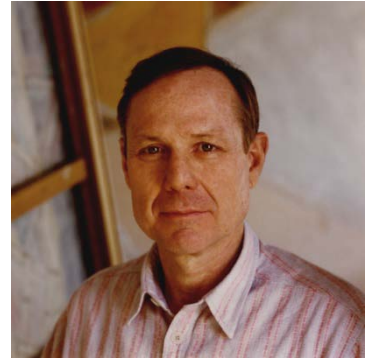


# Los Angeles Times

CRAIG KAUFFMAN, 1932 – 2010

## Artist captured the ethos of L.A.

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Craig Kauffman at his Eagle Rock Studio, ©1992 Jim McHugh

Artist Craig Kauffman, a sparkplug of Los Angeles' art scene in the late 1950s and early '60s who captured national attention with bubble-like plastic wall pieces that reflect Southern California's sunshine and car culture, died Sunday at his home in the Philippines. He was 78.

Kauffman had a stroke about two months ago, said art dealer Frank Lloyd, who represents the artist. Kauffman attended the early-April opening of his most recent exhibition at Lloyd's gallery in Santa Monica, but his condition worsened after he returned to the Philippines. He died of complications from pneumonia, Lloyd said.

An independent thinker whose work is often described in terms of voluptuous curves and sensuous surfaces, Kauffman worked in a self-styled aesthetic territory that has been called a seductive strain of Minimalism or an abstract version of Pop art. And he made his mark early, as part of the original stable of artists at Ferus Gallery, an avant-garde showcase on La Cienega Boulevard founded by artist Edward Kienholz and curator Walter Hopps.

"Craig was the smartest guy," said painter Ed Moses, a Ferus colleague and longtime friend. "He had traveled. He knew all about the New York School and what was going on in Europe. He had a very sharp eye. We all learned from him."

Stephanie Barron, senior curator of modern art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, deemed Kauffman "a seminal figure in the evolution of the L.A. art scene" whose "distinctive, luminous wall relief sculptures helped to define an era in our art history."

He also produced many abstract paintings and drawings, but the vacuum-formed plastic pieces are his signature works, Barron said, adding that they are partly responsible for a recent renewal of interest in the development of Los Angeles art.

One of those artworks, a 1967 pink and yellow lozenge-like relief in LACMA's collection, was in the news in 2006. Part of "Los Angeles: Birth of an Art Capital, 1955-1985," a highly publicized exhibition at the Pompidou Center in Paris, it mysteriously fell from a wall and shattered. Technology and paints had changed considerably in 39 years. But with the help of

specialists and money from the Pompidou, Kauffman made a new version — "Untitled Wall Relief (cast by the artist from the irreparably damaged 'Untitled Wall Relief,' 1967), 2008" — for the Los Angeles museum.

"It's not a miracle," the artist said upon completing the complicated project, "but it's pretty lucky." More intensely colored than the original, the new one also has a different mounting system. "We worked out a new one that's very sturdy," Kauffman said. "It's not going to fall off the wall."

Born in Los Angeles on March 31, 1932, the artist was the son of Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Kurtz Kauffman. He met Hopps, the future curator, when they were fellow students at Eagle Rock High School. Kauffman enrolled in the School of Architecture at USC in 1950 but transferred to UCLA in 1952, receiving a bachelor of fine arts degree in 1955 and a master of fine arts in 1956.

Artist Larry Bell, another Ferus compatriot, recalled Kauffman as "a sophisticated, very scholarly guy who knew a lot about painters and painting." Eccentric and reclusive, "he had a disciplined way of working," Bell said. "He demanded a certain kind of perfection of things, whether paintings or plastics, that were unequivocally what they were. He was always on the case."

Although Kauffman's friends remember him as being much more interested in doing his work than making career moves, he began showing his paintings as a teenager and compiled a lengthy resume of exhibitions in leading galleries and museums in the U.S. and Europe. His first big one-man show was held at L.A.'s Felix Landau Gallery in 1953, and he was part of Ferus' inaugural exhibition in 1957.

The Museum of Contemporary Art in La Jolla presented a retrospective exhibition of his work in 1981, and he commanded prominent wall space at such institutions as the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. He also taught art at UC Irvine from the late '60s to the early '90s.

Like some of his fellow artists, Kauffman experimented with installations of light in the late '60s, but he knew his strengths were in painting and drawing, said Jay Belloli, director of gallery programs at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena, who organized a retrospective of his drawings there in 2008. Nonetheless, Kauffman worked with unusual techniques and materials throughout his career.

Frustration with the fragility of glass led him to plastics, and he often painted on silk rather than canvas. His final show included flower-like wall pieces made by draping sheets of heated clear acrylic over wooden forms and applying spray paint and glitter to the cooled material.

"Think overgrown morning glories as brought to you by Monsanto," Times art critic Christopher Knight wrote in his review of the show. "Or, flesh brushed with satin and spangles. Or perhaps a sunset enlivened by smog. The strangely poignant collision of sumptuousness and vulgarity, elegance and tawdriness gives these works a surprising heft."

Kauffman, Belloli said, "was always pushing the envelope in terms of what his art was." And there's a large body of work, much of it unknown to a new generation of artists and curators, that deserves to be seriously examined in a retrospective exhibition, he said.

Kauffman's work is in the collections of more than 20 museums, including LACMA and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney in New York, the Tate Modern in London, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebaek, Denmark.

Frequently married and divorced, Kauffman is survived by daughters Wilhelmina, Rose and Georgia from his marriage with Dana Kauffman.

Funeral arrangements are pending in Angeles City, Philippines.