

Billy Al Bengston

FRANKLIN PARRASCH GALLERY

“We’d surf, play Ping-Pong and work, smoke and drink black coffee. That’s it. That was what we did for three or four years. That’s all we could afford to do,” Billy Al Bengston recently said, recounting his time sharing a studio with fellow painter and ceramicist Ken Price in the early 1960s. I don’t surf, but those close to me who do have often noted the degree to which it’s a transfixing waiting game in which natural rhythms take over any sense of structured temporality, and doing the same thing over and over again is never the same thing. And so it’s a smart conceit that this small exhibition of paintings encompassing more than half a century of Bengston’s career seems to insist on that strange duration in which nothing much happens at all.

It’s far from boring, though. Doing very little can be a transcendent process, a move toward synthesis with nature: Wait long enough and you will become that perfect swell on its way to shore. Bengston’s work feels like it is striving to reach this state. (Nature here is as much sun glinting off the hood of a dented car as it is a breaking wave.) The

Billy Al Bengston, *Gold Hill Dracula*, 1969, oil on canvas, 14 × 14".



magical realism of specimens in sixteenth-century *Wunderkammern* meets an early Surrealist fascination with formal adaptation meets California Finish Fetish: Everything in life becomes a surface with which to meld. Or, in the artist’s words, “I’m sort of a chameleon and I’ll reflect the colors I see around me.” This makes Bengston’s art at once instantly recognizable and elusively uncategorizable. Motifs rise slowly to the surface and then go back under, and the profound and the prosaic share space in equal measure.

The show began with *Koji*, 2000, a kitschy joke on the subtle monochromes of the likes of Ad Reinhardt—if you look long

enough, a red heart will appear in the center of the small red square. (This conjures in turn a much earlier Bengston work not exhibited, *Grace*, 1959, which delivers that same valentine in black.) The self-assured *Erroll*, 1961, is a study in successive cool blues, from its slick central chevron in a feathery frame to the crisp matte of its outer square. In *Men Are Like That*, 1969, a chevron is camouflaged by Bengston’s application of lacquer and polyester resin onto a wrinkled sheet of aluminum. He achieves the pale green and ochre of an unripe peach, with squiggled bruises that at first appear to be shadows cast onto the work from some exterior source. On longer viewing, the dark pattern becomes ridges of sand under very shallow water. (Further heightening the collusion of environment and work, Bengston once exhibited a series of such pieces with just a few candles lighting a gallery.) *L.A.S. 10:35pm*, 1998, one of two seascapes in the show, is a German Romanticist view of big sky over an ocean, as seen through a hazy saltwater filter.

The show’s most hallucinatory repetition came from the shape of an iris. (The flowers are called *draculas* in many of Bengston’s titles, because Price once commented that they looked like Count Dracula flying through a window. An iris also refers to the eye and, in Greek mythology, to color—Iris was the goddess symbolized by the rainbow.) Rendered in various hues and textures, this flower haunted the central squares of many paintings—*Shawnee Dracula*, 1969, for example, with its sludgy brown amoebas, or *Maui Watercolor*, 1974, a study in bright wallpaper Pop—suggesting botanical pressings from various places. At times, the collage of brash color and crafty graphics was difficult to take, as in *Robertula Diaz*, 2009, in which a demented mix of marbled lilac bordered in turquoise surrounds a gold square containing an iris-as-icon. Much more inviting was *Peahead Pinecone Calling*, 2013, the most recent work in the show, a five-by-five-foot abstract splash of bright-mustard yellow on aquamarine—as if, after staring into a giant Rorschach print for a long time, someone finally just jumped into it.

—Prudence Peiffer