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LOS ANGELES CONFIDENTIAL

Art of the City: Billy AI Bengston and Other Bold Artists We Spotlight This Year

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This year, our exclusive and unique Art of the City portfolio presents a true celebration of the exceptional talent and diversity of our nation's artists. In what has become one of the most exciting events in our GreenGale Publishing calendar, the 2016 lineup represents the best, the boldest, and the buzziest from each of our 11 cities.



From Boston to New York City and the Hamptons, to Washington, DC, and Philadelphia, Chicago and Miami, Los Angeles, Aspen, Las Vegas, and Austin, we are showcasing this spectacular array of artists in each of our magazines, on our covers, and through a series of exclusive events around the country, designed to connect our readers and communities with America's art superstars.

In addition—and to underscore our commitment to art awareness in our cities—this year's featured artists have donated select works to charities to help provide much-needed support.

Twyla Tharp said, “Art is the only way to run away without leaving home.” Now, on your mark, get set... go!

LOS ANGELES

BILLY AL BENGSTON

AN LA LEGEND ARTS ON.

BY MICHAEL HERREN



In the pantheon of postwar California Cool artists—adventurers with names such as Ruscha, Price, Bell, Altoon, Irwin, and Graham—[Billy Al Bengston](#) is the trickster god.

He’s one thing; he’s its other—a beautiful talker with a wise mouth that compliments and cuts with equal charm, hilarity, and acuity, unafraid of a salty expletive or three. An entertaining introvert who’s naturally the life of any party (as well as a renowned party host) but who’s also a natural in his studio, alone, a party of one. A man’s man, periodic hell-raiser, and self-proclaimed pistonhead who’s surfed toes-on-the-nose and raced motorcycles for cash and glory—and who translated this love of speedy sleekness and slick sheen into motifs and finishes in his paintings. He’s also a dandy Beau Brummell who embraces pastels, animal prints, and silky neckerchiefs, and who paints silhouettes of flowers, iris after iris.

Born in Dodge City, Kansas, at the height of the Depression, Bengston migrated with his family to SoCal and then back to Kansas several times before settling in LA in the late 1940s, just in time for high school. “I went to the hoodlum school,” he says of Manual Arts High School in Downtown, “but they took me to heart.” Nicknamed “Rainbow” for his daring multi-hued clothing combos—“I’d do a complete wardrobe change at lunch”—Bengston endured the vocational gamut, drafting to body shop. But what revved his engine was ceramics. “The teacher was pretty good, although he’d penalize you if your pitcher dripped.”

Moving beyond the constraints of the functional, Bengston advanced to art, studying ceramics at the California College of the Arts and the Otis College of Art and Design, where he was taught, inspired, and challenged by the likes of Richard Diebenkorn, Saburo

Hasegawa, and Peter Voulkos. “Voulkos! Ultimately I figured out I couldn’t be as good [a ceramicist] as Voulkos,” he admits. “But I thought, I can paint better than Voulkos!” So Bengston switched media. He proceeded to have five solo shows at the famed Ferus Gallery on North La Cienega Boulevard between 1958 and 1963, and at age 82 he continues to strive to paint a pretty picture—noting, however, that his idea of a pretty picture might not be yours: “Painting, it’s like self-flagellation. You sort of like it, and hope other people like what you did while you were beating yourself.”

Bengston is donating a hand-colored monoprint, *Untitled* (1972), to be auctioned on July 16 at Summer on Seventh, the annual fundraiser-cum-arts happening (think: rooftop concert! art installations! food trucks! drinks!) benefiting Inner-City Arts (innercityarts.org), a nonprofit that provides underserved youth in LA with access to free arts education. Bengston’s work is featured in *“Human Interest: Portraits from the Whitney’s Collection,”* which runs April 27, 2016–February 12, 2017, at the [Whitney Museum of American Art](http://www.whitney.org), 99 Gansevoort St., New York, 212-570-3600.