

Late Fifties at the Ferus



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James Monte The Ferus Gallery opened its doors on March 15, 1957 with a group exhibition which included works by Richard Diebenkorn, Hassel Smith and Clifford Still, as well as a host of younger Northern and Southern California artists. As Gerald Nordland, the art critic for *Frontier Magazine* at the time commented, “. . . the Syndell and Now Galleries have joined forces.” The Now Gallery was owned by Edward Kienholz and the Syndell by Walter Hopps. Both Kienholz and Hopps were extremely influential not only as art dealers—sales were virtually non-existent—but as key figures who brought together the best younger artists in the Southern California region as a group. Hopps, Kienholz and, later, in the Fall of 1958, Irving Blum and Sadye Moss were to a large degree responsible for promulgating the notion among patrons as well as artists that there indeed was a vital group of artists of the highest ambition who lived and worked in California. In the spring of 1957 it seemed necessary for both owners of the Ferus Gallery to establish the fact that the young abstract-expressionist painters in Southern California, including John Altoon, Billy Al Bengston, Craig Kauffman, Edward Moses and Paul Sarkisian, were of equal artistic merit as the better known artists of the San Francisco Bay Region, including Jay De Feo, Sonia Gechtoff, James Kelly and a handful of others.

The high degree of competence exhibited by these young artists—how intensely they understood the lessons of the fathers of Abstract Expressionism—will astonish many visitors to this miniature survey of the early years of the Ferus Gallery. It has been my contention for the past few years that the second and third generations of abstract-expressionist artists in California compares favorably to other developments in this area throughout the world, and in almost every case is more serious, more engaging painting than any of the period with the exception of the best of the older generation. In arriving at this conclusion, which is justified by simple comparison of pictures completed between 1953 and 1962 by artists living on both coasts of the United States, as well as Europe and Japan, it appears that the original animus so evident in the best early works of Still, De Kooning, Rothko, Newman and Kline stimulated the highest later achievement on the West Coast rather than elsewhere in the world. It is this very quality of animosity, anarchy, even hatred, which animates even the sometimes lyric achievements of the artists within this exhibition. The rhetorical pictures of De Kooning's emulators, exhibited in Tenth Street galleries on Manhattan Island, would for the most part not have

been accepted as student work in the better art schools on the West Coast in the middle and late fifties. The artist's intentions as reflected in his art became extremely muddled in New York and Europe in the fifties, while in California a kind of moral criticism was practiced by the best teacher-painters on the work of art students. With the students of Clifford Still it became evident that skill in manipulating paint was a very real detriment to be overcome in order to reach a level where a student's pictures embody his existential position as accurately as is humanly possible. Painting was not judged in terms of innovative uses of structure, color or form but rather how intensely it appeared, how it revealed the character and morality of the artist. One can characterize the difference on both coasts between hypothetical questions: the young East Coast artist working in the fifties asked of himself, "How can I find a combination of elements which will push painting forward and at the same time give me an identity?" On the West Coast the question would have been: "How can I find who I am through painting?"

In conclusion, it is evident that until the closing of the Ferus Gallery in 1966, after a brief nexus with the New York based Pace Gallery, it exerted the very best influence on the Los Angeles art community. The gallery grew and changed after both Kienholz and Hopps left to pursue other careers. Irving Blum and Sadye Moss continued the tradition of the Ferus into the sixties with exhibitions of many of the early members of the gallery, as well as artists based in New York and Europe.







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Catalog of Works

- 1 Robert Alexander
Untitled, 1955, collage, 18 x 12"
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Edward
Kienholz
- 2 John Altoon
Fay's Christmas Painting, 1958
o/c, 72 x 64 $\frac{5}{8}$ "
Lent by Pasadena Art Museum
Gift of William C. Janss
- 3 Billy Al Bengston
Untitled, 1957, o/c, 48 x 48"
Lent by Mrs. Oscar Moss
- 4 Wallace Berman
Exhibition Photograph, 1957
20 x 16"
Courtesy Charles Brittin
- 5 Jay De Feo
Veronica, 1957, o/c, 11' x 42 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
Lent by Irving Blum
- 6 Richard Diebenkorn
Berkeley #32, 1955, o/c, 59 x 57"
Lent by Mr. and Mrs.
Richard E. Sherwood
- 7 Sonia Gechtoff
The Mystery of the Hunt, 1956
o/c, 48 x 108"
Lent by Irving Blum
- 8 Robert Irwin
Ocean Park, 1959, o/c, 60 x 60"
Lent by Irving Blum
- 9 Craig Kauffman
Tell Tale Heart, 1958, o/c, 68 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 49"
Lent by Irving Blum
- 10 James Kelly
Untitled, 1954, o/c, 60 x 42"
Lent by Mr. and Mrs.
Edward Kienholz
- 11 Edward Kienholz
Leda and the Canadian Honker
1957, mixed media, 24 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 80"
Lent by Mrs. Mary Kienholz
- 12 Frank Lobdell
February 1959, 1959, o/c, 70 x 59"
Collection Los Angeles County
Museum of Art
- 13 John Mason
Spear Form, 1957, clay, 66 x 26 x 14"
Lent by the artist, Courtesy Hansen
Gallery, San Francisco
- 14 Edward Moses
Rafe, 1958, o/c, 72 x 70"
Lent by Pasadena Art Museum
Gift of Harris Newmark
- 15 Kenneth Price
*Great Lime Green Ceramic
Simulated Mountain*, 1959
earthenware, 21 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 20"
Lent by Artist Studio, Venice
California
- 16 Arthur Richer
Clown, 1957, o/c, 20 x 16"
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Horace Block

