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Craig Kauffman at Frank Lloyd Gallery

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In 1969, when Craig Kauffman painted his series called “Loops,” a vigorous practice of questioning the nature of art was underway just about everywhere. Doing it required going back to basics.

A contemporary painting could be described as a flat plane of color suspended before a white wall. And that is precisely what Kauffman made with his “Loops,” even though the result didn't much look like anything that had fit that succinct description before. At Frank Lloyd Gallery, five works show the strength — and the weakness — of the proposition.

Kauffman, who died last spring at 78, made the paintings by spraying color on one side of a large acrylic sheet, then heating the plastic so that an end could be curled back into a shorter parallel plane. The curled “loop” functions as a hanger, with the panel suspended several inches from the wall by a wire.

The colored lacquer is applied on just one side. Glossy and transparent where the acrylic folds over, it's more matte and light absorbent in the larger rectangular expanse. Kauffman paired hues — emerald green and blue, raspberry and bright orange, pale orange and pink, etc. — that yield the look of smog-enhanced sunsets or expanses of deep sea. The colors reflect onto the wall behind each “Loop,” adding another spatial layer of perception.

The problem comes in the suspension technique. Seeking invisibility, Kauffman used stainless steel wire bolted into the ceiling. (The gallery doesn't have the right kind of ceiling for that, so a temporary if rather clumsy wire system was employed; since then the gallery has reinstalled the show with another method,

which I have not seen.) But no system can be truly invisible, instead leaving the acrylic sheet looking a bit like laundry hanging on a line.

Rather than an invisible cord, Kauffman would have done well to take the suspension method at face value. It might have been a distinctive feature of the work.

--Christopher Knight

Frank Lloyd Gallery, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 264-3866, through Nov. 13. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.franklloyd.com

Photos: Craig Kauffman, "Loops," 1969; Credit: Frank Lloyd Gallery