

The New York Times

ART IN REVIEW; Ferus

By ROBERTA SMITH

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Gagosian Gallery
555 West 24th Street, Chelsea
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"Without Ferus there was nothing." "Irving was the scene." "He spoke brilliantly, not very deeply, but brilliantly, like a dealer should." So Philip Leider, the legendary first editor of Artforum magazine, describes Irving Blum and his Los Angeles gallery, Ferus, in Amy Newman's amazing oral history, "Challenging Art: Artforum, 1962-1974" (SoHo Press, 2000).

From 1957 to 1967, Ferus was the heart of the Los Angeles art scene, with Artforum as its upstairs neighbor during the last five of those years, after which the magazine moved to New York.

Mr. Blum explained the situation, also in Ms. Newman's book, more simply and modestly: "We were young, we were ambitious, we were lonely. There weren't many people to talk to."

The idea that the liveliest art galleries come about as a means of keeping those directly involved entertained has a lot of merit, and it receives ample confirmation in tribute. Ferus has already been the subject of two exhibitions in West Coast museums; this one brings its life and times, glamour and eclectic mix of notable artists to New York, albeit with a shortage of works that were actually shown at Ferus.

Mr. Blum, whose base of operations after 1973 was the Blum-Helman Gallery in New York, came to Ferus in the summer of 1958. He bought the share of one of the gallery's founders, the artist Edward Kienholz, for \$500, and worked with the other founder, Walter Hopps, until Mr. Hopps, caricatured in a wonderful life-size cut-out assemblage by Kienholz, left in 1960 to be a curator at the Pasadena Art Museum in California.

Some of the stirs Ferus caused include the first show of Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup can paintings in 1962 (two years before the artist's first show with Leo Castelli) and the debut that year of "Roxy's," Kienholz's walk-in tableau of a house of ill repute -- one of several shows that drew the police. (The soup cans are here, but not "Roxy's.") Ken Price, Roy Lichtenstein, Larry Bell, John Altoon and Frank Stella, all amply represented in this show, had first or early solo shows at Ferus.

At Gagosian, examples of L.A. finish fetish by Craig Kauffman, Mr. Bell and Robert Irwin hold their own against the New York Minimalism of Ellsworth Kelly and Donald Judd. Billy Al Bengston's sly, tight-skinned fusions of symbol and color command the eye, evoking Marsden Hartley, Kenneth Noland and even Fred Tomaselli. And San Francisco artists like Bruce Conner, Jay De Feo, Richard Diebenkorn and Hassel Smith extrapolate hand over fist from Abstract Expressionism and Surrealism. Mr. Smith's dispersed, almost comic episodes of line and color feel especially contemporary.

With the help of too few of Dennis Hopper's stylish black-and-white photographs of the gang, and a handsome catalog that reproduces four dozen gallery announcements along with further photographs, this exhibition conjures a euphoric moment. It was a time when East and West Coasts seemed evenly matched, and Mr. Blum, as usual, never looked less than dapper, when the women were rarely other than blond, and nearly all the artists were good-looking, clean-cut and male. Needless to say, it was a time before feminism.

Still, Ferus represented the pluralism of American art as well as -- if not better than -- any New York gallery of its era. It is interesting to peruse the show with the title of Ferus's inaugural exhibition in mind: "Objects in the Landscape Demanding of Attention."

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