

# Los Angeles Times

## Craig Kauffman: Sensual/Mechanical at Frank Lloyd Gallery

September 29, 2011 | Christopher Knight



The momentous transition from painted canvas to colored vacuum-formed plastic reliefs is compellingly sketched in a tight show of Craig Kauffman's artistic evolution between 1958 and 1964. Frank Lloyd Gallery has assembled 17 infrequently seen works.

Kauffman, who died last year at 78, was critical to the distinctive emergence of what came to be called the L.A. Look. Pegging art to the city in which the artist lived was popular in the 1950s and '60s -- Bay Area Figurative, New York School, Chicago Imagism, etc. But only the L.A. Look has been hampered by a sticky attachment to rather vapid civic clichés.

Chicago is not inherently identified with images in any distinctive way, New York isn't the only place with schools and figures don't just live in San Francisco. The L.A. Look, however, is invariably tied to banalities like surfboards and aerospace.

Because Hollywood ruled American popular culture while the U.S. was artistically insecure, some simply assumed art produced in Tinseltown's vicinity could not escape being superficial. New York critic Clement Greenberg's hugely influential 1939 essay, "Avant Garde and Kitsch," set muddle-headed terms of opposition that would operate for decades.

This show effectively sweeps all that away, digging down into Kauffman's particulars in ways unseen in 30 years. (Kauffman was the subject of an incisive 1981 retrospective at San Diego's Museum of Contemporary Art.) The gallery has wall texts, but it's the selection and juxtaposition of paintings and drawings that's most impressive.

Two 1958 paintings on canvas show Kauffman's interest in De Kooning, Gorky, John Alton and gestural abstraction with a strong erotic undercurrent. Tension is established between freewheeling improvisation and considered structure, creating a pictorial equivalent to jazz. Layered smears and brushstrokes of red, yellow, blue and off-white paint are bounded by broken lines of dark gray, which seek to contain them. Several drawings show how Kauffman plotted compositions.

The result is a quiet, rigorous conversation among color, shape and line -- plus sensuality, severity, control and abandon. As the work develops, the erotic duality becomes more frank.

Abstracted shapes in bright colors and razor-sharp contours suggest buttocks, magnetos, bosoms, pistons, phalluses, valves, vulvas, motor oil, bodily fluids and other human and machine parts. (Sometimes the drawing paper is a Frederick's of Hollywood mail-order catalog page for fetishistic

stiletto shoes.) In 1963 he began to paint on the backs of 6½-foot tall plexiglass sheets; when turned around, the sexual thrust-and-parry assumes a visual sleekness.

Their va-va-voom is as clinically absurd as a monumental animation-cel. The technique was plainly inspired by Marcel Duchamp's "The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even" (1915-23), often called "The Large Glass" in reference to the transparent material on which it's rendered. Kauffman had seen the replica-version in the 1963 Duchamp retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum. Familiar with the plastics used by Bauhaus-era artists Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Antoine Pevsner, Kauffman employed simple technology used to make commercial plastic signs.

Luscious color, organic shape, seductive image and glamorous object now fused into an arresting whole. An age-old erotic subject is played as an up-to-the-minute sign of the times.

Like "The Large Glass," but in a manner wholly born of his own evolution as a painter over the previous five years, Kauffman's "sensual/mechanical" art (as the show is titled) is both intimate and remote. The riveting look-but-don't-touch visual appeal is almost voyeuristic.

A strange pathos wells up, incongruously mingled with humor. And there isn't a surfboard anywhere in sight.

Frank Lloyd Gallery, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 264-3866, through Oct. 15. Closed Sunday and Monday. [www.franklloyd.com](http://www.franklloyd.com)

*Photos: Craig Kauffman (1932-2010), "No. 1," 1963 (detail); "No. 1," 1963, acrylic lacquer on plastic, 80" by 42." Credit: Frank Lloyd Gallery*