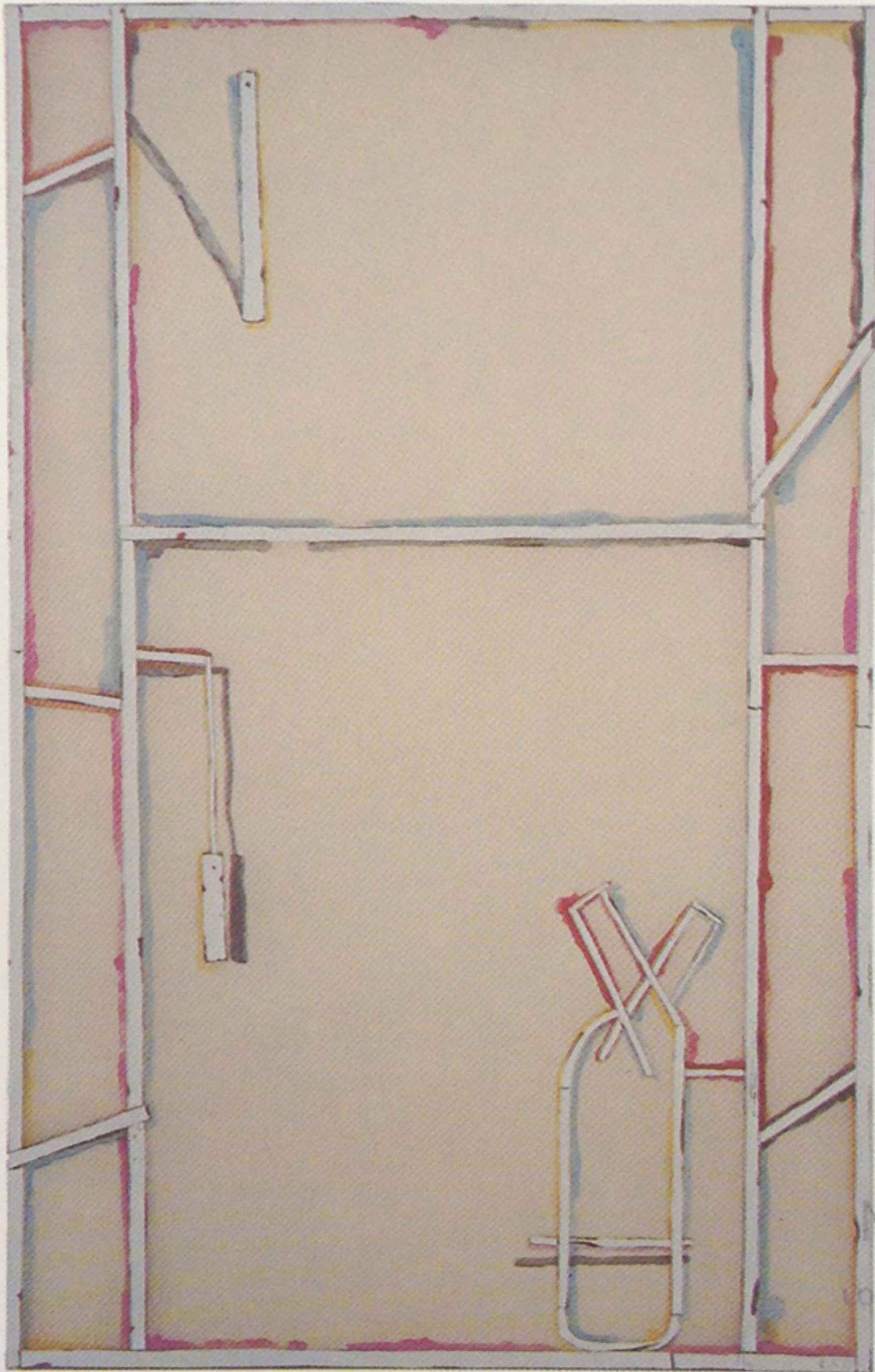


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Craig Kauffman

# Craig Kauffman's Interiors

Throughout history nearly all art has been produced according to certain prescribed conventions or beliefs as to the manner in which it should engage itself, such as the tribal ritual, the Golden Mean of ancient Greece, the Renaissance structuring of space according to perspective, the minimalism of the 1960's. Much rarer is art made from a direct response to the immediate environment (the cliché of an artist setting up an easel to paint the scene in front of him notwithstanding). Among the few periods in art history when artists have involved themselves with the content of perceptual experience are Impressionism and contemporary Southern California art. Craig Kauffman's new work is extremely unusual in that it combines both of these methods of approaching the art act, incorporating conventions drawn from the French and Oriental traditions together with a sensitivity to ambient light and space that is associated with a Southern California aesthetic derived from the natural environment.

Kauffman's earliest paintings, in the 1950's, were sparse Abstract Expressionist works, abstractions of semi-organic, semi-mechanical forms. This imagery was influenced in part by the work of Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia, to which Kauffman had access because of his friendship with Walter Hopps, who took him to the Arensberg collection then in Los Angeles. Executed in black, calligraphic strokes, with spare additions of color, the paintings allotted a greater percentage of space to the white of the canvas than to the artist's marks. In fact, Kauffman's discomfort with the neutrality of the canvas itself, its demand to be filled, led him to begin experimenting with plastic as a medium. In the 1960's he began making painted plastic reliefs whose empty spaces were filled with translucent, sprayed color rather than linear gestures. The reflective surfaces of these hybrid painting/sculpture objects are in a state of continuous interaction with the changing characteristics of ambient light.

Kauffman's major concerns in making the plastic reliefs were those of a painter: color, light, illusionistic space. At the beginning of the 1970's his plastic pieces became flatter physically and their formats changed from bulbous single images to irregular constructions of bars with colored masses between them. At this point it seemed more logical to make the bars actual strips of wood, instead of plastic illusions of wooden bars, and to stretch canvas in the intervening spaces. In the ensuing series both the wooden bars and the canvas were painted, the former having a relatively opaque surface and the latter a

comparatively translucent one. Certain sections of these constructed painting-objects were left empty, without canvas, playing off empty, literal space against the space of painted surfaces.

Following a sabbatical in Paris, 1976, Kauffman's current series, *Interiors*, began to evolve. Essentially they are a refinement and simplification of the pieces done in Paris, which had some structural bars on the front of the canvas, some behind it, creating complicated constructions of dimensional objects and flat planes, literal and illusionistic space. *Interior #1*, 1977, contains all of its structural bars behind the front surface, which is painted on silk rather than canvas. On the front surface strips of paper the width of the structural bars are glued on them, creating bands that are opaque, in contrast to the translucency of the rhoplex-coated silk. In addition the paper strips have a different physicality from the ambiguous surface of the silk. The paper is more familiar, a material from the everyday world, and ensures that the works will be seen as objects built in several pieces, as in the Constructivist tradition, rather than continuous, painted surfaces. This means that *Interiors* have a physical presence that anchors us perceptually to a particular object. Without the paper strips, the rhoplex-coated silk, with its elusive, translucent surface and accompanying illusionistic space, would be completely mysterious, otherworldly. It seems that Kauffman uses the paper and silk in combination to create a tension between the familiar world of commonplace objects and the other-world of abstract art, in much the same spirit that the Cubists originally invented collage, in order that art might be a part of, while simultaneously departing from, everyday life.

In the new work Kauffman's imagery, though abstract, is also more specific than it has been previously. It includes architectural fragments that function either as wall or as painting supports, both metaphorical and literal, and abstracted objects found in his immediate environment—Japanese tea bowls, palettes, light bulbs, hanging lanterns, paint brushes. The artist's use of his own milieu—studio space and tools—is a recurrent theme in French painting. Kauffman says he has always loved both the quality of paint and the reference to objects in French painting. The inclusion of abstract objects is important to him as a referent to human scale, but at the same time he has always felt that French painting is too cluttered. Hence the majority of the surface in these new works, as throughout his career, is occupied by empty space. His predilection for empty space and its sensitivity to ambient light derives not only from his California environment but also from his interest in Japanese art, such as the uninterrupted

flow of space in Japanese temples. "In a perverse way," he says, "I like to make paintings in which you can't make a mistake, can't paint over, but instead have to build rather than correct, like Oriental art."

Kauffman's imagery is articulated in a restrained manner that is obviously carefully considered with regard to placement and scale, but does not preclude spontaneous gesture. The fluid washes of color and calligraphic black lines that outline the paper frames of implied walls, windows, doors, are freely applied. Colors exist like pigmented shadows around the architectural fragments and studio objects, and establish a variety of moods in different paintings: restrained in monochromatic purple-grey; earthy in a palette of brown, green, red; gaudy in orange, magenta, yellow, green combinations. The illusion of colored shadows in these paintings recalls the artist's involvement with actual colored shadows cast on the wall through transparent plexiglass in earlier work. Many of the painted shadows are irrational, seemingly cast by objects that are not to be found within the painting as in several of Duchamp's works.

Although the *Interiors* have many affinities with painting tradition, they also depart from it in many ways. In order to avoid a framed look, Kauffman overlaps the strips of paper, especially at the corners. Although he refers to objects, his references are ambiguous. As he says, "I don't want to be too literal, like making a tea house wall." For paintings these have very little paint on the surface. Games are played by the artist with placement and scale, resulting in some works that seem to be square but in fact are not.

For Kauffman the ambiguous quality of space is the most important aspect of the new work. It is an ambiguity that results from the use of material—silk-screen silk stretched tightly over the stretcher bars like fabric over an airplane wing; the silk both sprayed from behind and painted with silvery, shimmering rhoplex on the front. The resulting surface looks translucent, indeterminate from a distance, but cannot be seen through when viewed closely. The elusive, pearlescent reflections of light are subtle, visible only through concentrated perceptual attention. This lack of spatial definition, of location, and resultant mystery is not an issue traditionally addressed by painting. It is closer in fact to the qualities found in environmental works by California artists like Robert Irwin or Larry Bell, with whom Kauffman feels more rapport than he does with painters. In fact Kauffman himself has experimented with environmental installations, as in a 1970-71 exhibition at UCLA, *Transparency, Reflection, Light, Space: Four Artists*, but learned that he was temperamentally more comfortable working in his

studio with architectural things he could control than with the environment. Nonetheless, the new works are able to produce a phenomenological experience of empty, ambient light and space. That they can do this in conjunction with tasteful, abstract references to specific objects and art traditions is a rare accomplishment and results in an original and highly resolved body of work.

Melinda Wertz, Director, Fine Arts Gallery, University of California at Irvine

### **Cover**

*Coin de l'Atelier*, 1977, Acrylic on Paper and Silk, 64" x 39<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

## **CRAIG KAUFFMAN**

### **Biography**

Born Los Angeles, 1932; lives in Laguna Beach, California. Studied University of Southern California, School of Architecture, 1950-1952; University of California at Los Angeles, M.A., 1956.

### **One Man Exhibitions**

Felix Landau Gallery, Los Angeles, 1953.  
Dilexi Gallery, San Francisco, 1958, 1960.  
Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles, 1958, 1963, 1965, 1967.  
Pace Gallery, New York, 1967, 1969, 1970, 1973.  
Irving Blum Gallery, Los Angeles, 1969, 1972.  
Galerie Darthea Speyer, Paris, 1973, 1976.  
Pasadena Museum of Modern Art, 1970.  
University of California at Irvine, 1970.  
Mizuno Gallery, Los Angeles, 1975.  
Robert Elkon Gallery, New York City, 1976.  
Comsky Gallery, Los Angeles, 1976.

### **Selected Group Exhibitions**

"Annual," Los Angeles County Fair, Pomona, California, 1951.  
Members Gallery, Museum of Modern Art, New York City, 1952.  
"Artists Under 35," Dickson Art Center, University of California at Los Angeles, 1959.  
"Annual," University of Illinois at Champaign, 1961  
"5 at Pace," Pace Gallery, New York City, 1965.  
"Los Angeles Now," Robert Fraser Gallery, London, 1966.  
"Ten from Los Angeles," Seattle Art Museum, 1966.  
"Form, Color, Image," The Detroit Institute of Arts, 1967.  
"A New Aesthetic," Washington Gallery of Modern Art, Washington, D.C., 1967.  
"The 1960's," Museum of Modern Art, New York City, 1967.  
"V Paris Biennale," Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France, 1967; and Pasadena Museum of Modern Art, 1967.

"Recent Acquisitions," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City, 1968.  
"Sculpture Annual," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City, 1968.  
"Late Fifties at the Ferus," Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1968.  
"Three from Los Angeles: Irwin, Bell, Kauffman," Dunkelman Gallery, Montreal, Canada, 1969.  
"Fourteen Sculptors: The Industrial Edge," Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1969.  
"Plastic Presence," Milwaukee Art Center, 1970; The Jewish Museum, New York City, 1970; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1970.  
"Kompass 4 West Coast," Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Netherlands, 1969; Dortmund, Germany, 1969; Bern, Switzerland, 1969.  
"Transparency, Reflection, Light, Space: Four Artists," University of California at Los Angeles, 1971.  
"Contemporary American Art: Los Angeles," Fort Worth Art Museum, Texas, 1972.  
"Last Plastics Show," California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, California, 1972.  
"Corcoran Biennale," Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1973.  
"Seventy-First American Exhibition," The Art Institute of Chicago, 1974.  
"Illuminations and Reflections," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City, 1974.  
"Irvine 1965-1975," La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, California, 1975.  
"The Last Time I Saw Ferus," Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California, 1976.  
"75 Years of California Art: Bicentennial Exhibition," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1976.  
"Recent Los Angeles Work," Museum of Modern Art, New York City, 1976.  
"Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1976; National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1977.  
"Biennale de Paris: Un Anthologie 1959-1967," Paris, France, 1977.  
"Collage," Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles, 1978.



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