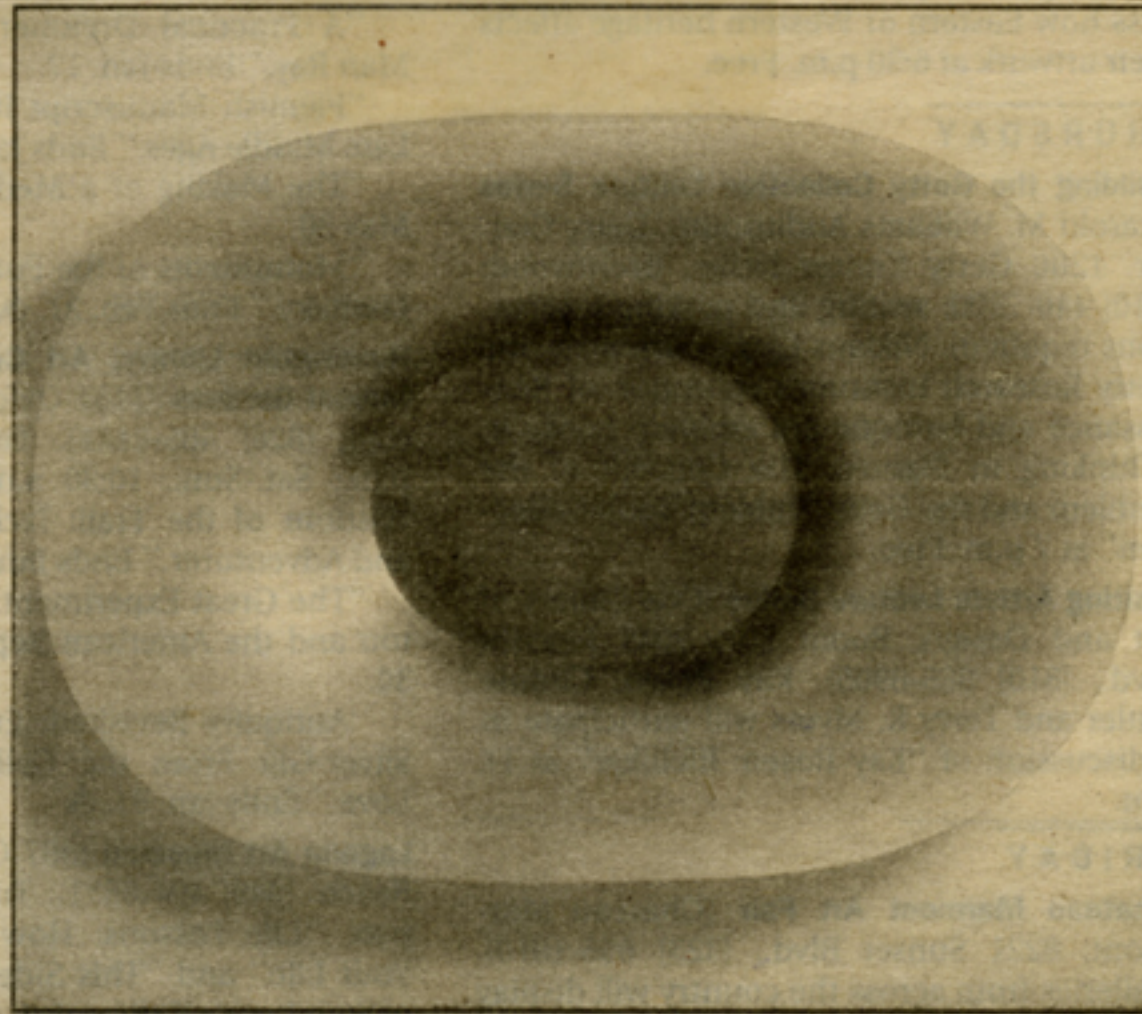


PATRICIA FAURE GALLERY

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Art & Architecture



Patricia Faure Gallery

Kauffman's "2-3," 1995, displays sexual overtones. "I lose interest in the erotic, then it comes back."

Back to the Drawing Board

Craig Kauffman looked at his old work before moving forward with the new, using the Far East influences of calligraphy for a twist.

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ROBERT GAUTHIER / Los Angeles Times

"I like the quality of translucence," says the 67-year-old Kauffman, at the Patricia Faure Gallery with some sketches of his sculptures. "I've had a hard time with the rough, opaque surface of canvas."

By HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP

The pellucid marine light flowing through the new skylights of the Patricia Faure Gallery lends an ethereal aspect to Craig Kauffman's recent painting of dark lines whirling like dervishes across a white silk surface. The artist muses: "These new pieces are skeletal. I went back to looking at my old work and started drawing again. They seemed to work better when I thought of lining the images up like calligraphy." Kauffman's paintings and drawings go on view at the Faure Gallery on Saturday, complementing the artist's 1968 pink-plexiglass bubble sculpture included in "Sunshine & Noir: Art in L.A. 1960-1997" at UCLA's Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center.

One of the original artists associated with L.A.'s infamous Ferus Gallery in the late 1950s and '60s, Kauffman has yo-yoed between the more traditional concerns of abstract painting and making the vacuum-formed plastic wall reliefs that earned him membership in L.A.'s so-called Finish Fetish school. Dissimilar on the surface, both aspects of his work actually reflect a lifelong interest in the properties of light and the aesthetics of the Far East. Art critic Michael Duncan observed in *Art in America* that Kauff-

man's plexiglass wall reliefs, which he resumed making in 1996 and '97, demonstrate a "subtlety of color, delicacy of texture and air of mystery [that] seem spiritually founded in Asian art."

"I like the quality of translucence," Kauffman, 67, says. "I've had a hard time with the rough, opaque surface of canvas. After the work in plastic, I began painting on silk like the Japanese artists. I like the sense of immateriality that they get with thin washes."

Kauffman's passion led him to live in a suburb of Manila in the Philippines from 1986 to 1996. During that time, he traveled around Asia, and those years of looking at calligraphy and ink painting made him feel he shouldn't try to re-create what already exists. "Calligraphy is something you need to learn when you are quite young," he says. Instead, his drawings emulate the calligraphers' free movement of line and the spare use of color.

Kauffman's introduction to Asian art began in the late '50s through Alan Lynch, a friend who collected Japanese ceramics. "He showed these masterpieces to [artists] Billy Al Bengston, Ken Price and me. I really loved them. He went on to be really involved in Zen Buddhism. He taught me how to sit in medi-

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CRAIG KAUFFMAN, Patricia Faure Gallery, 2525 Michigan Ave., B7, Santa Monica. **Dates:** Opens Saturday. Ends Jan. 16. **Phone:** (310) 449-1479.

Kauffman

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tation, something I still try to practice." In the late '50s, Kauffman taught himself tea ceremony rituals and regularly played the Japanese strategic game of Go. On trips to San Francisco, Kauffman was introduced to the writings of Alan Watts and the Beats.

In addition, he remembers an early trip to the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. "They had a lot of Oriental paintings. I thought, 'I really like the way these look—plain, spare, not a lot of color,'" Kauffman recalls. "I think that experience has stayed with me. It's why I like Minimal art and many of the Minimal artists were friends of mine in the late '60s, when I lived part of the time in New York: Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Carl Andre, Robert Smithson. Not so much the painters. I was more interested in the '60s Minimal sculpture."

Indeed, Kauffman's molded plastic reliefs were included in various Minimalist sculpture shows such as "A New Aesthetic" organized by Barbara Rose for the Washington Gallery of Modern Art in Washington, D.C., in 1967. Kauffman saw the connection but wasn't entirely comfortable with the label: "I felt my stuff was different, maybe not as intellectual."

Part of Kauffman's desire to move between painting and sculpture, form and surface, has to do with his distrust of the relentless categorization of art. He is considered the first artist to have used vacuum-formed plastic as a medium, in 4-by-8-foot sheets. "I took out an ad in [the magazine] *Art International* in 1964 announcing the 'paintings in plastic' to establish that I was the first to do plastic in a big scale, though Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Naum Gabo had worked in plastic on a smaller scale. After that, a lot of people started to do plastic."

From his phallic, high-color wall reliefs to his luminous bubbles sprayed with pastel auras, the plastic work landed Kauffman international recognition, museum shows and representation with Pace Gallery in New York.

In 1971, his work was included in a show at UCLA's Wight Gallery titled "Transparency, Reflection, Light and Space" along with works by Robert Irwin, Larry Bell and Peter Alexander. For the show, Kauffman created a plastic trough of water with a mirror that reflected prismatic wave patterns on the wall. "People really liked that," Kauffman says. "One guy was meditating in front of it. Pace wanted me to show the piece in New York, and I decided I didn't want to do that kind of work anymore."

Although Kauffman continued to work in molded plastic until the mid-'70s, he was tired of being removed from the more basic act of painting. "I wanted to work in my studio."

The artist believes his work is strongest when it is intuitive. "A lot of ideas I've had get me in trouble. I'm better when I'm winging it. [Abstract Expressionist Mark] Rothko said, 'Whenever I get a bright idea, I go take a nap.' When I get a bright idea, the mistake is that I do it." Kauffman recently sold his Eagle Rock home and destroyed much of what he found in the studio. "I've done a lot of work, and only some of it is good," he says.

In the 1970s and '80s, he began painting on silk and on paper, pursuing abstract, often erotic forms, at times painting on the back as well as the front of the surfaces to add an element of surprise. After returning from Manila, Kauffman found many of the plastic sculptures in his studio to have a certain "thereness."

"Now I can see a lot of consistency in the work," the artist says. A few years ago, he returned to the medium of plexiglass and fabricated brilliant-hued ovoids with sexual overtones. "I lose interest in the erotic element, then it comes back. Those same shapes recur in different forms."

Veiled eroticism threads through the sculptures, paintings and drawings of the oft-married Kauffman. "You are in love with love," warned his friend Irwin. He has one daughter by an earlier marriage and three with his current wife, Dana, 27. They live in Arroyo Grande, a community south of San Luis Obispo.

Kauffman did not expect to have such a peripatetic and dramatic life; his father was a Superior Court judge in Los Angeles, and the artist grew up in Eagle Rock, where his childhood classmate and friend was Walter Hopps, who became one of the co-founders of the Ferus Gallery and now a curator at the Menil Collection in Houston. When Kauffman designed his high school's commencement program in the then-controversial Cubist style, authorities worried about possible Communist links. It was the teenage Hopps who convinced them otherwise.

Kauffman initially studied architecture at USC, then, in 1952, transferred to the art department at UCLA, where Hopps was also a student, and together they put on a series of jazz concerts. Kauffman showed his paintings with the Felix Landau Gallery on La Cienega, and he was part of the first show at Ferus in 1957. From his earliest exhibitions, the viewers responded to the element of eroticism. He recalls, "I got a lot of static from my mom about that at first, though I thought they weren't all that obvious. I remember Ken Price got static from his mother, too."

The success of Hopps, of Ferus Gallery, of fellow artists is viewed through the lens of history in "Sunshine & Noir" at the Hammer. Kauffman shrugs philosophically about his tumultuous early decades. "I knew everybody was talented, but I had no idea how successful everybody was going to become," he says. "We were so young. We were rabble-rousers." □

Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar.