

July 1, 2016 2:04 pm

Review: Edward Kienholz at Prada Foundation, Milan



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His critique of US society shook its artistic establishment in the late 20th century



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Edward Kienholz's 'Five Car Stud' (1969-72)

Europeans, said the American artist Edward Kienholz, understand mortality better than anyone.

“They have been in two wars where there was death and destruction all around them and . . . intuitively sense that what I do has some meaning,” he once said in the course of a controversy-fueled career. “Not Americans. What I make is too desecrating to Americans. I am saying, essentially, ‘You’re going to die’, and people don’t want to hear that.”

True to those sentiments, a powerful and deeply disturbing exhibition devoted to Kienholz is entertaining — can it ever be the right word? — visitors to the elegant complex of Rem Koolhaas-designed buildings that forms the Prada Foundation in Milan.

Kienholz's nightmarish installations and provocative sculptures would appear to have little in common with fashion houses playing at art. Except that Miuccia Prada, the foundation's co-president and driving force behind the brand, is serious about her involvement in culture, and loves nothing more than to confound expectations. And here, just a year after the foundation's opening, is a spiky show that is anything but pleasingly decorative.

Kienholz's withering critiques of American society shook that country's artistic establishment in the tumultuous years of the 1960s, and continued right to his death in 1994. While many of the fashionable artistic genres of those years paid scant, or superficial, regard to the momentous changes happening all around them — think Pop Art or Minimalism — Kienholz confronted them with ferocity. “[He] questions the conflict between good and evil, beautiful and diabolical,” says the exhibition's urbane curator, Germano Celant. “He has the courage not to repress it, but to delve into it.”

The centrepiece of the exhibition is “Five Car Stud” (1969-72), a grim, life-sized installation depicting the impending castration of an African-American man at the hands of a gang of white men wearing Halloween masks. The room is lit only by the headlights of four cars and a truck, forming a ring around the gang as they pin their victim to the ground.

There are reluctant witnesses: a white woman who was caught with the man is forced to watch the assault, while a young boy sits in one of the cars crying with fear. We step into the intimidating arena, scarcely able to examine the details of the scene. But it is only in close-up that we detect the six letters — N-I-G-G-E-R — that float randomly, yet with deadly purpose, inside a gas can.

Kienholz described his work as a representation of the “burden of being an American”. Yet it has barely been shown in his own country. “Five Car Stud” was first exhibited at Documenta 5 in Kassel, Germany, after which it was purchased by a Japanese collector and held in storage for nearly 40 years. Following a restoration, it showed at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Lacma) in 2011, and then the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark a year later. The Prada Foundation bought the work in February 2012.

Kienholz never bothered to hide his irritation at his countrymen's timidity in the face of his work. In the Documenta catalogue, displayed at the Prada show, he writes that “Five Car Stud” was considered for exhibition at the Hayward Gallery and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, but “in both instances some vague form of censorship or aversion to controversy (or just plain aversion) has prevented it”. Some months later, he continued in the same vein when writing to Documenta 5's curator, Harald Szeemann: “I think the US is embarrassed that Germany can accomplish such a show on such a scale and we are still shitting around with some drawings in the Biennale.”

From 1972 onwards, Kienholz worked in collaboration with his fifth wife Nancy Reddin (their co-authored work would be subsequently signed: “Kienholz”), who attended the opening of the Prada Foundation show. “Ed was a moralist,” she tells me when I ask her what motivated him. Did she feel

that his work was too much for the American people to take? “It wasn’t the American people who were afraid of it,” she replies feistily. “It was the American institutions.”

It beggars belief that Kienholz’s breakthrough 1966 show at Lacma was almost derailed, she says, by his 1964 sculpture “Back Seat Dodge ’38”, of a couple making out in the back of a car. The LA County Board of Supervisors threatened to shut down the exhibition, but reached a compromise with the museum: it allowed the work’s display provided the sculpture’s car door was closed and guarded, and opened only on the request of a museum patron who was over 18, and only if no children were present in the gallery. All this, she adds wryly, for a depiction of “one of America’s favourite pastimes”.

But the making, and displaying, of “Five Car Stud” went way beyond that kind of pleasing irony. “Just to work on it was such a horrible thing,” says Reddin. Kienholz’s desire to explore, as Celant puts it, “the visages of sad and lonely people, abandoned in their environmental and emotional emptiness” is depicted at its most acute in the remainder of this show.

“The Bear Chair” (1991) is the most disturbing example, showing that archetypal symbol of innocence, a teddy bear, transformed into a child-abusing monster (the work is sufficiently graphic as to find it hard to imagine it on display in a London or New York public gallery). In 1980’s “The Bronze Pinball Machine with Woman Affixed Also”, a woman’s spreadeagled legs are attached to a Playboy-branded machine (prefiguring by eight years the notorious “pinball” rape scene in Jonathan Kaplan’s *The Accused*).

In “Jody, Jody, Jody” (1993-94), one of the last times Kienholz and Reddin collaborated before his death, the pathos of traumatised childhood is again invoked: a young girl is seen clutching at a wire highway divider. The work is based on a 1969 news story, according to which a four-year-old was asked by a local sheriff why she was standing in the middle of the freeway, and replied that she had been told by her father to “stay there until my new mama came”.

It is all but unbearable to look at; yet this bracing show at the very least raises a question mark over Kienholz’s relative neglect, compared with some of the contemporary figures that have worked in similar, yet more palatable, terrain: Jeff Koons, Paul McCarthy. Kienholz said his work was designed to take viewers to “a new place that I can’t even imagine”. Who would have thought that Milan’s modish new cultural headquarters would be giving its visitors a taste of hell?

‘Kienholz: Five Car Stud’, to December 31, fondazioneprada.org

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‘The Bear Chair’ (1991)