasn't culture. It was just what you did.

Yeah, it wasn't culture.

It was just what you did. Kenny Price and I shared a studio on Pier Avenue. It was 4,000 square feet, \$75 a month. We overpaid, but that was okay. Across the street Bob Irwin had a studio, and behind me Larry Bell had a studio and it was really bitchin'. It was very remote and quiet, and Larry had a VW, and he would drive us to Barney's Beanery every night and that was about it.

And surfing too right? You were always surfing.

Well, I started surfing in 1945.

Do you feel like there is an easy bridge to cross between being an artist, being a surfer, and being a motorcycle racer?

Yeah, it's things to do.

And you won a lot of races? You were good at it.

I made a living. You don't have to win them all. But you get paid all the way down to 10th place. So, if you fell off in the main event (there were only eight people in the main event) you always got paid (laughter).

Sure.

But the difference would be, you'd get a dollar and a half verses a hundred dollars.

Was there a lot of betting involved, or a lot of people putting in money?

Not that I know of. I bet my friends that, "I ain't gonna fall down this time."

Any major injury stories?

Riding motorcycles? I guess breaking my back.

You broke your back? Wow, in a crash?

Avoiding a crash.

You did a lot of stunt riding for movies too, right?

A little bit. I didn't do much riding though. I was just good at jumping out of buildings.

So, very specific stunts?

Yeah, the type of stunts you ar-

phoned and said, "You wanna make a buck?" And I said, "Sure I'm there." I'd go and it was all independent contractor stuff.

Amazing.

Anything that I only had to work one day a week for was good for me and if it was half a day that was better, and if it was 60 minutes, even better.

So, working smart?

It was easier. I might have to lie down the next day.

It seems like you'd need a week to recover from something like that.

No, I was skinny like you, and I was a gymnast so I was strong.

So, do you still ride at all now? What's your association with the culture?

Occasionally, I pop a clutch, yeah. But, it doesn't count. I only like racing, I don't really like riding.

So you get on the track sometimes?

I'm too old. My best friend out here is Sonny Nutter, he's ten years younger than me and he was the US Speedway Champion for a while, and he rode until he was 65. We'll go out and kick each other's asses every so often.

I found this document from the Market Street Program surveys, and I don't know if you signed it, somebody

signed it. But, Sonny Nutter's name is on it.

Isn't that a great name?

Great name. They all had great names, these racers. But, they asked you to write down artists...

Ah, that's it. Neil Keen, he was a fantastic half miler. Bart Markel, the meanest prick in the world. David Aldana, really stylish. Oh, these are all half milers on the top except Charles Minert and Bengt Åberg was an international Swedish motocross racer. And the others were sort of like me, except for Jay O.

I thought it was funny because they asked which living West Coast artist would you want to exhibit with in a group show and you listed nothing but motocross racers.

Well, of course. Why would you want a show with other people? It's like

"EVER SINCE THEY PUT BRAKES ON BIKES I'VE NEVER BEEN EXCITED ABOUT IT. IT TOOK THE AESTHETICS OUT OF IT.."

en't even old enough to remember. They used to have theaters, and on the weekend they would play Western serial movies. I'd be in those and I'd get killed hundreds of times. Shot and then fall off the second floor roof, sort of do a backflip and land on these awnings and roll down the awnings, and then if you were lucky, you'd land on a mattress they'd buried under a thin skin of dust. If you were lucky.

Did you always get lucky?

I missed quite a few times. If you only went down one level, you'd get \$20, if you went down two levels you'd get \$50. So I signed up for the \$50's all the time.

Where was that place in Malibu where they had that whole Western set? Paramount Ranch?

But, that's when it got fancy. When I was doing it, a friend of mine



Billy Al Bengston and Peter Alexander, Baltimore Hotel, Los Angeles, CA, Mailer for Locksley Shea Gallery, Minneapolis, MN, 1971. Photo: Jerry McMillan

asking, "Who would you want to dance with as an artist?"

Sure, of course. Swede Savage also has a good name.

Isn't that a great name? That was his real name. I met him when he was 14 years old and his dad was making him into a racer. And when he came out to the professional track, we had to slow him down a little bit.

And then something else slowed him down, eventually.

No, you just do dirty little things to slow people down. I guess it's sort of like if you're playing your school horn with your tenor sax player, and then you go and you were playing with Coleman Hawkins or something. You'll say, "Oh, there is a difference."

I don't know why I have so many questions about motorcycle racing. Well, you are the right size.

I'm too afraid of motorcycles

though.

Well, then you're the wrong size.

But maybe I could, maybe that's a new thing for me.

If you do, I advise that you start doing wind sprints and start your day with a couple hundred push-ups.

Yeah, you almost have to be a jockey weight to be a motorcycle racer.

It helps, because one horsepower is every 15 pounds, and one horsepower in every half-mile race, usually, if you're riding at the same intensity, will give you 15 feet per lap.

So, it helps.

Every little bit helps especially if you don't have to work for it.

Do you watch a lot of racing now?

It's not too exciting to me. Ever since they put brakes on bikes I've never been excited about it. It took the aesthetics out of it, because then you could just go in and

stop instead of having to orchestrate your turns and know who else is orchestrating their turn and how to maneuver. Actually, putting brakes on motorcycles slowed down the racing.

So, it's not as exciting.

Oh, it's pretty cool. I mean, if someone gave me a ride I'd go out and do it. I think I could do a couple laps. I'd do 20 laps. But, I'd be 20 laps behind too.

I want to talk about that famous Duchamp show, was it at the Pasadena Art Museum?

Oh, that show.

There's that famous photograph of you by Julian Wasser with Dennis Hopper and Andy Warhol. It's a great photograph.

Julian's cool. He's still on the planet?

He's still on the planet, still around, still shooting. We had



Lunch with him at a little dingy dark LA spot.

That would be his choice.

Yeah, I couldn't see in there.

I can imagine. He's been around forever. He's gotta have archives that are amazing.

You met Duchamp when he was out here in LA?

He was a boring old fart.

Yeah?

Yeah. The thing that is interesting, when you're young, you build

up these fantasies. Marcel was one of them, but I don't know why. His work certainly didn't demand it. It was pretty simple stuff.

Sure.

He dressed good, he cross-dressed.

Yeah, what was his-

Rose Sélavy. C'est la vie actually.

Julian also took that photograph of Marcel with Eve Babitz. She mentioned you in her dedication page in her book. Do you remember or did

you see what she wrote? She apologized for putting a cigarette out on your white floor.

It's about time she did that.

Is there a story behind that?

The story is: she was a crude, rude bitch. There were so few females in the art world. I went outside of the art world. I didn't like girls in the art world. There weren't enough to even like. Maybe I liked one - who did I like? Oh, Penny Little. That was later, though.

You spend a lot of the year in Ha-



er Park motorcycle
: 1959-60. Courtesy

waii, right?

As much as I can, yeah. I should be there right now, but I'm not. My wife is always booking too many things for me.

Yeah, like this interview.

I'm afraid I would leave if this was part of it. No, it's other stuff. And now we have to go, I think next week, we have to go back East and then the week after that I think we have to go to Mexico.

So, you've been nonstop busy.

Just nonsense. Garbage.

You'd rather be on a beach in Hawaii.

I'd rather be in my pad in Hawaii sitting on a balcony looking at the beach.

That sounds really nice.

And working.

Yeah. You and Ed Ruscha collaborated on a few things.

Yeah, Ed and I are good friends.

In the form of books. Two books, right, you made together?

Business cards and uh-

The one with the sandpaper cover.

Yeah, I can't remember.

Can you talk a little about the business card book?

We got some money for something, I forget what it was, and I said, "Let's blow it on a book." Ed said, "What?" and I said, "Business cards." Ed said, "That sounds like a good book." So, we made this book that's really terrible. The whole thing is a documentation of us making our business cards and then presenting them at The Bistrotro in Beverly Hills. I don't know where it is now or if I got any left but it's the worst book that Ed ever did, that's for sure. Ed's a brilliant man when it comes to that type of stuff. I'm a dolt.

But it seems like books were an interesting form of medium because there weren't a lot of art books around like that at all.

We, more or less, dug a hole and filled it full of books, yeah.

And you've inspired a lot of other artists too, like Judy Chicago.

I hate to say that.

Yeah?

I don't know what I did. If that's the case, then she should be doing better work.

But, there are also other artists like Banks Violette and Aaron Young that sort of work with motorcycles

and materials like you worked with.

How do you feel about your influence on younger artists?

I have no idea. I'm a picture painter. I raced motorcycles for a living, that's what I did. And I painted a few pictures of them. I had a show at the Ferus Gallery and there were two prices, \$35 and \$50, you know how many we sold?

How many?

Zip.

Really?

Yeah, and I think we sold one a little while ago for \$150,000.

Wow. I mean, how does that feel now, looking back?

Stupid! I mean...

But a little exciting too, right?

Yeah. It all helps. It's good.

Where's your studio nowadays? Is it here or is it downstairs?

Downstairs. I don't dare go in it. No, that could lead to a serious waste of time.

Do you have any bikes down there?

No, I got two bikes at Sonny's. I got one under a staircase. And two electric bikes in the garage, and four racing bikes.

Alright, well let's stop there. Do you mind if I take a few portraits of you for this story? We can do it right here.

Do you do retouching? (laughter)

Yeah, we have a professional retoucher.

Good.

Let's get some portraits of you and the dog too.

You know the nice thing is, when you get a dog in a picture nobody looks at you, so you don't need to think about it.