



THE
LONG
MARCH
OF POP

ART
MUSIC
AND
DESIGN
1930-1995

Thomas Crow

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Frontispiece: Roy Lichtenstein, *Blam* (detail),
1962, oil on canvas, Yale University Art Gallery,
New Haven, Connecticut

THE NEAREST FARAWAY PLACE

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BILLY AL BENGSTON AND POP LIFE IN LOS ANGELES

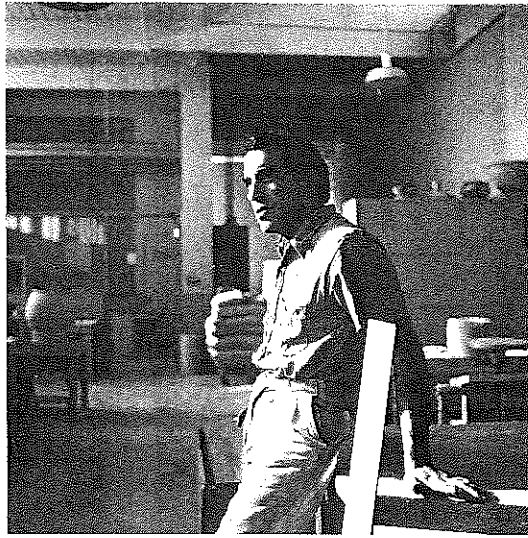
It is customary to regard the art and artists elevated in New York as largely unconditioned by regional particulars and conditions. That perspective is not necessarily inaccurate. It hardly mattered to Lichtenstein's success, for example, that the American comic-book industry had been headquartered in New York from its heyday to its forced decline in the later 1950s and that the bulk of its artists and writers had been native to the city. For him, it was the proximity and interest of a major gallery, mediated by a highly sophisticated network of fellow artists, that fostered his distinctive manner and fixed it in place. The comics he mined for material could have come from anywhere.

For Warhol and Rosenquist, it would be far harder to detach them from New York as a particular locality. Both depended for a substantial portion of their earlier careers on kinds of employment and communities of skill that would have been difficult to duplicate elsewhere. For Warhol, the concentrated conjunction of fashion and magazine publishing in New York permitted him to form his first identity and gain a successful livelihood. That many of his early drawings and prints were distributed as gifts to sympathetic art directors like Tina Fredericks and John Kane bespeaks the pedestrian network of face-to-face contacts on which he built his career. Even after his transition to the status of fine artist, he could not work without the constant company of his Factory entourage and the endless nightly socializing that Manhattan makes possible.

In the case of Rosenquist, he could have found employment painting billboards in many cities. Indeed he returned for a time in the late 1950s to work in Minneapolis, where he first learned the rudiments of the trade (see fig. 154). But no city possessed the acreage and heightened visibility of the theater signs in Times Square – and none would have put him under the same degree of pressure to excel. Nor could the sheer density of buildings providing large visible and paintable walls, spreading for miles across the outer boroughs, be found elsewhere. He has said more than once that the venerable firm of Artkraft-Strauss provided the schooling that made his fine-art career possible. As with Warhol, the cheek-by-jowl proximity of two concentrated professional sectors in commercial design and fine art respectively, both of them at equal levels of development, provided the catalyzing friction that generated the art.

In 1950, when he was seventeen, Rosenquist traveled with his father to Los Angeles: "I saw all these Brit motorcycles," he recalls: "I thought as I looked around: This is incredible! . . . I'll come out here and customize a car and go surfing."¹ Five years later, after finishing his two-year art degree at the University of Minnesota, he found himself in a state of indecision as to which coast to choose in order to make his escape from the Midwest ("In 1973," he says, "I made a painting called *Slipping Off the Continental Divide*, which was, in part, about my dilemma"). The counsel of his teacher, Cameron Booth, along with the scholarship to the Art Students League and his perception that

162 Billy Al Bengston, *Skinny's 21*,
1961, oil on canvas, 42 x 40 in.
(106.7 x 101.6 cm), private collection



163 Peter Voulkos in ceramics studio, 1954, Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles

"the East is more literate, more European, more educated," made him decide for New York: "I liked the hipness, the sound of the city that never slept"²

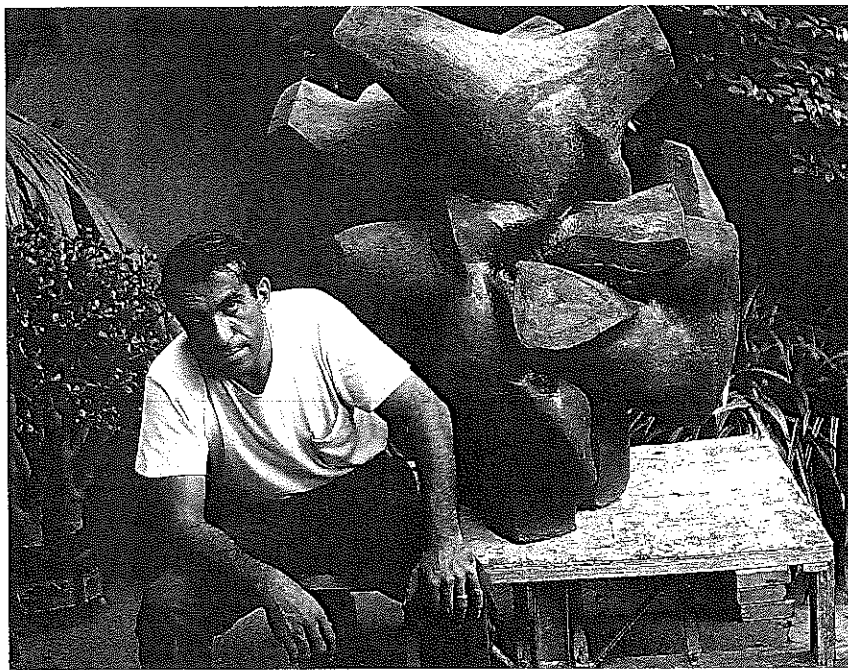
Los Angeles, however, was attracting in the same period its own share of restless young Midwesterners seeking the life of the artist, but these were migrants more in tune with the thoughts of Rosenquist at seventeen. Billy Al Bengston, born one year after Rosenquist in the old cattlemen's railhead town of Dodge City, Kansas, was one such recruit. In Kansas, he claims, "farming and animal husbandry" provided his rustic formation. His family began following the track of older Dust Bowl immigrants in both directions, traveling to Los Angeles for extended stays before making the move permanent in 1948.³ Starting at Manual Arts High School in the South Central district (where Jackson Pollock and Philip Guston had once been students), Bengston fixed on the earthy medium of ceramics as his first vocational pursuit, then followed his high-school teacher, Bernard Kester, to a new appointment up the ladder at Los Angeles City College (Kester would go on to chair the art department at the University of California Los Angeles in later years).

City College, a two-year institution with a serious commitment to teaching in the arts (at around the same time, the Idaho native LaMonte Young was studying serial composition there with Schoenberg disciple Leonard Stein), exemplifies a distinctive characteristic of California that in many ways made up for the absence of the developed artistic infrastructure that drew Rosenquist to New York. Throughout the state's postwar expansion, its massive and in those days generously funded system of higher education reflected an emphasis on self-actualization, on the creative use of leisure time, which had emerged as one of the region's defining social norms. The three-tiered system that came to be codified in 1960 as California's Master Plan for Higher Education – the university branches at the top, the more numerous State Colleges in the middle, and the many two-year Community Colleges at an entry or vocational level – provided employment and training for large numbers of artists as a normal feature of civic life.

As addressed in Chapter Five, the postwar emergence of a new mass of art students in American higher education made possible a career like Lichtenstein's, one in which the pressures and insights of teaching came to condition his work. Without his passage through

Ohio State, SUNY Oswego, and Rutgers, without the need to find common ground with a heterogeneous and unprepared student population, it is unlikely that he would have found the conviction that aggressively demotic content could lend a new and illuminating intensity to the traditional protocols of fine art. Coming to that recognition nonetheless required a higher-education outpost of especially concentrated wit and sophistication, which the Rutgers program provided. Southern California witnessed a similarly inspired conjuncture between postwar youth and accelerated artistic innovation, but it occurred around the unlikely medium of ceramics.

The change came with the arrival of one decisive figure, who bore with him an experimental, non-hierarchical ethos incubated at Black Mountain College, and who happened to work in clay: Peter Voulkos came on the scene when the Otis Art Institute, a county-funded four-year school near downtown Los Angeles, tapped him in 1954 to upgrade their lagging ceramics program. The school's conservative director and board thought they had recruited a prodigy, just thirty years old, in fine ceramic workmanship (fig. 163). Born to Greek immigrants in Montana and largely educated at Montana State College in a traditional potter's techniques, Voulkos had already been directing a ceramics workshop set in Rocky Mountain



164. Peter Voulkos in front of his 1958 sculpture, *Black Butte Divide*, at Pasadena Art Museum, 1958. Photo by Henry Takemoto

foothills outside Helena. But passage through another rustic workshop setting of a vastly different character had changed him in way that his new employers had never anticipated. After a summer at Black Mountain in the company of Cage, Cunningham, and Rauschenberg, he undertook the Otis assignment with a dramatically unconventional pedagogy. Bengston recalls the moment when "we saw that Peter Voulkos was coming to town . . . the stud duck of all time . . . and Bernie Kester hated him." Like a number of other acolytes, Bengston ignored the formalities of enrollment and simply migrated from City College to the new Otis studio. Once "we saw Pete's demonstration," he says, "there was no greater love."⁴

Voulkos's improvisatory approach to manipulating clay, along with his abstract painterly decoration and the unprecedentedly large scale on which he worked, has regularly been likened to Abstract Expressionist painting. He combined his slab-like forms in ways that had little to do with the vessel forms still normative within the craft ethos of his medium and much more to do with the ambition of a sculptor (fig. 164). But the emotional reminiscence by the normally unsentimental Bengston bespeaks a deeper social and affective dimension to his pedagogy. It is indeed arguable that the most significant impact made by Voulkos on an emerging Los Angeles art culture lay in the manner and style in which he worked and taught. In his courses, it soon became clear, there would be no schedule as such, no lectures, no critiques, no grades: in his own words,

We'd all go to class, then the first thing we'd do is go off to see whatever there was to see in galleries, drinking coffee, and talking. We'd look at a new building going up or a show at a museum. Then we'd talk some more. Then we'd go to work. My purpose was for the students to become aware not only of everything around them but of themselves, to find themselves, to get to the point where they felt that they were the complete center of the universe and everything worked around them.⁵

Every individual body in the studio thereby took on a heightened salience, most of all Voulkos's own. To maneuver hundred-pound (45-kilo) masses of clay into shape on the wheel, Voulkos would throw his whole body into the task, turning his regular work into public performances for his students and entourage, telling jokes, wearing flamenco boots, and moving with musical and theatrical flourishes (he prided himself on his dancing).⁶ Paul Soldner, the first MFA student at the start of the 1954 academic year, marveled at the atmosphere and camaraderie of the Otis pot shop: "People began dropping in. They did not enroll. They just worked. It was dynamic. It never happened like that before."⁷ Clay may have been the beginning and end of the process, but between raw material and fired finished product lay the elaboration of a different, round-the-clock way of life: throwing sessions fueled by caffeine and nicotine until dawn, accompanying a charismatic model of the artistic vocation centered on the body and every ephemeral action of the creative personality.

Beyond the evidence of charisma and originality as a teacher, there were larger implications to the Voulkos pedagogy that bear on the formation of a Pop aesthetic in Los Angeles. The first that might be adduced lies in his evident effort to adapt his own awareness and sensibility from a picturesque rural setting – often thought natural to the pastoral character of the craft – to an urban environment. His Black Mountain colleagues had brought a taste of New York with them, but Voulkos now confronted a city for the first time on his

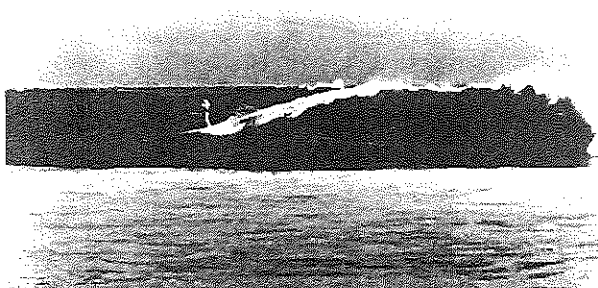
own; what was more, a metropolis of a decidedly different character. It is a common observation made by newcomers to Los Angeles that the city seems unprepossessing on first encounter. Apart from the spectacular mountainous and coastal terrain (too often obscured by smog and fog), the built environment seems short on landmarks and symbolic value in general. Ferreting out the stimulating urbanity hidden in its extensive, low-rise fabric requires application and continually alert exploration. Even long-time residents never lose this awareness.

Voulkos did not relinquish his traditional assumption that ceramics grows from its physical environment; the point was to know this particular environment well enough to reestablish the groundedness of his art in new terms. His investigations led, for example, to the heretical application of epoxy pigment – a primer-coat staple of the auto body shop – onto the glazes of his pieces. His students would not only participate in the studio but would also function as native informants, offering a continual source of information and stimulation to their teacher. Hence the marathon talking sessions driven by endless caffeine (a Greek inheritance), improvised dialogues full of confessional opportunities for young aspirants. Master's degree candidates frequently trailed an education acquired elsewhere in the ramified state system of higher education. Moreover, they would carry local knowledge from the distinct subregions of the Los Angeles basin (what the architectural critic Reyner Banham would later famously simplify into his urbanistic model of "four ecologies"⁸).

Interaction with a young and distinctly male cohort also tapped into the expressive physicality encouraged by the climate, terrain, and natural attraction of ocean and desert. Bengston offered a prime example of the ways in which southern California could transform a youthful arrival from the flat and dusty plains of western Kansas. Already in the late 1940s, the teenage Bengston was making the trek from Banham's "Plains of Id," the featureless alluvial fan on which Manual Arts and City College were sited, to "Surfurbia," most often the rock reefs under the stunning high cliffs of Palos Verdes Cove, situated in that affluent suburb at the dramatic southern boundary of Santa Monica Bay. In his first memories of the cove, Bengston recalls that it took him and a friend together to carry one of the heavy plank or wood-box surfboards of that era down the curving half-mile-long (ca. 800 meters) path to the base of the promontory.⁹

The balance and style required to hold his own among the small society of early surfers came readily to Bengston, who already stood out as a high-school gymnast. Surfing not only demanded athletic prowess: its early enthusiasts typically manufactured their own boards, or oversaw a friend's handiwork. If the design and efficiency of boards still had a long way to go in the early 1950s, they were invariably crafted to a fineness of finish and an extra dimension of symbolic embellishment commensurable with the ego identification and emotional investment that the sport elicits from its practitioners.

Surfing thus offered two aesthetic registers: first, of course, is quality of movement, among adepts approaching grace, combined with a kinaesthetic exhilaration derived from forces vastly beyond the strength of the rider; the second is an evolved tradition of object-making, sophisticated in design and technique but still under the competent control of amateurs or semi-professionals. As some of the best surfers in the water have also been the most successful designers and shapers, it is clear that decisions in one part of the sport – riding or making – continually entail fine imaginative calculations derived from the other.

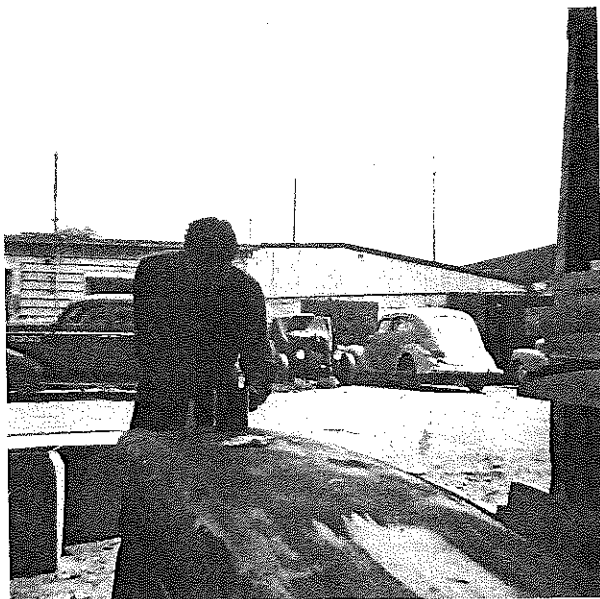


165 Bob Simmons Riding Malibu, 1949. Photograph attributed to Bob Prosser, John Etwell Collection, Surfing Heritage and Cultural Center

The fact that two of Bengston's several lives encompassed surf and art, both embattled subcultures of an equivalent minority status, points to the way that ceramics came to catalyze the peculiarly participatory model of Pop that distinguished its expression in Los Angeles. Voukos's practice as a ceramicist and as a teacher provided a template whereby the special demands and pleasures of this characteristically local sport could be likened to the controlled physical exertion at the wheel. Both demanded an all-in commitment, bursts of brute strength alternating with touches of delicate nuance; both yielded objects of exceptional charisma; and both refused to stay within proscribed vocational or avocational boundaries, expanding outward to encompass a larger and larger share of their adherents' lives.¹⁰ These characteristics came to define what is most distinctive about the emerging art of Los Angeles, traits borrowed from adjacent zones, across the alley or down the street, of what were already highly aestheticized activities but were rarely called art. To grasp the extent of the correspondences between art and the vernacular crafts of southern California, it will be helpful to examine this one craft sector in greater detail in order to know just what was entailed for an artist becoming part of such a subculture.¹¹

While this way of life began as the affair of a tiny coterie in California and Hawaii, that exclusivity changed in the wake of the Second World War. The physical fitness and skill, the competitive intensity, and mechanical ingenuity cultivated in these early surfing circles had been perfectly suited to the demands of warfare, particularly to the naval conflict in the Pacific. The war in turn widened the pool of potential surfers, as masses of sailors, soldiers, and marines returning from Hawaii and the Pacific islands through Long Beach and San Diego swelled the local population. Release from the privations and stress of war beckoned: "Nobody loved the ocean better than I did," recalled one pioneer, Dave Rochlen. "And when the war ended . . . we gave ourselves over to it entirely. I think it was because we spent four or five years in the war and we had survived. And it had all been bad. Now there was no question about what had us by the throat. It was the ocean. Everything else was secondary."¹²

Memories of the war in the Pacific fueled a national craze for Polynesian-themed bars, restaurants, and hotels, nowhere more evident than in the palm-fringed precincts of southern California, while other residues of wartime could be put to more active and practical

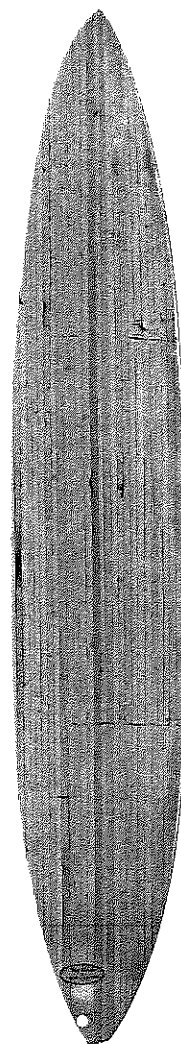


166 Bob Simmons working on surfboard, Santa Monica, California, 1951. Photograph by Les Williams, Surfing Heritage and Cultural Center

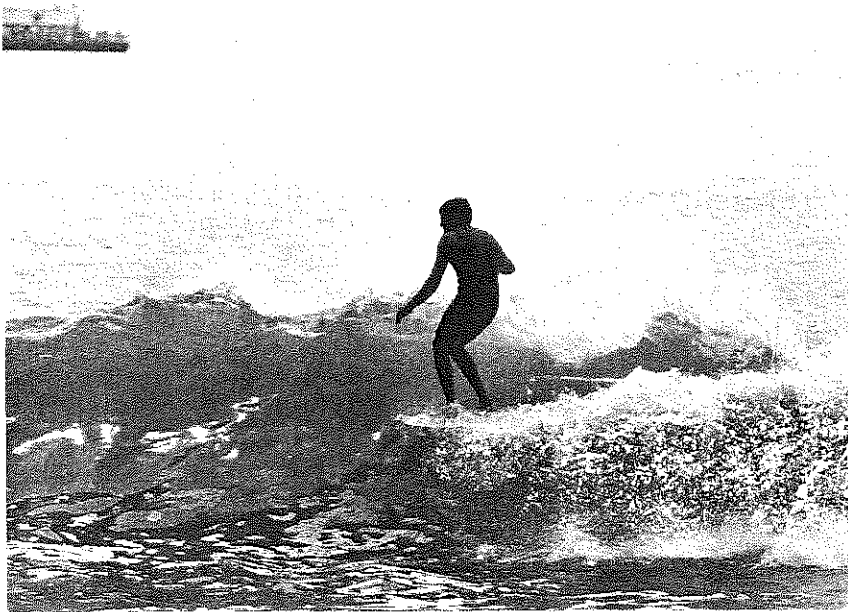
use by an imaginative minority among the ocean-besotted returnees. Balsa wood, comparatively rare and expensive, had seen much use in various military applications for its lightness and high flotation, which meant that there was an unusual quantity of the material to be scavenged following the conclusion of hostilities. The figure who knew best what to do with it was a surfer and engineer named Bob Simmons, who had missed combat because of an arm disabled in a childhood accident. An obsessive mathematics adept and drop-out from the California Institute of Technology, he spent virtually all of his time either traveling to surf in a dilapidated prewar Ford (fig. 165) or fashioning new, experimental boards (fig. 166). His applications of naval planing-hull design produced redwood-balsa boards that allowed their riders to hold a track parallel to the face of the wave, unleashing a freedom of maneuver that had never been possible on existing equipment.¹³

Balsa, in contrast to the dense woods used in the old planks and hollow designs, absorbs water like a sponge. But Simmons also had the insight to exploit another technical legacy of the war: the composite use of fiberglass and polyester resin. While the first was an American invention from just before the war, the resin, cured into a hard plastic by a heat-producing catalyst, had been a secret of German wartime chemistry, stolen by the Allies in 1942. A fiberglass-resin composite, though far from unbreakable, still provided an impermeable casing that could be applied in the most low-tech workshop, and in that combination the modern surfboard was born (fig. 167).

In 1954, when just thirty-five, Simmons disappeared in high waves off Windansea reef in La Jolla. Disciples such as Joe Quigg and Matt Kivlin continued making and refining his prototypes, but battled the rarity and fragility of balsa as their main material. The idea of using a plastic foam in its place had already occurred to Simmons among others, but the cheap and familiar Styrofoam compound melted on contact with polyester resin. Polyurethane foam, another Nazi-era discovery by the chemical giant Bayer, became available in the mid-1950s, but controlling its behavior in real-world applications remained an elusive achievement: on mixing its two liquid components, the mixture expands in size some thirty



167 Dale Velzy and Hap Jacobs, surfboard, 1957, balsa wood, fiberglass, polyester resin, and pigment, Surfing Heritage and Cultural Center



to fifty times in a few seconds, generating considerable heat along with high pressure. Even when the process was perfected, successful blowing of usable, high-density blanks required constant, nerve-wracking vigilance.

Once that obstacle had been overcome, electric planers provided shapers working in foam with the versatile tool required to create both the larger contours and the most subtle transitions – rocker, rails, cross-section, varying thickness, and so on – their strict symmetries maintained entirely by eye and a pair of rough calipers. The glasser then unfurled the fiberglass cloth over the bare foam and cut it to the template. After the first, “hot” coat of resin was brushed on, set and sanded, the fin was inserted, and any bands, stripes, pinlines, or more elaborated designs in pigmented resin applied. A polished, transparent gloss coat of resin completed the process [custom-made boards are still built in the same way].

By 1959, there was probably no object so resonantly symbolic of liberated youth culture as the surfboard – smaller, lighter, easier to manufacture, and poised to capture national and international attention via drive-in films and top-forty records as a totem of leisure-time consumption. Boards were moreover made to be seen, whether in the surf shop window, on the beach, or in increasingly aestheticized levels of performance in the water. An acknowledged exemplar of this kind of display was Miklos (Miki) Dora, who owed his unusual name to a Hungarian immigrant father (fig. 168). With a near-sociopathic willfulness, eccentricity, inscrutability, and flamboyance to match that of any *artiste maudit*, Dora backed up that persona with a seemingly effortless domination in the water, standing apart from virtually any contemporary surfer in his febrile responsiveness to every shift in the wave’s behavior – moving, weighting, un-weighting, flicking a series of turns with almost imperceptible movements of knees and ankles – along with a look of insouciant comfort riding on the forward tip of the board.¹⁴

There was one break that produced summer waves with extraordinary consistency and was close enough to the adjacent Los Angeles conurbation to be the public focus of such

168 Miki Dora surfing
Malibu Beach, California, 1967.
Photograph by Steve Wilkins,
Surfing Heritage and Cultural
Center

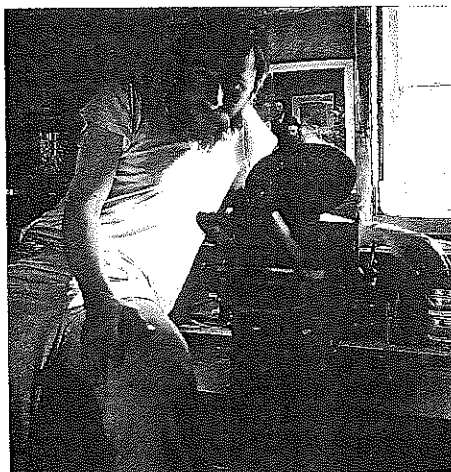
exploits. Malibu's long peeling wave, breaking close to shore, wrapping around the stony, triangular point deposited over centuries by Malibu Creek, provided a theater stage for Dora and his rivals, who never lacked an audience. For his part, Bengston had evolved as a surfer with the advance of its new technological underpinnings, becoming a charter member of the early Malibu coterie. He found, much to his intense chagrin, his nickname of those years, Moondoggie, borrowed for the leading male character in *Gidget*, the 1957 novel by the screenwriter Frederick Kohner about a young female aspirant (his own daughter Kathy) to acceptance as a Malibu surfer. Adapted into the 1959 film starring Sandra Dee, *Gidget* became the earliest introduction in a mass medium to the romance of the sport and more broadly to the postwar youth culture of Los Angeles.¹⁵

Like many of his peers, Bengston had his brushes with the film business. For a while around 1960, he says, his best source of income was taking stunt falls out of buildings for studio stock footage at \$500 a time.¹⁶ If both Warhol and Rosenquist depended on the machinery of promotion and advertising in New York, it would seem a natural parallel that the looming apparatus of film production in Los Angeles would be the prime mover in any version of Pop to come out of that city. But this has largely been, through the history of art in the region, the dog that failed to bark. At least, the direct transcription of film motifs or themes has been rare.

That relative lacuna may make more sense, however, in light of the non-local character of film consumption. It makes little difference where one sees a Hollywood film, and the magic may work the stronger – as in Warhol's endless efforts to channel movie glamor – the further one is from the source. The high-minded laments of *kulturkritik* that today dominate the academic criticism of art remain more in thrall to the media spectacle than the most besotted audience for the latest Hollywood blockbusters. But surfers, bikers, and drag racers in Los Angeles, voluntary outcasts all, were the least likely subjects to be beguiled by the spell of the movies. For them, no particular mystery attached itself to the process of movie-making, just as, on a smaller scale, their customized cars and surfboards appear flawlessly manufactured, but not by some distant and alienated industrial process. And there were similarly abundant face-to-face points of contact with the movie business.

One such interface had grown around the welcoming household maintained by the former jazz hipster Wallace Berman and his wife Shirley, first in a Westside cul-de-sac off Beverly Glen canyon near UCLA, then in the still quite rural environment of Topanga Canyon along the coast to the west (fig. 169). Before adopting an earthy, Beat mode of life, the young Berman had been a magnetic figure in the margins of show business. In the recollection of Sidney Felsen, a Fairfax High School friend (who would co-found the lithography workshop Gemini G. E. L.), "Wally hung around with Sammy Davis Jr. quite a bit, and you'd regularly see them at Herbert's Drive-In with a crowd of hot young dancers" (fig. 170).¹⁷

Walter Hopps, the curator and guiding light of the Los Angeles scene if there ever was one, left a haunted, *noir*-saturated reminiscence of first laying eyes on Berman in 1949. The setting was a South Central jazz club: "Seriously dark room with thoroughly contradictory small hours somnambulant and electric atmosphere. Clientele of exquisite detachment and anonymity murmuring following the explosive set. Then a curious silence." Somehow gathering into himself attributes of both muted mystery and charged magnetism comes a "figure moving through darkness suddenly illuminated in random harsh light. For



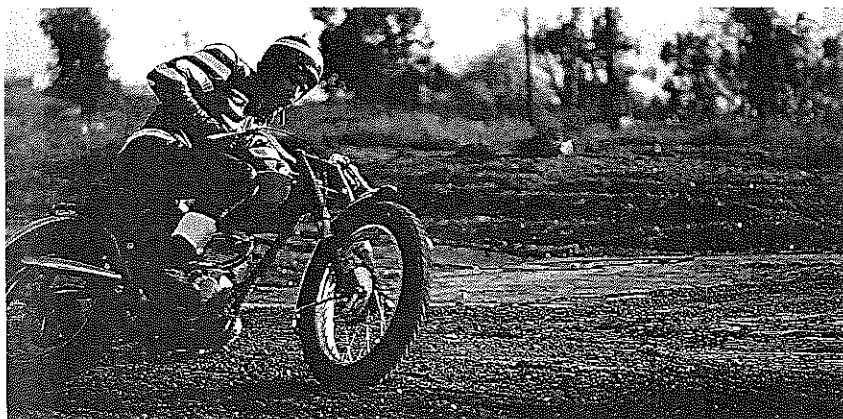
seconds, a stunning presence. Young, hawk-face intensity, straight ahead stare, super cool, zoot suit type attire topped by brush cut hair strait up, with young woman in tight black dress disappearing in a room behind the stage." All attention in the seriously hip room followed the couple: "'Who was that?' asked a stranger at the adjoining small round hard black chrome-rimmed table. . . . 'That's Wally Berman' came the anonymous reply, with an authority that implied all had been said."¹⁶

"I knew somehow then that I must come to know him," Hopps concludes, and that astonished instant affinity demonstrably affected many others, long after Berman shed his sharp zoot suits and pomaded haircuts for an unaffectedly Beat style of life as a poet and artist – a change that in no way diminished his contact with the entertainment world. Adventurous young actors like Dennis Hopper, Dean Stockwell, Russ Tamblyn, Toni Basil, and Teri Garr, chafing at cookie-cutter roles, studio surveillance, and industry philistinism, found their way into the network that Berman knit together through his loose-leaf poetry and art journal *Semina*. Under Berman's influence and that of the free-spirited artist George Herms, a number of them tried their hands at assemblage, which presented a low bar in terms of technical skill but plenty of expressive scope.

One such was the erstwhile child actor Billy Gray, famous for playing the teenage son whose scrapes were always settled in twenty-two minutes on episodes of the anodyne television comedy *Father Knows Best*. Gray lost his wholesome image and most of his acting career when arrested for marijuana possession in 1962, retreating to the Topanga house bought at the height of his fame five years before. There he cultivated a seemingly unlikely pair of passions for sculpture in leaded stained glass and for racing and collecting motor-cycles.¹⁷ Not unlikely for Los Angeles, however, as the latter pursuit had far more to do with the emerging credibility of fine art in Los Angeles. Mechanical expertise and pride as an accumulator of gleaming machines allies him, within the entertainment industry, not so much with his fellow performers as with the great mass of technicians who worked behind the scenes – the wide distribution of technical skills across the local population, which arose from the craft side of the entertainment business, but to an even greater extent from the mass of engineers and ex-military technicians who staffed the enormous aerospace industrial complex – Lockheed, Douglas, Grumman, Raytheon, Hughes, General Dynamics – with their hundreds of subcontractors and suppliers.

169 (left) Wallace Berman, *Self-portrait*, 1955, Crater Lane, Beverly Glen, Los Angeles. Courtesy Wallace Berman Estate

170 (right) Wallace Berman and Loree Fox in front of Tempo Records, Hollywood, California, 1947. Photograph by Lee Wilder, Charles Brittin collection, Getty Research Library, Los Angeles



Vast new housing developments, preeminently Lakewood near the Douglas aircraft plants in Long Beach, had become a parallel industry called into being by the need to house the expanding labor force.²⁰ Not a few among this population, many still galvanized by the physical testing of wartime, could not contain their sense of identity and technical mastery within the conformist discipline of work and home. Motor racers found in the dry lakebeds north of the city a bleached counterpart to the oceanic wilderness at its western edge, each negotiated by driven individuals in pursuit of an exhilaration unavailable in any other way, indeed, qualities of experience unknown and largely unimaginable to the general population. In these pursuits, the notion of "risk" was no notional artist's conceit but genuine hazard: the drowning of pioneer surfer and shaper Bob Simmons (a trained engineer retooled as a wartime machinist) carried totemic significance; California designs by shapers like Pat Curren and Greg Noll were making it possible for surfers to ride for the first time the perilous winter waves on the north shore of Oahu; the death of James Dean in 1955 stood for the mortal peril in the drive for speed. Negotiating these last pockets of the western American frontier required physical equipment of exceptional refinement, dependent on the industrial technology of the region but nonetheless accessible to the expertise and personal embellishment of the amateur enthusiast.

All of these pursuits, by the beginning of the 1960s, had come to exist as two distinct phenomena. There were firstly the images projected in movies and on the record charts, the entertainment business taking advantage of exciting youthful imagery on its own doorstep.²¹ The second lay in the ground-level expertise that made the images possible, which artists like Bengston not only admired as an aesthetic point of reference but frequently practiced themselves, investing a commensurable portion of their own identities in the active pursuits of their non-artist neighbors, cultivating the same skills and submitting themselves to the same demands and risks.

Bengston's most active engagement at this juncture lay, like Billy Gray's, with motorcycles (fig. 171). Lacking a cushion of television residuals, Bengston from around 1959 both worked in a shop and began to enter races for prize money on the dirt circuit at Ascot Park Raceway in Gardena (hard by Lakewood), known for its hair-raising figure-eight layout. Finding himself unprepared in 1961 when offered a last-minute slot for a Ferus Gallery

171 Billy Al Bengston on his BSA Victor motorcycle riding in Ballona Wetlands, Marina Del Rey, California, 1966. Photograph courtesy of Billy Al Bengston

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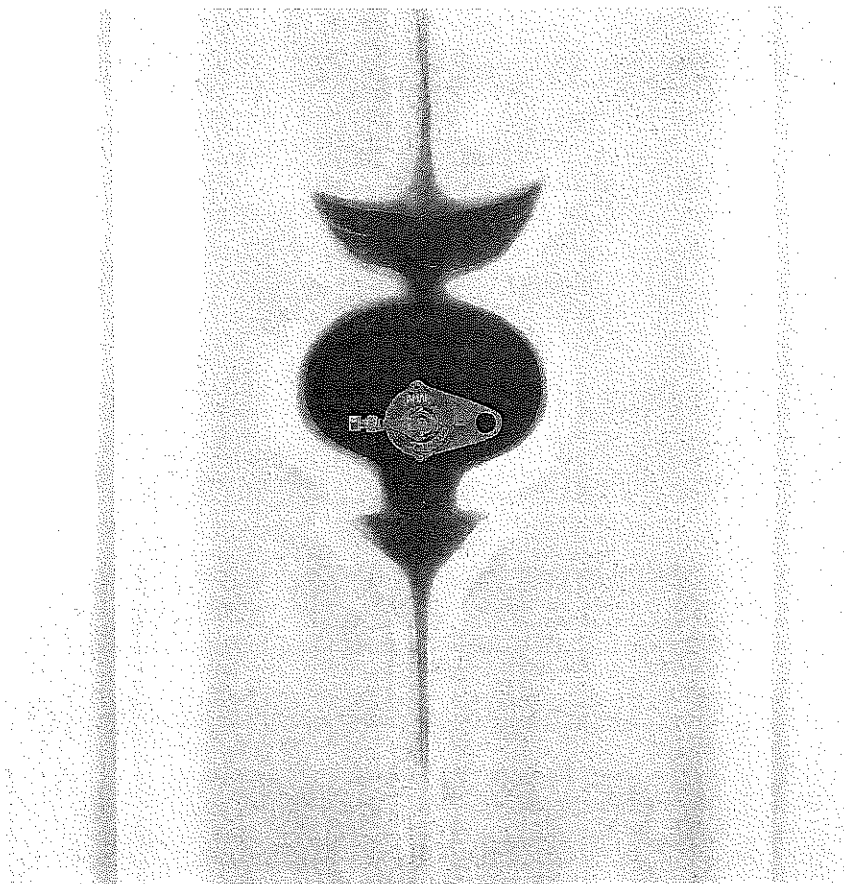
show by Irving Blum, he recalls, "I had to show some kind of work, but there was nothing else I knew. My frame of reference was too narrow. . . . I knew my motorcycles. I knew surfboards, that's it. And my motorcycle had a lot of parts, and I worked on it all the time, so I painted the parts of my motorcycle."²²

That particular model, the BSA Gold Star 21-cubic-inch (fig. 172), also happened to be the fastest production motorcycle of its class. Bengston worked up ten paintings of his prized bike's components in thinly applied oil paint on canvases of uniform size (fig. 173), supplemented by an emblazoned emblem of its trademark: *B[ritish] S[mall] A[rms]* and an engineer's profile view of the whole (*Skinny's 21*; fig. 162). However, he found this quick and direct application of subcultural expertise to fine art distinctly unsatisfactory: "There was nothing to doing those – draw it in, do a little fudging around, and you got a painting." "But," he rationalizes, "one month out of my life."²³ A tribute from the biking community in the form of a feature in *Motorcyclist* magazine (which noted with pleasure that the actual motorcycle had been installed in the gallery) would only have underlined the secondary, illustrational character of the suite.²⁴

There remained a debilitating mismatch between the representational stand-in for a charismatic motor vehicle and the real thing, that is, when there were powerfully aesthetic examples of the latter in the vicinity – even if few were calling them art. In the same year as Bengston's BSA exhibition, 1961, a minor situation-comedy actor and (like Gray) former child star named Tommy Ivo, whose primary occupation lay in building and driving drag racers, unveiled his consummate creation. Over each of its four massive slick tires he mounted a separate engine: a "Nailhead" Buick V8, so called by hot-rodders for its thin, vertical valves (fig. 174). Although discontinued in 1956, no other Detroit motor had the ruggedness and above all the look – narrow cross-section and straight up and down rocker covers – that "TV Tommy" wanted for his masterpiece.

The quad "Showboat," engines and pipes chromed to the hilt, slicks on both front and rear wheels, embodied a concept of maximum power and acceleration as a work of sculp-

172 Marvin Silver, Billy Al Bengston in studio with his motorcycle, 1963, gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 in. (28 x 35.6 cm)



ture more than it succeeded as a work of engineering.²⁵ The elevation of cars to do-it-yourself aesthetic showpieces had been for many years a feature of Chicano life on the city's East Side, while the consummate customizers Sam and George Barris had been active since 1951 in the automotive enclave of Bell and Lynwood, inner suburbs near the car and tire factories south of downtown, resculpting Detroit sedans into monumental volumes set off by deep lacquered finishes.²⁶

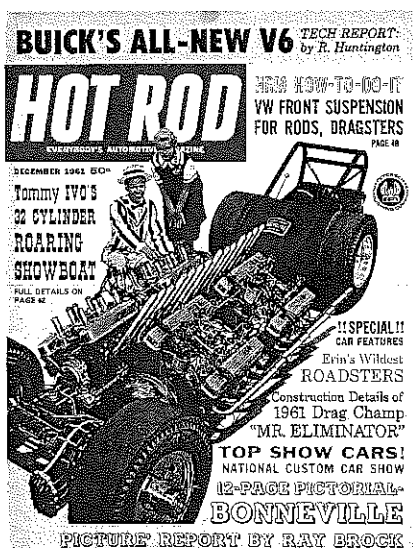
Robert Irwin, who came of age in the same southern suburbs during the 1940s, had been himself a custom-car enthusiast, as well as being, like Wallace Berman, a competitive dancer, motoring in his youth from one jitter-bug or lindy-hop contest to the next: "Monday was the Jungle Club in Inglewood, Tuesday was the Dollhouse out in the Valley, Wednesday was in Compton, Thursday in Torrance, Friday in Huntington Park."²⁷ The photographer Marvin Silver induced Irwin to display some jitterbugging in his pristine studio in 1962, austere abstract canvas in the background (fig. 175): "He still talks," says a friend, "of a unique shoulder twist he employed when attempting to take flight on the dance floor."²⁸

For both Bengston and Irwin, art had to compete in grace and intensity with these other components of their lives.²⁹ Irwin tells the story of critic Max Kozloff visiting from New York

173 Billy Al Bengston,
Carburetor Float Bowl, 1961,
oil on canvas, 42 × 40 in.
(106.7 × 101.6 cm),
private collection

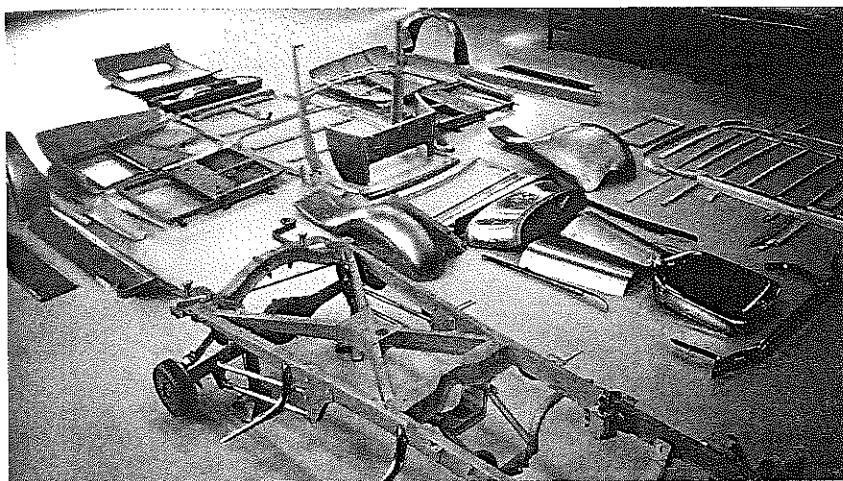
in the mid-1960s. Upset at the thought that Bengston raced motorcycles, "this critic just dismissed that out of hand as a superficial suicidal self-indulgence." As a reply in the form of an object lesson, Irwin drove Kozloff out to the San Fernando Valley to see a hot rod that he had found advertised for sale. The car on offer was a beauty, a 1932 Ford roadster (the little deuce coupe of legend), Irwin reports, but his attention turned with even more enthusiasm to another Ford hot rod still in process on the shop floor (fig. 176): "here was this '29 completely dismantled, I mean completely apart, and the kid was making decisions . . . all kind of things that no one would ever know or see unless they were truly sophisticated in that area." To Irwin's mind, "you couldn't talk about a more real aesthetic activity than what he was doing, how he was carefully weighing: what should be the attitude of this whole thing? . . . What was the relationship in terms of its machinery, its social bearing . . . the aesthetics of how the thing should *look*? It was a perfect example." The critic (renowned for his "gum chewers, bobby soxers, and delinquents" insult to the Pop sensibility) ran true to form, vehemently refusing to take the point: "Not important, unreal, untrue, doesn't happen, doesn't exist," as Irwin sums up Kozloff's side of the argument on the ride back: "So I finally just stopped the car and made him get out . . . just drove off. Said 'See you later, Max.'"³⁰

For all of the depth of their subcultural commitments, neither Irwin nor Bengston were naïve about the difficulties of putting a painting in conversation with a dance craze, a surf-board or a lacquered motor vehicle, yet have it be distinct within its own fine-art sphere,



174 (far right) Tommy Ivo and actress Cynthia Pepper with "Showboat" dragster, cover, *Hot Rod* (December 1961), Petersen Publications

175 (right) Marvin Silver, Robert Irwin doing the jitterbug in his studio, Venice, California, 1962, gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 in. (28 x 35,6 cm)



distinct enough to challenge any art being made anywhere. The relationship between the two artists as aesthetic interlocutors parallels in many ways the one that existed at the same moment between Robert Indiana and Ellsworth Kelly. As the New York pair agreed on a hard-edge approach to oil on canvas, their Los Angeles counterparts emerged from their Abstract Expressionist phase (where Bengston had been the leader) to agree that their paintings needed to eliminate unnecessary volume in favor of some kind of perceptual membrane. And each pairing came to a similar estrangement. Where Kelly continued to believe that shape and color were all he required, Indiana needed the friction of language. Where Irwin kept moving in the direction of greater and greater parsimony of sensory stimuli, Bengston linked the idea of painting as membrane to the skins of other well-designed and well-crafted objects in his vicinity. As those vernacular vehicles came encased in arrestingly variegated veneers, a painting in their spirit would be nothing *but* veneer, which nonetheless possessed emphatic physical strength and durability combined with figurative vividness.

Marvin Silver photographed Bengston in 1963 in his studio polishing the surface of a painting (fig. 177), the import of that action in flat contradiction to the look-but-don't-touch expectation of a fragile, inviolate painted surface – and a world away from the fledgling artist he had been six years before, caught in a 1957 photograph studiously accumulating abstract brushstrokes on canvas (in that picture, the geometric pattern on his shirt is ultimately more interesting than the painting; fig. 178). "I loved painting tanks and stuff like that. I mean we'd go out and race these things and they're out in the elements for years and they hold up fine. You get an oil painting and you're lucky if you get six months before it starts cracking. So this has got to be a better surface."³¹

Rosenquist might well have come to a similar pass had he opted for the West Coast rather than the East, based on his youthful infatuation with Los Angeles – "I'll come out here and customize a car and go surfing" – as well as the passion behind his hitchhiking

176 1929 Ford Model A,
disassembled parts.
Photograph by Stefan Bau

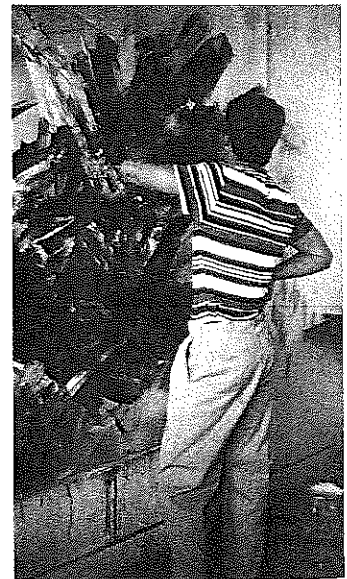
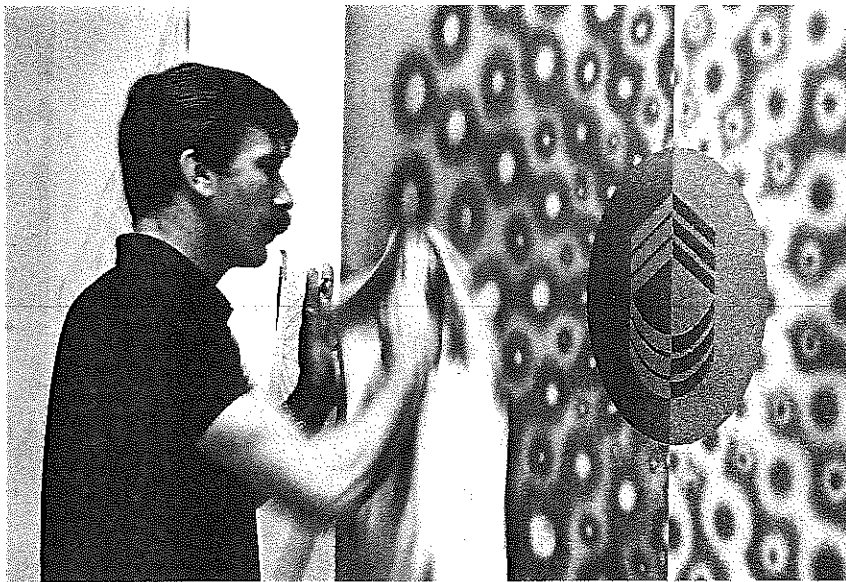
to Daytona Beach for the motorcycle racing. As it was, both he and Bengston derived from their differing craft skills an impatience with the poor, impermanent workmanship widely tolerated, if not encouraged, in the fine arts. Both lit on the same phrase to describe an adequate standard: a painting should be "built to last."³²

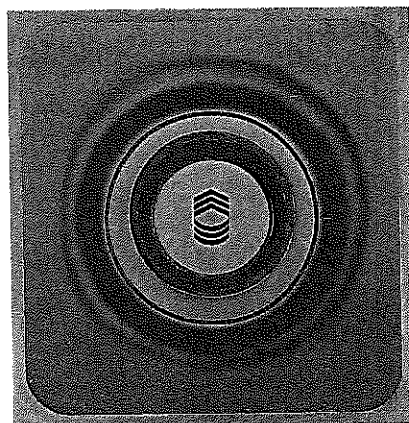
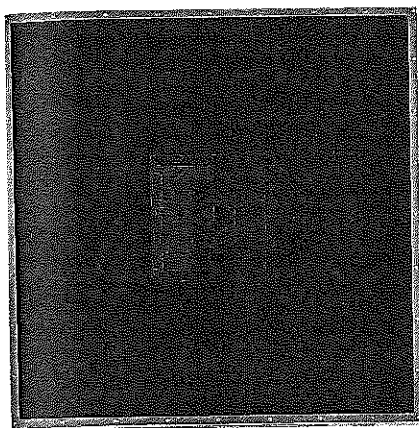
In hindsight, both Rosenquist and Bengston were defying a conventional assumption about painting that has only become more deeply entrenched in the intervening years, that is, the expectation that paintings should be fragile and vulnerable, however forcefully they might appear to have been executed. Modern paintings, as much as cracked and darkened old masters, find themselves habitually treated as patients or invalids, their conservation issues endlessly mooted and fretted over. It may well be that this preoccupation with the ill health of artworks stands as an essential corollary of the ever greater – and ever more anxiety-producing – preciousness invested in them, such that they have come to rest under a kind of therapeutic regime.

None of this conventional fragility accords with the definition of Pop that both Rosenquist and Bengston were forging in 1960, one in which the pragmatism of their craft identities had necessarily to be brought over into their work as fine artists. A deeper definition of a Pop aesthetic beyond the surface mimicry of mass-produced images lies instead at the level of the object itself, which abjures the precious standing that comes with physical fragility. A location such as Venice Beach, with back-alley mechanics, bondo and lacquer

177 (left) Marvin Silver, Billy Al Bengston polishing a painting, Venice, California, 1963, vintage gelatin silver print, 3 1/4 x 5 in. (8.25 x 12.7 cm)

178 (right) Billy Al Bengston painting in his studio, West Hollywood, California, 1957. Photograph courtesy of Billy Al Bengston





masters, board shapers and glassers at every hand, continually put artists in a rivalry with these peers in combining maximum utility with maximum formal elegance.

Bengston drove the point home in 1960 with the narrow frame he secured with neatly visible rivets onto the lacquered surface of *Big Duke* (fig. 179). While he dismissed the idea that a painted tank could be a work of art, his experience in the motorcycle paint shop brought to the fore non-iconic properties of physical toughness and sensual depth.³³ The better surface he had in mind would be like the primed metal; the spatial depth of color he sought came from the sprayed synthetic lacquers – nitrocellulose, acrylic, polyester – applied in layers (up to 90 altogether), polished, and surmounted with a hard clear coat. All this went down on the smooth side of a Masonite panel, as no stretched canvas could have supported such a load.

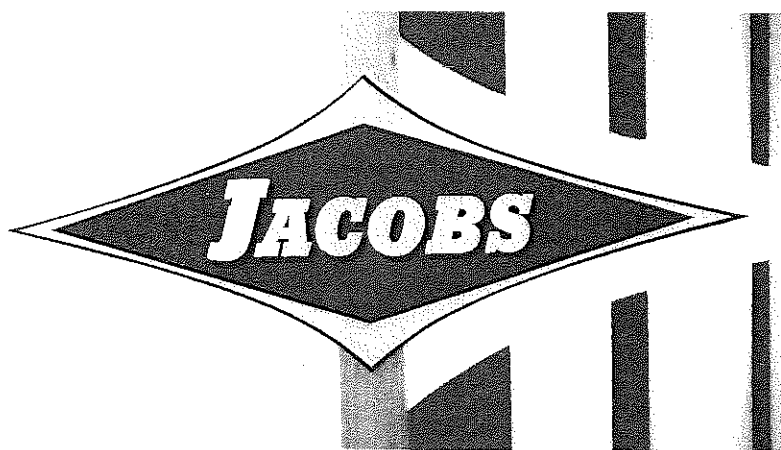
On the occasion of his Los Angeles County Museum of Art retrospective in 1968, James Monte (the painter and co-founder of *Artforum*) articulated the local ethos in uncompromising terms: "The concept held in many quarters throughout the art world, that art objects may be experimental in design and fabrication, and that subsequent exhibition of the perhaps conceptually clear but fitfully executed objects is validated because of their experimental state is wholly at odds with Southern California idealism." That idealism, it goes without saying, was not metaphysical, but arose out of "a toolmaker's or engineer's" outlook, "whereby quality is judged by the perfectedness of the painted surface, much as one admires the look of a carefully engineered industrial tool apart from its known function."³⁴ The function of a painting was to preserve its original appearance and integrity, with the least trouble to its custodians, for anyone who might wish to look at it.

Beyond this assumption, however, the approaches of Rosenquist and Bengston diverge in a way that directly follows from the differing settings in which they had acquired their manual skills. Rosenquist could depend on the utter familiarity of his style and motifs, so relied on their consequent numbness in assuming a free hand intuitively to rearrange them into unexpected and eccentric (but consummately executed) compositions. Bengston derived his style and motifs from what was an exotic world to most viewers, even on his

179 (left) Billy Al Bengston, *Big Duke*, 1960, magna, lacquer on masonite with wood and rivets, 48 x 48 in. (122 x 122 cm), private collection

180 (right) Billy Al Bengston, *Clint*, 1962, polymer, lacquer on masonite, 48 x 46 1/2 in. (122 x 118 cm), private collection





native ground. Not many art lovers had dwelt on the pinstripes, crests, flames, and sunbursts that sped past them on the street, that is, when they saw them at all.

Bengston's *Big Duke* emblazons itself with the centralized chevron pattern of an army master sergeant's stripes that Bengston would make into his cognate insignia (fig. 180). In one telling, he came up with the idea just to shut Irwin up in the midst of a twelve-hour transatlantic flight: "I say, 'I'm going to paint sergeant stripes.' He says, 'huh?' and that's when I knew I had the right idea. Because it stopped him from talking!"³⁵ That disarming protestation of randomness and happenstance has much in common with Jasper Johns's customary non-explanations for the inspiration behind his flags and targets. The fact that Bengston had never served in the military (draft avoidance being an article of faith in his circles) might make his choice of symbol seem even more arbitrary, but there was an arguable cunning in its selection, a deft condensation of multiple connotations that belies a first impression of ubiquitous neutrality – whether or not he had himself grasped them all at the outset.

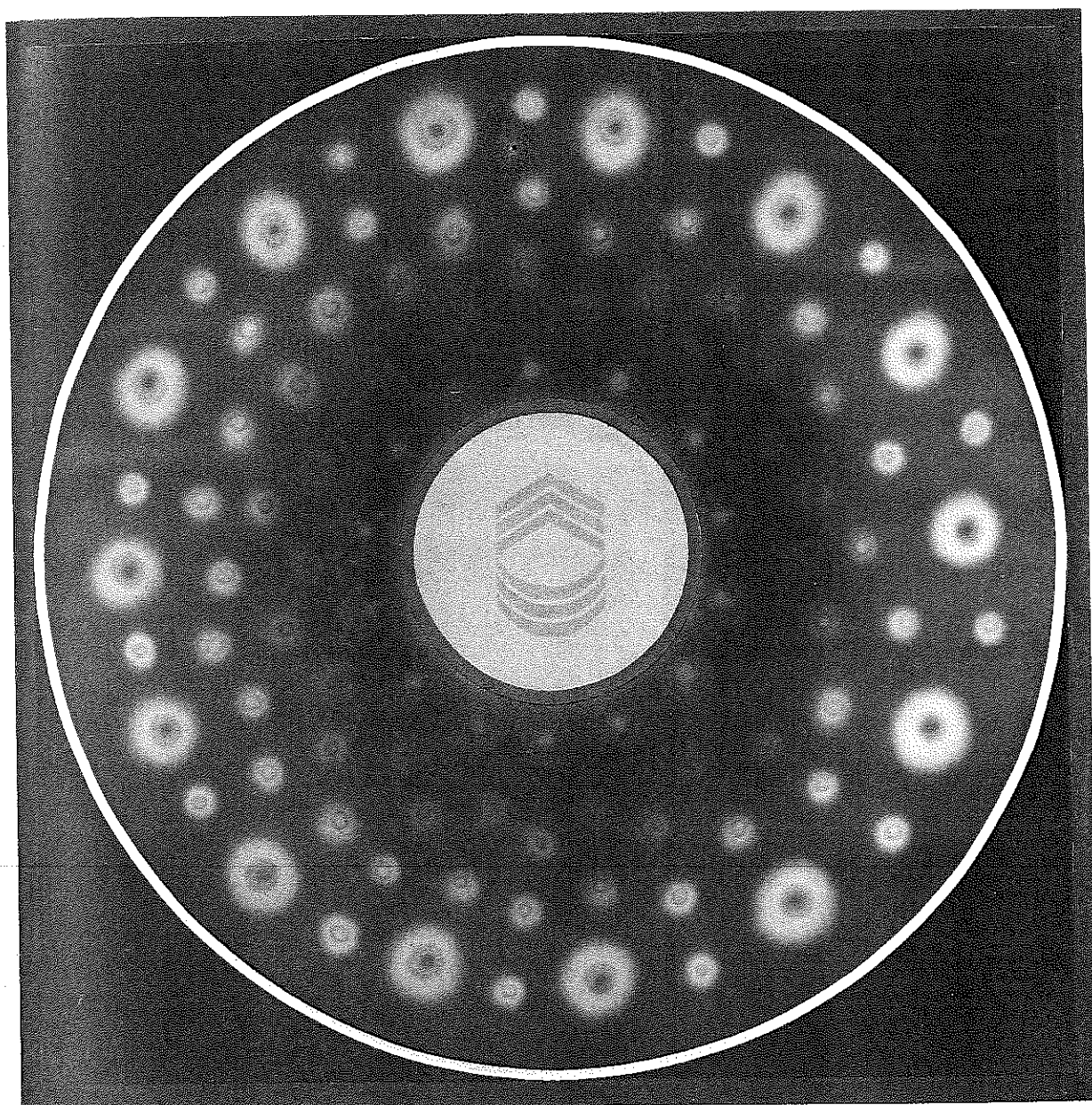
The combination of equal rows of three angular chevrons and three curving stripes provides an arresting symmetry-within-asymmetry detachable from the rote meaning of the symbol. The tapering curves in particular bear a similarity to streamlined painted ornament in the custom car and motorcycle world. An architectural cognate of the angular chevrons could most handily be found in the high-peaked façades of the Polynesian tiki-style hotels and restaurants that dotted the suburban landscape. And that configuration, in the abstract, had guided the logotype designs of the most prominent surfboard makers (fig. 181). Finally, the whole emblem's obvious function denoting military rank spoke to the very foundation of southern California's populist prosperity and cults of masculine expertise and adventure. Subtending all of these associations, the sergeant's stripes stood for a person, one of requisite practical modesty, no officer but the competent subaltern, whose surrogate identity the artist assumes.

181 (above) Jacobs surfboards logo (laminated)

182 (facing) Billy Al Bengston, *Buster*, 1962, lacquer and oil on masonite, 60 x 60 in. (152.4 x 152.4 cm), Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, Museum purchase, dedicated in 2002 in honor of Thomas S. Tibbs (1917–2002), Director of the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art from 1968 to 1972

183 (page 226) Billy Al Bengston, *Busby*, 1963, oil, polymer, and lacquer on masonite, 80 x 60 in. (203 x 152.4 cm), private collection

184 (page 227) Billy Al Bengston, *Tubesteak*, 1965, lacquer on Formica, 37 x 28 in. (94 x 71 cm), courtesy of Billy Al Bengston



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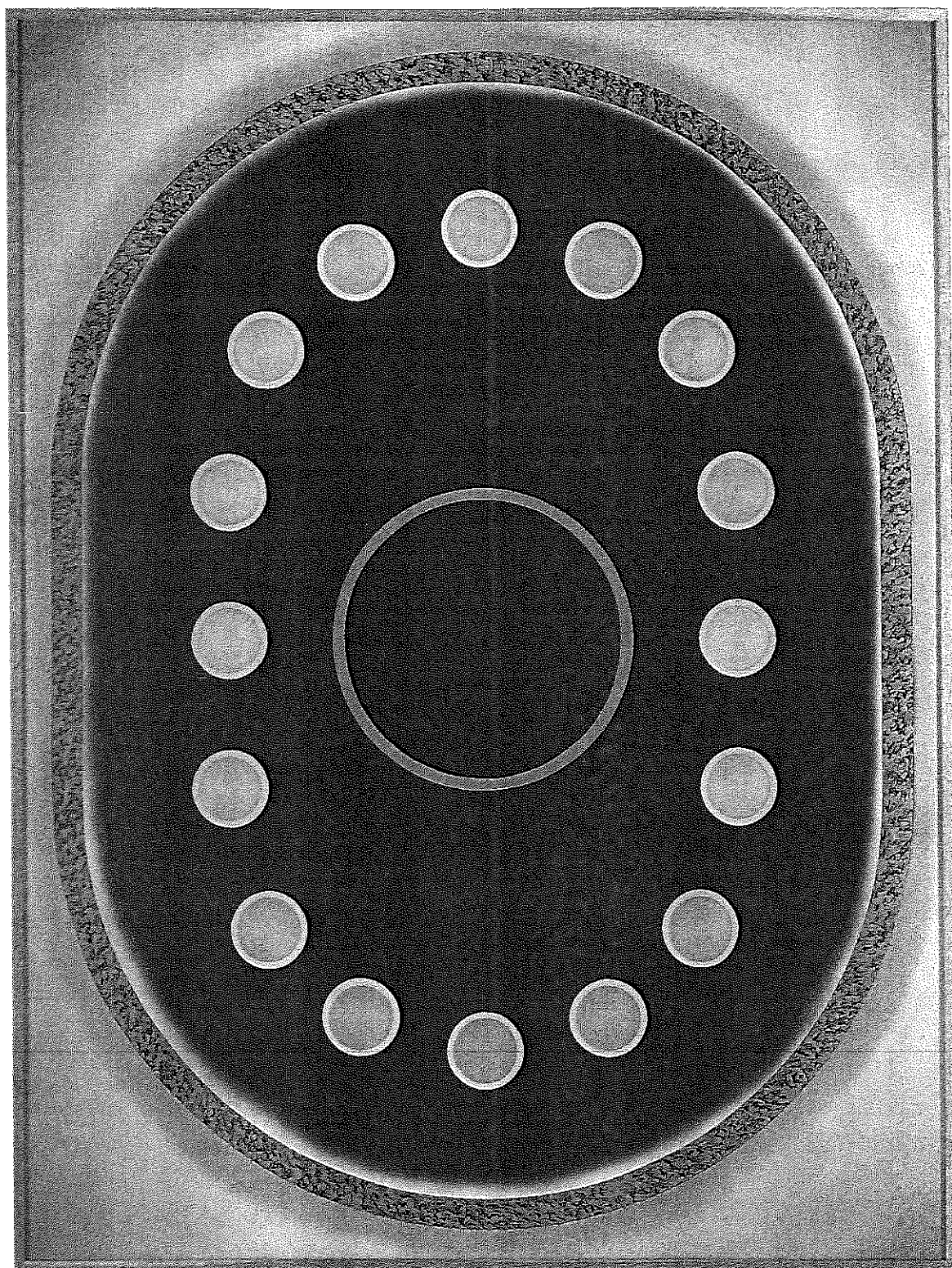
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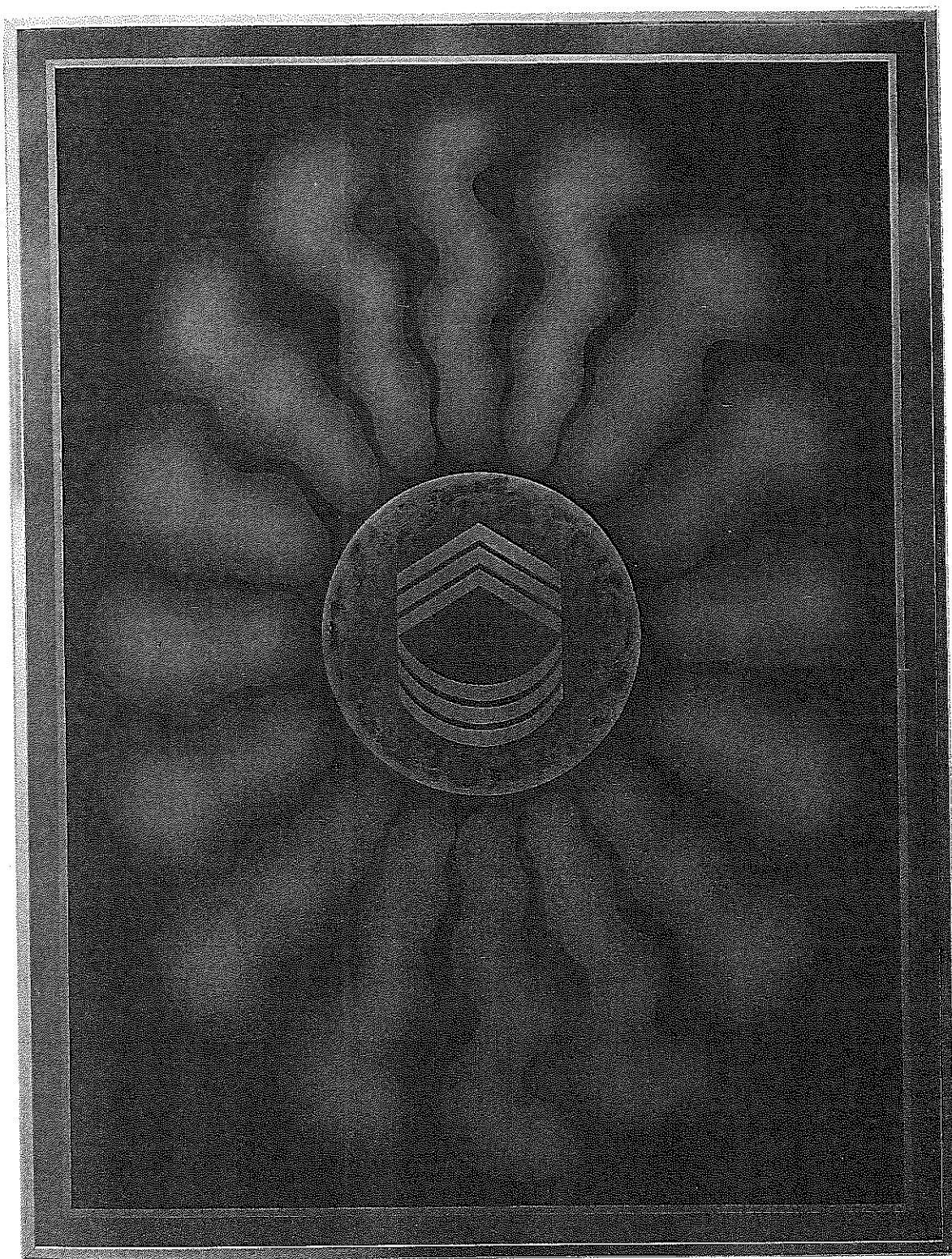
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As Bengston tended to name his paintings after persons (*Big Duke* plainly takes its title from John Wayne, *Clint* from Eastwood), so each of his paintings would begin with his own symbolic signature as its invariant and most stable element. The question then followed, what would surround this trademark? In order to realize his conception of painting as utility, much of the conventional business of part-by-part composition or accretions of texture could only be a distraction, an unnecessary multiplication of attributes: as he puts it, "The reason I chose the central format is because I was interested in painting . . . I was more interested in painting than I was in composition. So I said, well how do I do the composition?" The uprightness of the chevrons' invariant signature constitutes the most stabilizing component, what he called "an arbitrary way of placing," in arrangements that run away from the center in all directions, frequently inside a circular field with no necessary orientation to his rectilinear supports.³⁶

Bengston's *Buster* of 1962 makes for an apposite case in point, as it possesses no composition as such, only a regular order or pattern (fig. 182). To say the same of a contemporaneous painting by Frank Stella, that would be nearly the entire point of the work, its pattern self-evidently following from the shape of the framing edge. The residual perspectival cues retained by Stella follow from the character of his paintings as boxy objects in themselves. Bengston, by contrast, treats the framing edge simply as a way to demarcate the outer limits of his painted field, which derives its logic and integrity from its center. Color and pattern suffuse themselves throughout a surface that advertises no physical depth at all, but substitutes a perceptual depth lodged in glowing color, activated by his command of the spray nozzle in conjuring hot points of light surrounded by glowing penumbra: "the idea," as he said, "was to move beyond the surface, to be in front, and back, and all around."³⁷

The thought and intent behind a painting like *Buster* may thus have been eminently serious – and a challenge to what passed for seriousness in the East – but it need not parade its seriousness, rather the opposite. The panel is named, after all, for Buster Keaton, a great film comedian and pioneer of physical clowning on screen. Its component forms have the look of spinning carnival lights, their pedigree bypassing entirely the Constructivist-derived vocabulary of putatively objective and neutral elements. A neat equation also arises between the aesthetic necessity of a superficial painted surface and the superficiality of screen images and other ephemerally packaged pleasures. Thus Bengston's favored elements tend to possess an insouciantly low-brow or offbeat character, partly a mimetic correspondence to the honky-tonk lights and atmosphere of the Sunset Strip or Hollywood Boulevard premiers (see *Busby* [Berkeley], 1963; fig. 183), but also a necessary displacement in repertoire if not in level from the more cultish gothic ornament favored by his fellow motorcyclists. There is next to nothing left of the visionary in the radiances that shine from the celestial disk in *Buster*: transcendence persists only by negative implication in favor, to use Bengston's words, of "man-made things that we see in harsh California light."³⁸

To underscore the salience of the veneer, with its inevitable overtones of a cheap and ersatz substitute, a logical step would be to paint on top of a veneer that signified those very qualities. Bengston did precisely this in fashioning a painting like *Tubesteak* in 1965 (fig. 184), in which he appropriated for its support a sheet of imitation wood-grain Formica,

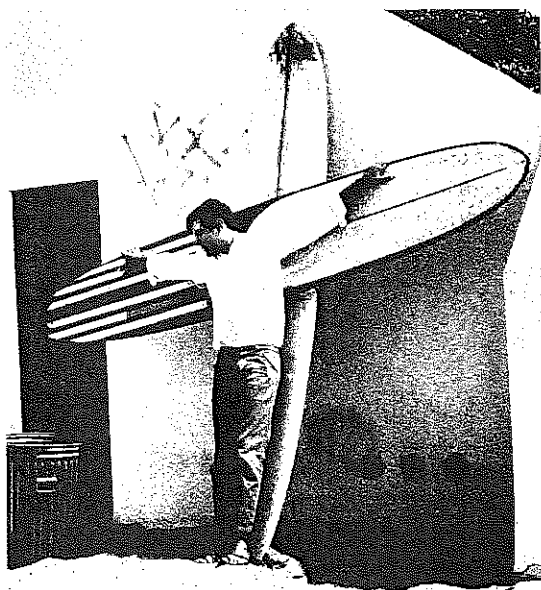
a builder's item meant to dress up kitchen countertops on the cheap, and he envisioned it sunk into a paneled wall so as to be continuous with its setting. He called this series "Woodies," a nickname for the prewar, wood-bodied station wagons that surfers had bought up on the cheap for convenient transportation of boards and bodies up and down the coast. They were collector's items by the mid-1960s, while their contemporary Detroit counterparts sported merely decorative side panels in fake wood grain.³⁹

Bengston thus managed to collapse a totemic subcultural reference into a sly dig at commercial falsehood. Positioning the sheet so the false grain runs in a wave-like horizontal pattern, framing it appositely in painted silver and peach bands, he showed a certain restraint in embellishing what he already had in this vernacular Pop item with its photographically derived representation of a natural material. A thinly lunar disk encompasses the sergeant's stripes, rendered in a peach tone that matches the border, the only other element being the spreading blob-like forms in yellow that radiate like fleshy fluorescent petals or pseudopods to delineate a roughly oval centralized motif.

Those shapes further evoke spreading pools of some viscous secretion (or a blossom of condoms), which brings Bengston's title into play, as "Tubesteak" rolls a number of harshly demotic terms together: originally Depression-era slang for hot dog, it became a common euphemism in the military for penis. In the surfing idiom of the time, a "hotdogger" was a rider who cultivated attention-getting tricks and movements on the board. And Tubesteak was also the nickname of an old time Malibu surfer and Bengston crony Terry Tracy, the model for Cliff Robertson's "Kahuna" character in *Gidget*, who presided over the squatter's palm-frond shack that served as the insiders' headquarters (fig. 185). (Tracy accounts for the nickname by his having worked at a Coast Highway eatery called Tube's Steak and



185 "The Pit," Malibu Beach, California, c.1953. Photograph by Dick Metz



186 Miki Dora on Santa Monica
State Beach, California, 1966.
Photograph by Pat Darrin

Lobster House.)⁴⁰ The rudeness of the humor couched in delicately floral disguise expresses both solidarity with a society beyond the confines of art, indeed of polite society in general, and a riposte to the chaste, not to say prudish decorum bound up with conventional notions of artistic seriousness. At the same time, that coarse jocularity required some significant redemption in the direction of art, hence the seemingly paradoxical delicacy in technique and effect that manifests a consistent feature of Bengston's Masonite paintings overall.

The *New York Times* journalist Guy Trebay, whose regular beat is fashion, nonetheless wrote accurately in 2006: "Lately, the octopus grasp of surf culture has become so inescapable that it is hard to contemplate a time, just over a half-century ago, when surfers were legitimate counterculture types, a wave-riding minority of oddballs, semi-sociopaths, dropouts, athletically gifted isolates with the occasional drug or messiah problem, or just all-around good-time freaks" (fig. 186).⁴¹ Ed Kienholz, another Bengston friend with an expansive, domineering personality akin to Tubesteak Tracy's, had long railed against arbitrary boundaries of taste both in words and by unflinching confrontation in his art with the scabrous and disreputable. In that light, it is no coincidence that neither artist liked to play along with the existing norms of art-world civility and calculations of mutual advantage. By the end of the decade, both would be essentially operating outside of the normal gallery and exhibiting system altogether.

In 1962, Bengston had already had a taste of exposure in New York at the Martha Jackson Gallery – Indiana's dealer – with some initial success. Reviews were uncomprehending and dismissive for the most part, but Jackson was nonetheless willing to carry on, capitalizing

on his affinities with Indiana's brand of Pop, building a following for him in New York. As Bengston tells it,

She picked me and . . . I was naïve and sophisticated at the same time, in that my exhibition was ready to come back here and she says . . . "Honey, you've got to live in New York. I'll get you a studio, I'll give you money, and you'll have a show and in a year you're going to be very famous." And I said, "Martha, I'm not into this game, it's not about fame, I'm living."⁴²

While the anecdote is couched in a way to put the teller in the best light, the attitude it expresses is one he put into practice. The prevailing ethos in the East placed art under the category of work, of servitude, of striving for success and monetary rewards. For Bengston and a fair number of his artistic peers in Los Angeles, an art career was about the avoidance of externally imposed routines of work. They were exacting and self-critical in their actual fashioning of art objects, as well as assiduous in protecting their rights in the objects they made; but that discipline would be freely engaged or not submitted to at all. For the lucky few, art-making could be the means to support a much larger way of life, one full of satisfying pursuits and undertakings from Malibu to Lake Mirage, all of which could be sustained in those days by irregular earning from any convenient source. The web of professional norms and shibboleths that constrained life in cold, unwelcoming New York – to which artists submitted for the sake of exposure to a higher urbanity, as well as for the sake of its venues and levers of recognition – would simply have come at too high a price for an artist as embedded in the total life possibilities of Los Angeles as Bengston was. What was more, the organically Pop character of his art depended on its anti-hierarchical place as no more than one option in an array of cognate activities that elsewhere would be condescended to as mere Pop subject matter, if they received any consideration at all.

The previous two chapters have both ended with discussions of New York Pop artists stretching themselves at least to touch on the African-American struggles for civil rights then encountering hellish reprisals in the American South. Until the summer of 1965, when the Watts rebellion brought flames to the doorstep of Bell and Lynwood, the white, male, working-class semi-utopia figured in Bengston's art gave little thought to other ethnicities and still less to a place for women in that world. The fat of the land on which it depended was the purest product of the Cold War arsenal. Yet even on its own terms, this was estimable art that stands out in the art-historical record for speaking confidently and without apology from within disparaged subcultures of the non-privileged in terms of class, income, and formal education, thereby significantly enlarging the scope of what Pop could signify. When Claes Oldenburg arrived in Venice Beach early in 1963 for an extended sojourn, he found his status as an already storied New York artist counted for little among his new artist friends: "they looked down their noses at me because I couldn't surf and didn't have a motorcycle."⁴³