

ARTFORUM

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REVIEWS

Craig Kauffman DANESE

Bemused condescension is a nuanced mind-set. Yet it is familiar enough to the New York art world, as when, some forty-plus years ago, the cognoscenti encountered the team of young Light and Space artists who were then emerging in Los Angeles. It is not that ethereality, evanescence, and the dematerialization of color were necessarily foreign to the aspirations of East Coast painters in the 1960s—they weren't (think Color Field, for example)—but that such refined digressions, as we spun them, were embodied as pigment on canvas, including even the paintings of a nascent Minimalist persuasion. For the LA lineup, however, that was hardly true: Consider Larry Bell's reflective rare metals annealed to glass, John McCracken's perfectly lacquered monochromatic slabs, James Turrell's luminous coloristic halations, or Robert Irwin's conjuring of untrammelled ineffability as sensation. To aggravate matters further, on our side of the bicoastal divide, painting had resisted the appeal of plastic, of acrylic, of Lucite as a color-suffused support (or as a backing for an ultrathin skin of lacquer): Plastic was tacky from the outset, a material compromised by commercial associations—cheap advertising and popular culture.

But our smug self-assurance has foundered, transformed by the art world's decentralization. With LA now the new Athens, its acropolis crowned by trophy temples dedicated to art and music, Manhattan no longer serves as the sole art-world umbilicus, thereby forwarding LA's interests *à rebours* and finally rendering credible those first arguments in favor of the "finish fetishists" (to use John Coplans's telling sobriquet). In fact, such argument was mostly voiced in the pages of *Artforum* (despite its marked Greenbergian puritanism at that time)—a publication, as is widely forgotten, that began as the most topical of LA art journals.

And just what were those specifically Californian characteristics that spawned such knickerbocker anxiety? For starters, the work evoked LA's ubiquitous car culture (New Yorkers of a certain age still regard as a badge of merit the fact that they do not drive): the obsessive surfaces associated with automotive color, or the mirage brilliance

of midday light as it transmutes at sunset along LA's once easily car-accessible beaches and amusing bohemian *banlieues*, such as Venice or Santa Monica, with their niche-culture, Cycladic surfboards, and buff, beach-boy blonds. And, of course, there were hints of the illusions of celluloid Hollywood.

Such memories regarding bygone discord crowded in on me at this affecting and ultimately admonitory memorial exhibition of eleven late works by Craig Kauffman, who died this past May at the age of seventy-eight. In the '60s, following his fledgling steps as a painter, Kauffman became an early adept of vacuum- or drape-formed plastic acrylic. Abandoning this "techie" mode during a midcareer hiatus, he revived it again during the last decade of his life, crafting the hexagonal morning-glory "Flowers," 2009, drooping toruslike "Donuts," 2001, and pearlescent "Bubbles" (a series he worked on between 1967 and 1968 and returned to between 2007 and 2008) that were on display here. If anything, the flawless coloristic attractions of each of these groups dramatize the current elasticity of the Abstract Expressionist paradigm and the justified loss of faith in its "one size fits all" transcendence.

Granting my admiration for Kauffman's sensitive floriated and nacreous iridescences, I still waver with regard to the artist's frequent use of a shield- or tureen lid-like symmetry. Such centered symmetries are risky to begin with. Chafing and regularized, they miss the sense of potential infinity open, say, to the grid, with its horizontal or vertical push. Only Kauffman's sequence of quasi-rounded tondi may be affiliated with that Minimalist ur-form par excellence, even as their exquisite laminates of evanescent color ally the work with the glossy fetishism of photography. That said, of these "Donuts," a turquoise-y *Untitled* certainly carried the show for me, though to choose a favorite is a bit absurd to begin with. Like an expression of sympathy in a letter of condolence, "words fail to convey" the delicacy of Kauffman's West Coast color, especially when contrasted with the hard-nosed triad of the New Yorker's red, yellow, and blue.



Craig Kauffman, *Untitled*, 2001, acrylic lacquer on vacuum-formed plastic, 36 x 32 x 6½".

—Robert Pincus-Witten