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ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

How the Kienholz 'Merry-Go-World' invites you to spin the wheel of (mis)fortune



Edward & Nancy Reddin Kienholz, "The Merry-Go-World or Begat by Chance and the Wonder Horse Trigger," 1988-1992. Mixed-media tableau, 115 inches by 184 inches. (Jeff McLane / Estate of Nancy Reddin Kienholz / L.A. Louver)

By LEAH OLLMAN | DEC. 26, 2019 | 7 AM

Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz's stirring installation at L.A. Louver has a long, convoluted title and a precise, significant origin story. "The Merry-Go-World or Begat by Chance and the Wonder Horse Trigger" (1988-92) takes the form of a stationary carousel, abbreviated in scale and inverted in purpose. Rather than offering a momentary frolic, the environmental assemblage confronts us with bare, enduring truths about fate and the determining circumstances of birth.

From the outside "The Merry-Go-World" is already not so merry, in spite of its blinking lights and continuously playing calliope music. A creature — sculpted, taxidermied or a combination of the two — adorns each of its eight sides, and all are compromised or distorted in some way.

The giraffe lacks legs and stands instead on mismatched crutches. The lion wears an ammunition belt. The tiger's roaring head is attached to the body of a smaller, less

imposing lynx. The upper panels behind the animals feature baroquely framed mirrors and stuffed monkeys with paint-matted pelts. Sallow varnish and gluey paint drip from multiple surfaces, the signature Kienholz patina of accumulated time and exhausted vitality.



Detail of "The Merry-Go-World or Begat By Chance and the Wonder Horse Trigger" by Edward & Nancy Reddin Kienholz (Jeff McLane/Estate of Nancy Reddin Kienholz/L.A. Louver)

To enter the installation (which is augmented by related and preparatory works), you must spin a wheel. When it lands on a number, a signal light turns from red to green, and you push through a barrier and black curtain to stand alone in the small, dark space within, as in the womb, awaiting your assigned destiny. Lights flicker and ultimately one of eight tableaux illuminates.

Each represents a specific character in a particular place, emblematic of a broader economic, social and professional class: a chairmaker in Egypt, a poor Native American couple in South Dakota, a street barber in India, a wealthy woman in Paris. The living or working conditions of each are vividly evoked in a closet-sized shadow box through photographs, wall-coverings and found objects.

Kienholz installations, at their best, collapse the distance between life and its interpretation. Both immersive and performative, "The Merry-Go-World" has that no-degree-of-separation visceral impact. It was born of visceral impact.

Nancy Reddin Kienholz traced the piece's evolution to the distress and shame she felt after turning away from an old woman begging on an El Paso street in the early '80s. The two artists collected materials, textures and visuals from around the world to give this work its darkly honest naturalism, to most affectingly make the point that fortune and misfortune are largely accidents of birth. We don't ride this microcosm of life, "The Merry-Go-World." It's life that takes us for a ride.

Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz

Where: L.A. Louver, 45 N. Venice Blvd., Venice

When: Tuesdays-Saturdays, through Feb. 22

Info: (310) 822-4955, www.lalouver.com