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"ART IN REVIEW; Billy Al Bengston --
'Dentos and Draculas, 1968-1973' "
by Grace Glueck

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ART IN REVIEW; Billy Al Bengston -- 'Dentos and Draculas, 1968-1973'

Danese

41 East 57th Street, Manhattan

Through next Friday

The painter Billy Al Bengston, one of the Los Angeles "car culture" stars of the 1960's and 70's, was among the first to ditch traditional oil paint on canvas, opting instead for sprayed layers of automobile lacquer on aluminum in soft colors, achieving a highly reflective, translucent surface. He was also among the first to assert an artistic identity in terms of the "low" pursuit of macho sports. (He was once a semi-professional motorcycle racer.)

His Pop-ish icons combined Color Field abstraction with commonplace and commercial imagery. In his first exhibition in New York in 18 years, Mr. Bengston shows a small group of works from 1968 through 1973 to which he gave the titles "Dentos" and "Draculas." In the "Dentos," a military chevron takes dead center place; in the "Draculas," the central motif is the silhouetted shape of an iris, lifted from the logo on Iris brand sugar packets. Its petals, apparently, fancifully evoked the image of Count Dracula in flight.

Some of the paintings bear marks from a hammer beating, a rough touch of the street imposed on the dreamy, shiny surfaces built up of layered colors. In "Flying Leatherneck" (1969), for example, a brilliant white chevron sits on a ground composed of glossy diagonal brown bands edged in gray. But the well-mannered surface is roiled by a short row of rivetlike indentations beneath the chevron.

A few of the paintings depart from the rather rigid format of the centered icon: in "Rio Grande" (1969), four streamlined orange shapes converge on a cross-shaped delta of watery green. It's a winner. The show reminds you that Mr. Bengston's works, though slightly over the hill, have hung on to their virility.