

Around The Galleries

Still able to provoke

Leah Ollman

The embarrassment of riches that is Pacific Standard Time just keeps getting richer. One of the latest offerings by a participating gallery is the stirring “Kienholz Before LACMA” at L.A. Louver. Its 22 relief paintings and assemblage sculptures were made in the decade leading up to Edward Kienholz’s notorious 1966 survey exhibition at the county museum, then just a year old as a freestanding institution and, thanks to Kienholz, generating some major blow back.

Museum trustees chafed at the exhibition (whose curator, Maurice Tuchman, collaborated with L.A. Louver on the present effort). County supervisors declared it “revolting” and “repugnant,” condemned it as pornography and attempted, unsuccessfully, to shut it down. A lifesize tableau installation depicting a sexual encounter in the back seat of a car may have provoked the greatest ire, but Kienholz’s smaller, wall-mounted, pedestal and freestanding works — like those shown here, some of which did appear in the LACMA show — also possessed ample power to rankle and disturb. They still do.

Consider “Mother Sterling” (1959), a dressmaker’s form whose caged lower portion is packed with the heads and assorted limbs of countless dolls. Whether suggesting a graveyard, junkyard or assembly of vulnerables huddled under protective cover, the whole reeks of anguish. “America My Hometown” (1963), too, strikes a tone of grotesque elegy. Stuffed teddy bears with soiled, matted fur encircle a small cabinet as if giving it a group hug. A bluish flood light glares out at us accusingly from within the furniture, lined inside with an American flag like an inverted military coffin.



Edward Kienholz
Mother Sterling, 1959
mixed media assemblage
52 x 18 1/2 x 18 1/2 in.
(132.1 x 47 x 47 cm.)



Edward Kienholz
The Little Eagle Rock Incident, 1958
paint and resin on plywood with mounted deer head
61 3/4 x 49 x 20 in. (156.8 x 124.5 x 50.8 cm)

Kienholz took aim at specific topical issues such as the Vietnam War and the forced integration of public schools, and also swiped broadly at the American ethos of sanctity and self-congratulation — blind national pride. Many works from this period function as counter-memorials and anti-trophies. In “The Little Eagle Rock Incident” of 1958, he affixed a deer head, upside-down and painted black, to a panel painted with an abstracted flag and an arrow indicating, counterintuitively, which way is up.

Kienholz steeped his work in grief and anger but also humor, albeit dark, irreverent and often sexual. He took an old photograph album and augmented it with salacious pictures that turn the family narrative nasty. During these years, he painted with a broom, using a palette of dried blood, rust, sallow skin and scorched earth. Many a scavenged surface drips with resin, the yellowed, viscous syrup of age. Relics of a sort when they were made, these sculptures are doubly so now. They are easily dated to their assemblage/object expressionist moment, but remain no less relevant today.

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