

ANDREW KREPS GALLERY

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Billy Al Bengston
Warm California
May 12 - June 25, 2016

In collaboration with Franklin Parrasch Gallery, New York

Andrew Kreps Gallery is pleased to announce Warm California, an exhibition of works by Los Angeles-based artist Billy Al Bengston. Focusing on suspended, unstretched canvases and freestanding screens created by Bengston in the 1970s, the show includes works never exhibited in New York.

Bengston emerged as part of a vibrant scene in California surrounding Los Angeles' Ferus Gallery, which hosted his first solo exhibition in 1958. Once referring to oil paint as "pigment mixed up in salad dressing", Bengston favored the synthetic – his early works were deeply ingrained in LA car culture, utilizing polyurethane lacquer on thin aluminum sheets. Building upon a repeated, central motif of a sergeant's stripes, these works, with their slick, machine-like finish became a vehicle for exploring composition, color, and form.

It is these investigations that both influenced, and were countered by Bengston's Draculas, which populate the exhibition. Coined by friend and former studiomate Ken Price, who likened the form of the iris blossom to the transformational moment of the vampire count from bat to human, the motif would repeat serially through the 1970s. Marking a move from metal to canvas, Bengston simultaneously adopted a more fluid painting style he considered more appropriate to the soft surface. Slowly shedding the structure of past works, he eschewed the idea of central composition, utilizing an allover approach influenced by his time painting outdoors, repeating the iris within washes of acrylic, exaggerated brushstrokes, and geometric shapes.

Blurring the boundaries between his life and work, Bengston's surrounding environment was consistently folded into his practice – from his time as a professional motorcycle racer to his surfing. Also an avid diver, the works included in the exhibition draw on his diving trips in the waters surrounding Catalina Island and the Sea of Cortez. Hanging large swaths of canvas in his studio, often covering entire walls or corners, Bengston was inspired by the reflection of light on the water's surface, and the undulating shades of the ocean floor. Marking place and time of day through color, Bengston used this as a vehicle to record his own experience and evoke emotive response. These canvases would then be cut into strips and finished as double-sided scrolls or folding screens, which continued a composition as multiple panels. Installing these in clusters, scrolls hung from the ceiling, or the screens, staggered on the ground, the works guide how one circulates around them. Titled after seaweeds and algae, Bengston mimics the movement of these species in the water, likening the experience of the works to that of moving through a kelp forest.

In 535 W. 22nd street, the gallery will present a series of watercolors painted by Bengston in his Venice Beach studio in 1973.

Billy Al Bengston live and works in Venice Beach and Honolulu. Bengston's work has recently been included in exhibitions at the Rose Art Museum, Waltham, 2015, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, 2015, the Whitney Museum of American Art, 2012, as well as Pacific Standard Time, the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, traveled to Martin Gropius-Bau, Berlin, 2011. His work is held in the permanent collection of numerous public institutions that include the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Yale University Art Museum, New Haven, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Los Angeles Country Museum of Art, Los Angeles, and Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, among others.