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“Billy Al Bengston: Art Takes Balls”

by Billy Al Bengston

# LAWEEKLY

For me, the heyday was in 1959. It was before the Ferus Gallery moved across the street, in the days when Ed Kienholz and Walter Hopps ran it. At that time, art was taken very seriously in terms of being an artist, and not as a profession. We all worked like sons of bitches. There was nothing else to do. We were the beach group, we stayed at the beach, and on break time we'd go surfing.

We believed that there's no such thing as good art or bad art. Art is art. If it's bad, it's something else. It was a much, much harder line in the '50s and '60s than it is now, because the idea of art education didn't exist — they didn't have a fine arts program when I was a kid. If they did, they didn't have teachers who knew anything. Art is something you can't teach, but you can inspire it.

We were bare-knuckle artists. You got your ass kicked all the time if you didn't come up to the point — they all tried to kick mine. It was definitely a boy's club back then. You had to be good, and you had to have balls, and I didn't know any girls with balls then. In the arts scene there were female artists, but very few of them.

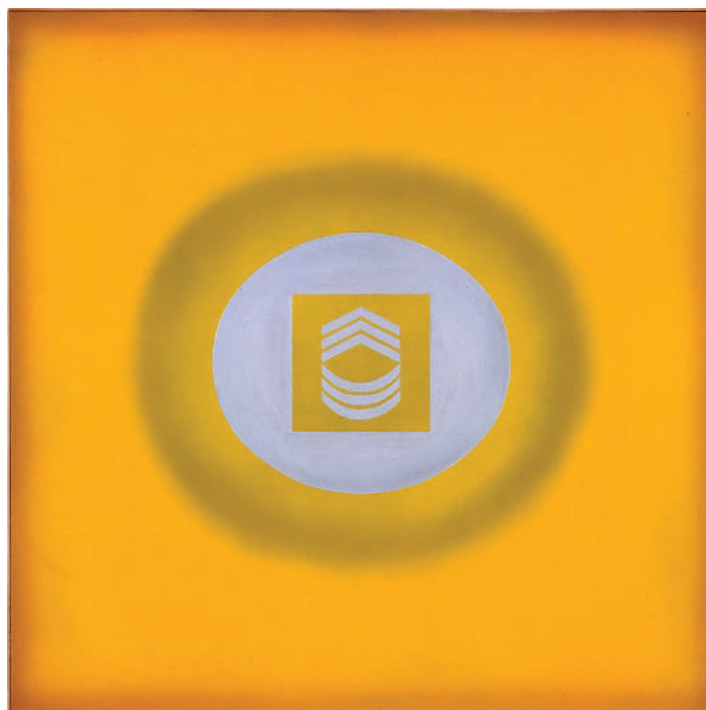
We worked on an extremely reduced financial budget. Every cent went toward the cost of production, and most of our dialogue was about keeping your integrity and your wheels. It was carpool times. It certainly restricted the amount of feminine appeal we could get, although I'll say we did very well, considering the circumstances.

It took a while for us to acknowledge that our influences, instead of coming from the West, came from the East. We were primarily subtropical- and Oriental-based. The art from the East is influenced by nature and touch. That comes from being more attuned to the environment. It's pretty simple — you can live out here and not die on the streets when it gets cold. When I was romanced

to go to New York, I said, “Who are you kidding? I'm not going to that shit hole.” There's a scent here that's different, and you lose a lot of those sensations when you're put in inclement climates. As a result, the real art of the time became real, nonobjective art. I think John McCracken cracked through that, Craig Kauffman did, I did. Even Ron Davis, Kenneth Price and Bob Irwin. We made art that was just art.

—As told to Sophie Duvernoy

Billy Al Bengston is an artist and sculptor who lives and works in Venice. A seminal figure in the 1960s Los Angeles arts scene, he draws much of his inspiration from the ocean, motorcycle racing, surfing and the East.



*Billy Al Bengston's 'Sonny' is in "Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture 1950-1970" at the Getty.*