

Precise control and sensuality of Craig Kauffman

By Christopher Knight
Herald Examiner art critic

LA JOLLA — Craig Kauffman is having a 23-year retrospective exhibition at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art. At the age of 48, the artist, who painter Billy Al Bengston once described as "the first Southern California artist ever to paint an original painting," has produced a body of work that is both conversant with the traditions of 20th-century avant-garde art and a point of reference by which the term "L.A. art" has come to be recognized since the '60s.

The exhibition is unabashedly beautiful, with an installation (supervised by Kauffman) that makes the museum's terribly awkward gallery spaces look better than they ever have. Over the course of the last 30 years we have come to distrust art that is "unabashedly beautiful," suspecting that it lacks a seriousness of purpose that the best art manifests. But we have also seen an enormous amount of art that has sought, as often as not with less than successful results, to directly effect cultural or social change. Kauffman's work, on the other hand, seems content with the quiet notion of aesthetic investigation, an investigation no less "serious" than the most politically directed art.

The traditions from which Kauffman's art springs are many, but two are paramount: the erotic, mechanomorphic imagery of Francis Picabia and, especially, Marcel Duchamp; and, to an even greater degree, the carefully structured, sensuously coloristic work of Henri Matisse. The influence of the former is most readily observable in Kauffman's acrylic-on-plexiglass paintings of 1962-63. While echoing Duchamp's enigmatic painting on glass, "The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even," these paintings exhibit a more direct, straightforward sense of erotic imagery. The clean, hard-edged forms are pure inventions, but inventions whose allusions oscillate between suggestions of precision-tooled mechanical pistons and genital forms

locked in an embrace. These images are a cleaned-up, streamlined reworking of the softer, more painterly forms that began to appear in "Still Life," "Studio," and "Tell Tale Heart" of 1957-58, the earliest paintings in the exhibition. The playful eroticism of these early works is given substance by a tactility of loosely handled paint, while the forms remain elusive, suggestive. The John Altoon-like softness of these calligraphic paintings and, later, the hard contours of the iconic images on plexiglass set the parameters for Kauffman's subsequent work: an ambiguous but sensuous optical experience that is orchestrated by means of a cerebral though precise pictorial structure.

This brings us to the second and, I believe, more significant tradition with which Kauffman works: the paintings and paper cut-outs of Matisse. In the erotically inclined, vacuum-formed plastic works from 1964-68 on which Kauffman's reputation became established — the stem-and-bulb reliefs and the lozenge-shaped bubbles spray painted on the back in luminous, somehow pornographic color — the artist partakes of the total affirmation of sensual pleasure with which Matisse is identified. The optical effect created by color sprayed on the back surface of the plastic bubbles suspends that color in space. We cannot always read the paint as one with the surface; we look through the plastic surface

and often transparent color into a muffled interior space; we read the hard bubble of plastic as an object pushing forward off of the wall into the space of the room. This spatial ambiguity generated by color and the barest structure is a descendent of the kind articulated by Matisse's 1911 masterpiece, "The Red Studio."

Kauffman's exquisite paintings on silk from 1977 to the present likewise owe allegiance to that source. In these works, paper is cut and affixed to the surface of stretched silk in configurations suggestive of the stretcher bars that form the stable support for a painting, with various shapes attached (a shoe, a leg, a heart, and abstract structural shapes.) The paper strips are painted, or shadows that would be cast by them are painted on the silk itself, so that the placement of color is determined by the structure of the image. The process suspends the

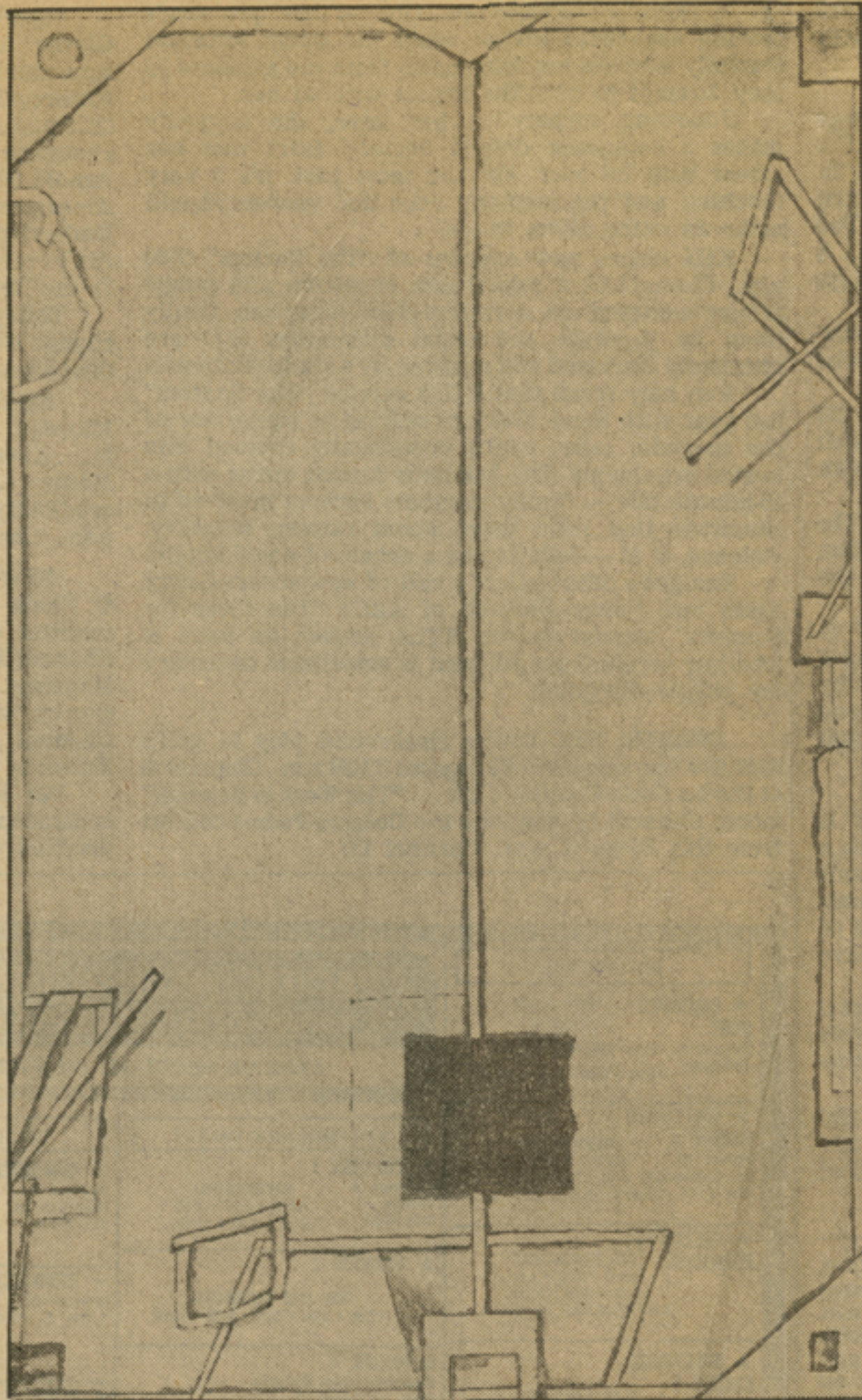
color in front of or behind the picture plane, creating a shallow optical space.

In allowing the linear paper configurations to determine the optically ambiguous placement of color, Kauffman moves into a territory once defined by Matisse as "the eternal conflict between drawing and color," a conflict the Frenchman was to resolve in his celebrated paper cut-outs. The small, agitated strokes of paint on Kauffman's "drawn" strips of paper or the "drawn shadows" that they cast — in vivid crimson and azure and orange — establish a pictorial tension between physical structure and optical sensation.

Perhaps the phrase that could best identify Kauffman's art would be "lush physicality," with its suggestion of a paradoxical fusion of precise control and seductive sensuality. For Matisse, this lush physicality was centered on what

has been called the landscape of pleasure, a pastoral ideal whose source was in nature. But for Kauffman, the sources are the marriage of human eroticism and machine form, of technological manipulation and structural invention. His work is decidedly centered on the landscape of pleasure, but it represents a commitment to a cultural, rather than a pastoral, ideal. That aspect of his work, laced throughout with a sensual reverie, is what constitutes the unique point of reference for so much "L.A. art."

The exhibition, which continues through May 3, was organized by the La Jolla Museum's chief curator, Robert McDonald, and sponsored by the Fellows of Contemporary Art, a free-lance support group based in Los Angeles. A very useful 96-page catalog, supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, accompanies the show.



From the Kauffman retrospective: "Amarillo" and "Untitled."