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ART, CULTURE AND THE CITY

"What I'm doing with my paintings is finding and synthesizing contemporary abstraction in what I see in the street... I hope people understand that it's a reaction to the times that we are living in." — Awol Erizku





"In L.A., there is a feeling that you can pretty much make anything. There is a bit of a more relaxed approach. Things get done, and on a big scale."

—Gary Simmons

Simmons in his new Montecito Heights studio.

HOWLIN' AT THE MOONDOGGIE

For 60 years, Billy Al Bengston has maintained his larger than life rep as the bad boy of the L.A. art world, but this fall he's offering a glimpse into the softer, celestial side of his ever-soulful practice at Various Small Fires.

BY **MICHAEL SLENSKE** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **STEVE PERILLOUX**

AS HE WAS PREPARING FOR “VENICE IN Venice,” a satellite exhibition to the 2011 Venice Biennale featuring works by a broad group of art legends from Venice, California, Billy Al Bengston and I had a long-winding (and gut-busting) conversation. We talked about the glaring similarities (and differences) between the two cities’ canal cultures, old legends of California surf and European motorsport history and the man who inspired his slick contributions to the show, Italian MotoGP racer Valentino Rossi.

Invoking some of his earliest fetish finish tropes—and borrowing the iconic sergeant stripe chevrons he famously painted on masonite and aluminum sheets with auto lacquer in the '60s (and on countless other surfaces in the decades thereafter)—Bengston embellished a pair of traditionally black Italian gondolas in day-glo hues to mimic the leather suits worn by Rossi and American motorcycle racer Nicky Hayden. As he told me at the time, “By turning this slug in the water into something that’s not camouflaged... I’m hoping what I bring to this is a new sensation, not an advertisement for myself.”

So when the curator informed him that the Italian authorities wouldn’t allow the vessels into the canals as a result of their Ducati-invoking paint jobs, Bengston didn’t take it sitting down. “Put the fucker in the water and let them arrest you,” he shot back, adding, “If you’re going to act like a Venice, Californian that’s what you do. Then you won’t have to come back again and you’ll be happy. You’ll be permanently banned!”

The gondolas eventually made it into the canals and Bengston, ever the provocateur, goaded me at the conclusion of our interview to “Just write whatever you want, Michael.” Paying little mind to the comment, I blithely replied, “Sure, Billy, I plan on it.” Then he stopped me cold, “No, I mean make some shit up.”

Perhaps it was his prankster past resurfacing or just a cheeky challenge from a stubborn Kansan who was notoriously competitive

with his famous band of brothers—the renegade Cool School group of Angeleno artists including Larry Bell, John Altoon, Ken Price, Don Bachardy, Craig Kauffman, Ed Ruscha, Ed Moses, and Robert Irwin—that comprised the pioneering Ferus Gallery of Walter Hopps and Ed Keinholz in the 1950s and '60s. Whatever the case, this gauntlet of Bengston’s always stuck with me over the years. Probably because he meant it. And probably because far too many artists these days—typically the commercially successful, emerging-to-mid-career set—attempt to maintain some PR-managed image of themselves that doesn’t allow for any interpretation, introspection, or, god forbid, fun. Surely not the type of fun that might come in the form of a writer they just met weaving fictions about their life and art. But here’s the thing about Billy Al Bengston: fun is (and always has been) his *raison d’être*.

“I don’t think I made a living doing this until I was at least 50, and a living back then was making \$50 at a time,” explains Bengston, now 82, who was born in Dodge City, Kansas to a tailor father who owned a dry cleaning business and a musical mother, who once sang for the San Francisco Opera. Raised with a sartorialist savvy and Midwestern work ethic, after moving permanently to California Bengston worked as a beach attendant by day at Doheny State Beach in Dana Point California—where he met Price—and by night he studied (i.e. mixed tons of clay in bread mixers) with Peter Voulkos at Otis College of Art & Design. Sometimes he manned the high ladder on construction sites with Ed Kienholz, other times he taught part-time at art schools (stretching from UCLA to Norman, Oklahoma) to make ends meet. “I didn’t give a shit,” he recalls. “I was just having fun surfing.”

As you might imagine, the challenge in embellishing his outsize life—as Bengston well knows—is daunting in the sense that any myth or conspiracy you might think to add to his CV has already “been there, done that” by the artist—decades ago. When he wasn’t red lining his BSA motorcycles at the old Ascot Park speedway on