

C R A I G K A U F F M A N

Wall Reliefs from the Late 1960s



September 4–November 8, 1987

Whitney Museum of American Art

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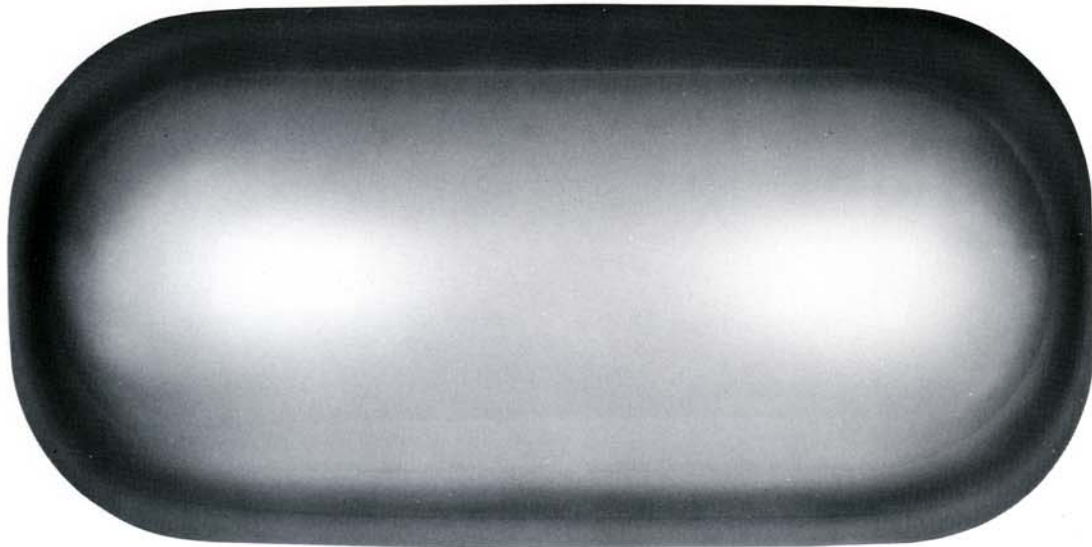
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The experimentation with plastic media and eccentric forms that characterized sculpture made in the late 1960s and early 1970s by such New York artists as Eva Hesse, Barry Le Va, Richard Tuttle, and Alan Saret was matched in Los Angeles in the work of Robert Irwin, Billy Al Bengston, Ken Price, and Craig Kauffman, who were developing an aesthetic that would come to be seen as southern California's first wholly unique art. While they shared with their Eastern colleagues a preference for new materials—especially acrylic resins—the Californians worked, each in his own way, toward more deliberately composed ends. The younger New Yorkers espoused a variety of three-dimensional gestural modes that tacitly refuted geometric, serial, or impersonally rendered sculpture. By contrast, the California artists were engaged in a profound search for forms that could accommodate serialization, an industrial look, and geometric symmetry. The artistic climate in Los Angeles was then marked by its dependence on the etiolated second-generation Abstract Expressionism that had developed in San Francisco and on the charismatic, but retrograde, example of Rico Lebrun's figurative expressionism. In reaction to these muddled histrionics, Kauffman and his compatriots evolved cleaner styles, mostly nonrepresentational, which seemed to reflect the mass media's image of southern California as a materialistic utopia, an image that was, to some extent, true to life. By the late 1960s, their approach had been dubbed the "L.A. finish fetish," and the

work of many of them, especially Kauffman, had reached an apogee of severe but allusive abstraction.

Although Kauffman had painted with some regularity since the age of seven, he chose to study architecture when he entered the University of Southern California in 1950. A well-received one-man show of his drawings and paintings—by his own admission, Paul Klee-derived—at the prestigious Felix Landau Gallery helped him make the decision to abandon architecture for studio art, and he transferred to the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1952. The UCLA faculty had little impact on Kauffman, but an important Henri Matisse retrospective organized by Frederick Wight for the UCLA gallery did. That show, plus an Abstract Expressionist show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, helped him perfect his own calligraphic style, one that amalgamated quasi-mechanical forms with biomorphic ones. Kauffman's intense palette in this period recalls Matisse's, but at the same time responds to the enveloping white glare of Los Angeles light.

By 1957, when Walter Hopps (a boyhood friend of Kauffman) and the artist Ed Kienholz organized the Ferus Gallery, Kauffman's work had achieved a level of quality and compositional clarity that was clearly in advance of his contemporaries. His paintings were included in the Ferus opening show, and he was given a one-artist show there in 1958 that attracted much favorable attention.



Kauffman spent the next few years away from Los Angeles—first in San Francisco, then in Europe, mostly in Paris. On his return to the States in 1961, he saw a show of recent work by Bengston and Price at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York and felt an immediate empathy for the pristine, non-gestural, spray-painted technique each employed. Back in Los Angeles, he painted on glass in an attempt to get a clean line in his own work; he then turned to a new support—plexiglass. Abstracted out of his previous calligraphic imagery, the forms in these paintings—bulbous shapes with lanky, hockey stick pendants drooping from them—assume a stark, sexually suggestive character. Kauffman's color had also evolved into a patently artificial spectrum which contrasts with the vaguely anthropomorphic quality of his drawing. In an attempt to further dematerialize color and ambient light, he began painting on the back surface of the plexiglass sheets, making for a shadow-box effect. At first he brushed on the paint, but soon, with Bengston's encouragement, turned to spraying uniform, unmodulated colors.

Early in 1964 Kauffman began customizing the plexiglass armature by molding its surface to his specifications. A series of undulating reliefs resulted, his so-called "washboard paintings"—hollow, molded shapes that merge figure and ground. Using opaque, pastel-colored plexiglass, Kauffman painted thin accent lines where the sides joined the cascading front plane to empha-

size its topological character. In color and by means of its highly nuanced drawing, this work corresponds to certain contemporaneous Color Field paintings—especially those of Jules Olitski—but the glossy, commercial plexiglass medium suggests a kinship with the advertising-based strategies of Pop Art.

For some time, Kauffman had been attracted to a pair of large plastic fruit clusters on the wall of a doughnut shop he frequented in west Los Angeles. Brighter, more eccentric in shape, and more technologically advanced than anything he had done, these commercial signs led him to visit a number of the small plastics factories that served the area's automobile and aerospace industries. Vacuum-formed molding thus came to his attention and he began using this method to fashion curved, lozenge-shaped reliefs. A series of twenty objects in two scales, employing blue, red, green, and orange plexiglass, resulted. *Untitled* (1967–68; Fig. 1) is an example of the smaller version. The piece projects from the wall plane in two swells, a shallow one that provides a resting frame and, at the center, a rectangular, horizontal protuberance indented across its middle. Glossy and symmetrical, the work's visually wet surface engenders anatomical, sometimes overtly sexual, comparisons. Another work in the series (*Untitled*, 1967–68) shows a complication of subject as Kauffman began working with neutrally colored, translucent plexiglass, spraying several colors from

Fig 2. *Untitled*, 1968–69

behind. Here a hazy, tricolored spectrum activates a centrally located ridge inside the larger shape.

Increasingly concerned with the interior light of his work, Kauffman moved away from these relatively opaque pieces in his next series of works, the "bubbles" (Fig. 3). Still using translucent plexiglass, he adopted nacreous color and enlarged the interior convexity to the outer edges. The bubbles were sucked into a reinforced box to create a seamless, inverted bathtub shape. Kauffman would build the wooden frames, then help fabricate the work at Planet Plastics in suburban Paramount, California. He again worked in two scales, one roughly $2 \times 4 \frac{1}{2}$ feet, the other $4 \times 7 \frac{1}{2}$ feet.

The five "bubble" pieces from 1968–69 in this exhibition were made with the vacuum-formed molding process. They show an evolution of form, scale, and color that testifies to Kauffman's growing confidence in the medium and its effects. The previously centralized spatial subject now constitutes the entire shape, obviating any distinction between figure and ground. We are confronted with a single, uninterrupted, horizonless shape. Kauffman sprays Morano paint on the back of these forms, a medium that allows pigment to vary in an extremely delicate stipple, admitting and reflecting light in a chalky, ethereal sheen. As the color shifts in value from different viewing angles, the pieces seem to pulsate. Kauffman simultaneously defines the area of the actual art object and engages the void behind it. Perfect

and perfectly ambiguous—in their tertiary colors, fabrication, and meaning—they seem otherworldly, removed from our accustomed experience. Kauffman's wish to get a "halo of color without associating it so much with the form" aligns this work to Robert Irwin's carefully lit plastic wall disks of the same period. Both artists made early and noteworthy achievements in the introduction of ambient, perceptual phenomena into the art experience.

Throughout this plexiglass work, Kauffman considered himself a painter, a self-image that underscores the odd derivation of these pieces from French Impressionism. Like the earlier French painters, he sought a vibrant art object that could not only be looked at, but also looked into. He recognized that in dislocating sight from its utilitarian function, the viewer could celebrate the uniquely nonverbal intelligence of vision.

Richard Armstrong
Adjunct Curator

I wish to thank the generous lenders to the exhibition, and also Julie Grossman, the Asher/Faure Gallery, and Craig Kauffman for their assistance.
R.A.

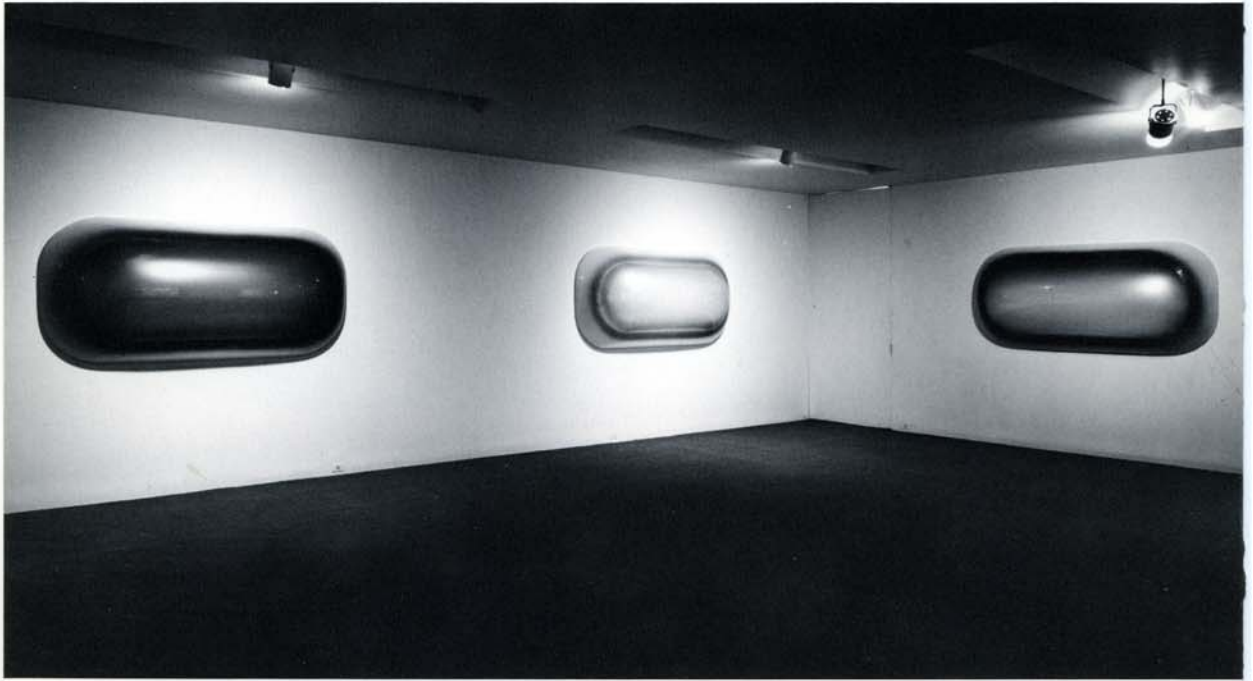


Fig 3. Installation view, "Craig Kauffman," Pace Gallery, New York, 1970

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

Untitled, 1967–68

Acrylic lacquer on vacuum-formed plexiglass,
34 × 54 × 8
Asher/Faure Gallery, Los Angeles

Untitled, 1967–68

Acrylic lacquer on vacuum-formed plexiglass,
18 × 54 × 10
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Kibrick

Untitled, 1968

Acrylic lacquer on vacuum-formed plexiglass,
22 1/2 × 52 × 12
Asher/Faure Gallery, Los Angeles

Untitled, 1968

Acrylic lacquer on vacuum-formed plexiglass,
22 × 50 × 12
La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, California; Gift of Arthur and Carol Goldberg in honor of Margo Leavin

Untitled, 1968–69

Acrylic lacquer on vacuum-formed plexiglass,
34 × 56 × 9
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Gift of Irving Blum

Untitled, 1968–69

Acrylic lacquer on vacuum-formed plexiglass,
43 × 89 × 15
Collection of Vivian and Robert Rowan

Untitled, 1968–69

Acrylic lacquer on vacuum-formed plexiglass,
43 × 89 × 23
Asher/Faure Gallery, Los Angeles

Craig Kauffman was born in 1932 in Los Angeles, where he now lives and works. He was educated at the University of California, Los Angeles (B.A., 1955; M.A., 1956).

Selected One-Artist Exhibitions

- 1952 Felix Landau Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1958 Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1962 Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1965 Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1967 Pace Gallery, New York
Ferus/Pace Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1969 Pace Gallery, New York
Irving Blum Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1970 Pasadena Art Museum
Pace Gallery, New York

Selected Bibliography

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- Bengston, Billy Al. "Late Fifties at the Ferus: A Participant Refuses to Take the Show Lying Down," *Artforum*, 7 (January 1969), pp. 33–35.
- Pincus-Witten, Robert. "New York," *Artforum*, 7 (April 1969), p. 70.
- Schjeldahl, Peter. "New York Letter," *Art International*, 13 (April 20, 1969), p. 65.
- Plagens, Peter, "Los Angeles," *Artforum*, 7 (April 1970), p. 84.
- La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, California. *Craig Kauffman: Comprehensive Survey 1957–80, 1981* (catalogue).

Cover: Fig 1. *Untitled*, 1967–68

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Designed by Anita Meyer

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