



Domestic Aesthetics

With 'Scenes from a Marriage,' the Artistic Marriage of Ed and Nancy Kienholz Is Brought Vividly to Life at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art



Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz, 'Bout Round Eleven,' 1982. Mixed media assemblage, 90 x 97 x 92 in. SBMA, Gift of Private Collection, Topanga, CA. | Credit: Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA. | Credit: Jeff McLane

By [Josef Woodard](#)

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To varying degrees, art is best appreciated up-close and personal, versus any detached or secondary mode of viewing or beholding. The truism is especially true in the rough, vivid case of sculpture by Ed Kienholz, which I first learned upon seeing his work – including his ribald, controversy-stoking, hardscrabble, high artwork from 1964, “Back Seat Dodge ‘38” – in the Santa Barbara Museum of Art a few decades back. You really have to “be there” in its visceral and often paradox-imbued presence to “get it.”

Suddenly, we have another ripe opportunity to “get it” in this space, with *Scenes from a Marriage: Ed and Nancy Kienholz*, the return of the Kienholz family name in the renovated upstairs contemporary art gallery. The short story: Ed married Nancy in 1972, and the pair started collaborating on their sculpture made of cast-offs, funky materials, and art made of earth and wood and gritty gumption.

At the heart of this small but must-see show – featuring both collaborative works and art by each Kienholz – is the large tableaux “Bout Round Eleven,” a newly acquired piece for the museum, from which the show’s art is largely drawn, along with works loaned from outside the museum organism.

If Ed and Nancy Kienholz’s art had a musical parallel, it would be some brand of punk-textured roots rock, with scrappy, deconstructed Americana in the mix along with unexpected jolts of meaning and implied narrative. Pop art was often fussy. Their work was more akin to the dark side of David Lynch, mining grimy dream worlds with materials filched from the real-world garage.

In their collaborative "Bout Round Eleven," its title relating to a grueling boxing match in its wearied post-10-round phase, a couple, made of papier-mâché, is seen in a state of chilled silence in their separate "corners." She is an all-pink visage gazing vacantly out the window, her face in a frame and shovel head; he, meanwhile, sits at a table with another shovel head, tethered to a cigarette and hypnotized by a television with a wild dog protruding through the screen.

Clearly, this scene from a marriage is not a happy home, its unease complicated by the central ambiguity of its implied drama — a Kienholz and Kienholz trademark.



Nancy Reddin Kienholz, 'Face to Face,' 2007. Lenticular photograph, mixed media. 30 x 30 x 4 1/2 inches. | Credit: Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA.



Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz, 'Bout Round Eleven,' 1982. Mixed media assemblage, 90 x 97 x 92 in. SBMA, Gift of Private Collection, Topanga, CA. | Credit: Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA.

Domestic American life takes a different turn in Ed's "The Nativity," dating from his pre-Nancy life in 1961 (and part of the infamous 1966 L.A. County Museum of Art retrospective with hot-button works "Back Seat Dodge '38" and the brothel-based "Roxys" in the house). Composed of roughed-up pieces of wood, lamp parts, and a metal box with doll's arms and a flashing traffic-light head passing for baby Jesus, with an illuminated star above it all, "The Nativity" is a suburban Christmas scenario goes gonzo, like something weird Uncle Rupert made in the basement.

Across the gallery, further observations on home life fester in Nancy's piece "Home Sweet Home," made in 2006, after Ed's death in 1992. Mixed metaphors and historical references enter the picture, with its melted stereo components and a burnt-out television housing a faux fireplace. The ironic anti-hominess also includes a cozy Persian rug below and, above, a "God Bless Our Home" black-light painting with a glum Jesus peering with disappointment over a faceless, possibly alien city.

As a fitting ancillary piece, Nancy's "Face to Face" (2007) is a lenticular photograph which shifts between the couple's respective faces as we shift our position. It's a two-as-one image, falling in with the timeless romantic ideal of marriage, but also a portrait of fierce individuality within the twosome package.

The exhibition finds these unique artists toying with and tweaking archetypes of hearth, home and wedded life, with irreverence and love. And, not incidentally, with a shared love of both elevating found materials and demanding that viewers "be there" for full impact. —Josef Woodard

'Scenes from a Marriage: Ed & Nancy Kienholz' shows through May 21 at S.B. Museum of Art (1130 State St.) See sbma.net.



Edward Kienholz, 'The Nativity,' 1961. Mixed media, 101 1/2 x 180 x 56 1/2 in. | Credit: Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA. Photograph by A. Shortall.

1 / 8

Mon Mar 06, 2023 | 21:10pm

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