

E. & N. R. Kienholz

“The Twilight Home”



Edward & Nancy Reddin Kienholz
“The Twilight Home” 1983,
assemblage.
tecnica mista,
218,4 x 132,1
x 58,4 cm, ©
Kienholz, courtesy
L.A. Louver,
Venice, CA, dalla
mostra “Kienholz:
Five Car Stud”, a
cura di Germano
Celant, dal 19
maggio al 31
dicembre, alla
Fondazione Prada,
Milano

For centuries, the aestheticization of violence in art has been the subject of considerable controversy and debate. Up to the early '70s, when Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz unveiled their life-size tableau *Five Car Stud* in the West Hollywood parking lot of print publisher Gemini G&L, most works depicting violence had been paintings, a form of simulation that has a particular relation to reality—or, as French philosopher Roland Barthes put it: “Painting can feign reality without having seen it.”

Instead of a painted version of reality, the visitors in Los Angeles were invited to step directly on dusty ground in order to explore firsthand a scene that turned out to be deeply shocking and repulsive. Five white guys are about to castrate an Afro-American male. A white woman on a pick-up truck looks on in despair. In a paroxysm of grief, she vomits uncontrollably. The figures are life-size mannequins wearing masks, illuminated by headlights. The encountered scene shows an act of mob law. All the worse, the horrible crime's background is an interracial love story. The immersive installation gives the viewer no chance to escape. A nightmarish anxiety creeps in and remains stuck in one's memory. The meticulous restaging of a crime that is just about to happen, the work has an impact that leaves no one untouched.

Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz, who worked together from the creation of *Five Car Stud* until Edward's death in 1994, brought topicality to the concept of the tableau. Before radio, film and television, *tableaux vivants* were popular forms of entertainment. Actors would stage scenes after paintings wearing costumes

Edward Kienholz (American, 1927–94) and his wife Nancy Reddin Kienholz (American, b. 1943) began an artistic collaboration in 1972 that lasted until 1994. Edward had previously founded Ferus Gallery with Walter Hopps in Los Angeles in 1957.

“Kienholz: *Five Car Stud*,” curated by Germano Celant, is currently on view at Fondazione Prada, Milan, through 31 December.

Gianni Jetzer is an independent curator and critic based in New York, as well as Curator-at-Large at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington DC.

Image:

Five Car Stud (detail), 1969-1972. Courtesy L.A. Louver, Venice, CA. Photo credit: Tom Vinetz

and surrounded by props. Instead of a fictional scene, however, the Kienholz brought to life a crime scene with little aesthetic filters. Not unlike an openly staged performance, the public is invited to be part of the scene, positioning itself in relationship to the action. The main protagonists thus are frozen in time, the climax of violence remaining unstoppable.

Following its acquisition of *Five Car Stud*, the Fondazione Prada has put together an ambitious show of the renowned American artist couple's output. Although many important works are on display in Milan, the controversial character of the piece, which was also prominently exhibited by Harald Szeemann at documenta 5 (1972) in Kassel, steals the show. During its first presentation in Europe, it was seen as the proof of ethnic violence as a typical American occurrence. Today, Europe is challenged by a wave of immigration from both the Middle East and the African continent, provoking an uprising of right wing parties that in turn fuel further racism, resulting in a heated climate of hate and contingently lynch justice. As such, the reception of *Five Car Stud* has changed considerably in the past decades, a reflection of Europe's declining political climate.

For forty years, the Kienholz' magnum opus remained in the storage of a Japanese collector and has only recently been shown in public again. By now, we are used to experiencing and consuming violence in different forms through art, media, film and the Internet. The form of violence we encounter in *Five Car Stud*, however, is different: it is not only staged violence but, in its configuration, is itself as violent as a kick in the gut. ☹

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