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Beyond Hope: Kienholz and the Inland Northwest

Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art WSU, March 26–June 29, 2024

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Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin
Kienholz, *The Returning*, 1976.
Estate of Nancy Reddin Kienholz.
Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA

Greeting the visitor to *Beyond Hope: Kienholz and the Inland Northwest* in a gallery of Washington State University's Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art is a wall-mounted assemblage featuring a black-and-white photograph of elderly figures in their Sunday best moving into a starkly empty field surrounded by high hills. The sepia-toned stain of liquid resin applied across the image enhances the sense of time past and the idea that it represents a fragile memory of a momentous change in the lives of the people depicted. Titled *The Returning* (1976), the landscape recalls the open rolling hills of the Palouse region of the Washington/Idaho state border that surround the campus. Framed by galvanized sheet metal, working electric lights, and a small, ceramic space heater, this curious image (repeated in a smaller print mounted behind the heater's wire grill) announces

some of the key themes of this show.

After first achieving fame and notoriety in Los Angeles as a leading West Coast assemblage artist, Ed Kienholz moved to Hope, Idaho (population about 50) in 1973, the area where he grew up. Shortly after his marriage to Nancy Reddin, Kienholz "returned" to the inland Pacific Northwest to start a new phase of his career in collaboration with his wife. At the same time, he established another studio in West Berlin where the artists split their time until the mid-1990s. In this surprising show, guest curator Johanna Gosse (formerly of the University of Idaho, now at The Courtauld Institute, London) turns attention to the history and nature of this region as seen through the work and community that Ed and Nancy made there and revises our understanding of the way place resonates in Kienholz's art.

Known primarily for his groundbreaking found-object sculptures with which he took on hot-button social issues—desegregation, abortion, teen sex—in a decidedly more figurative and politically-engaged approach than East Coast assemblage makers, Kienholz was central to early efforts to promote avant-garde art within the conservative culture of Cold War Los Angeles. He famously cofounded the city's most important gallery of the period, Ferus, by signing an agreement with his partner Walter Hopps on a hot dog stand napkin in 1957. Hopps and Kienholz both embodied the "frontier" spirit of this new art scene, with Kienholz being called a "lumberjack" by some LA artists who looked down on his rural origins, but Gosse astutely connects the historical resonance of this kind of language to Kienholz's relationship with settler-colonialism, violence, and the environment in the American West through her selection of work from the late 1960s to the 1990s.

The frontier may be glimpsed in the landscape featured in *The Returning* but is also symbolized by the multipart bronze sculptural installation of *Mine Camp* (1991), reproduced in a photographic print that spans the entire back wall of the large gallery adjacent to the museum entrance. The photograph documents this large-scale work where it is currently installed in the woods near the Kienholz compound in Hope. *Mine Camp* is an homage to Kienholz's love of the outdoors instilled in him by his father on numerous camping and hunting trips in the region. An astounding work entirely in cast bronze, it features a full-size replica of a pickup truck, a deer carcass strung up on a pine tree, a log pile, a campfire, and the figure of Kienholz as a middle-aged man sitting at the edge of the campsite, with his hunting rifle, tools, cookware, and canned and bottled goods all arranged nearby. The Schnitzer Museum was able to secure—a few of the smaller bronze items for display—a bag of potatoes, some individual pinecones, a carton of eggs, and a bottle of Jack Daniels—whose striking realism invites close examination and creates a visual dialog with the reproduction of the entire work on the wall behind them.

This artwork, fabricated in Washington state at the innovative Walla Walla Foundry, is the most traditional mode of sculpture in the show, which may appeal to a broader public than most of the other assemblage and conceptual work in *Beyond Hope* and anchors the exhibition in a landscape and set of activities familiar to the show's largely local audience in this rural college town. However, the title is crucial, as for many of Kienholz's works, because it alludes to the more complex issues animating the artist's practice via its pun on Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Kienholz's "struggle" represented here may only be with different aspects of his identity and the contrast of his rural roots with the slick art world of the 1980s, but Gosse boldly sets this piece, and the eponymous pun, as the entry point into the exhibition's larger themes by alluding to the histories of white supremacy, neofascism, and right-wing terrorism that haunt the region's first settlement and its recent history in the wall text and her exhibition essay.

Mine Camp served as a backdrop for vitrines and video screens which presented archival material documenting the Kienholzes' various artistic projects based in Hope (an artist's residency, an art gallery, guest speakers), their connections to art scenes across the Northwest, as well as their life with family and friends in Hope.

Through the Faith and Charity in Hope Gallery, the Kienholzes brought the work of artists such as Francis Bacon, Jasper Johns, Alberto Giacometti, Jay DeFeo, and Emil Nolde to this tiny town. In a 1980s video tape, Kienholz and a group of friends, including the art critic Robert Hughes, are shown returning from a hunting trip and cleaning their pheasants together outside the house. This is remarkable proof of how the international art world and rural American pursuits mixed in the Kienholzes' Hope.

One of the more compelling works in the exhibition, *The Non-War Memorial* (1970), reveals that Kienholz was contemplating working in the area even while he was active in the Los Angeles art world of the late sixties. One of the series of "concept tableaux," typed proposals for larger-scale work or more conceptual projects than the work he had become known for (framed and accompanied by an engraved brass title plaque), *The Non-War Memorial* is a haunting, site-specific piece to be created in the town of Clark Fork, Idaho, nearby Hope. If fully realized, the piece would bring a group of artists, activists, students and local residents together to fill fifty thousand surplus US military uniforms with slurred clay and then scatter them over a 75-acre field, echoing the forty-eight thousand American soldiers that had been killed in the Vietnam War by 1970 when the piece was conceived. Managed by a partnering museum, the uniforms would be allowed to rot for five years, letting the clay and fabric disintegrate and become embedded in the soil before the site was plowed over and planted with alfalfa grass.

In 1970, this was a very forward-thinking conception of land and environmental art in a memorial mode. But as Gosse highlights, the specific location that Kienholz chose for *The Non-War Memorial* and his emphasis on the land and natural processes suggests a relationship between the violence of the Vietnam War and the landscape that was the site of the decimation and dispossession of the region's Indigenous population during the Nez Perce Wars of the 1870s. Waged near the town of Clark Fork, this violent episode made way for the establishment of the state of Idaho in 1890. With its five, sand-filled, olive green, unmarked military uniforms arranged on the floor in a corner of the gallery, *The Non-War Memorial* is one of the most striking pieces in the show. It can also be seen when looking at *The Returning*, putting the landscape evocative of the Palouse hills in dialog with histories of military violence. The gallery presentation of the work includes a three-ring binder containing gridded pages of small black-and-white photographs depicting the stuffed uniforms arranged in various poses on the ground. This thousand-page document evokes the bureaucratic tallying of war deaths which characterized the US media coverage and the American military "progress" reports on the Vietnam War.

Many of the other works in the exhibition, such as the sparse abstract compositions of *The H.I.D Series* and galvanized metal, wood and found object constructions of *The White Easel Series*, demonstrate Kienholz's engagement with minimalism, an influence not often registered in accounts of his practice. Select "barter works," which consist of the printed name of the item for which Kienholz would trade the artwork, such as *For A Tent and Fishing Gear* (1974), show Kienholz's dialog with conceptual art routed through the concerns of a working artist in a rural area.

Overall, *Beyond Hope: Kienholz and the Inland Northwest* provides a much-needed exploration of the way the cultures and histories of this often-overlooked region shaped Kienholz's work and career. Kienholz's roots there and his return to them after the 1960s, as this exhibition reveals, made his work more ambiguous, complex, and prescient than has previously been understood.

The curator of this exhibition, Johanna Gosse, is currently a Field Editor at caa.reviews. Gosse was in no way involved in the commissioning or editing of this review.

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