

ARTFORUM

New York

Billy AI Bengston

ANDREW KREPS GALLERY
537/535 W 22nd Street
May 12–June 25

FRANKLIN PARRASCH GALLERY
53 E. 64th Street
May 21–June 25

Two concurrent exhibitions focus on the work of Billy AI Bengston in the decades following the 1966 close of Los Angeles’s epochal Ferus Gallery. Bengston’s idiosyncratic practice, influenced by the West Coast’s surf and high-gloss car cultures, cemented his reputation as a deeply original progenitor of LA *cool*. “Warm California,” on view at Andrew Kreps, serves up Bengston from 1972–76 via his “Draculas” series of works: screens, which feel like stained glass, painted on canvas and either stretched on frames or mounted between dowel rods, with muted depictions of irises (maybe the Dracula’s Kiss variety, similar to sculptor Ken Price’s thought that the flowers resembled the transformational moment between vampire and bat). *Punotaria Latifolia Draculas*, 1975, in dusty green, magenta, yellow, and purple, hangs from the ceiling, a dreamy work full of inviting, soft-focus, hallucinatory forms. “Plenty Aloha: Billy AI Bengston, Works 1982–1984,” at Franklin Parrasch, regales us with weird, jazzy ’80s-style cutouts in acidic colors and 3-D cut-paper noodles that bop around in deep-set frames. The artist’s visual language here is, tonally, quite different from what we experience at Kreps, with all the heart-shaped leaves, rainbow hues, and goofy-guy profiles.



View of “Billy AI Bengston: Warm California,” 2016.

In our age of seemingly irony-free normcore, Bengston’s works feel current, as they happily occupy the suburbany television aesthetics of *Gilligan’s Island*, or even *Hawaii Five-O*. One can’t help but think of Bengston’s iconic 1968 exhibition at LACMA in collaboration with Frank Gehry (who Bengston hired to produce the exhibition’s scenography), which positioned the artist’s graphic paintings near sofas, area rugs, and little side tables for lamps—gestures of decorative “whimsy” that subtly destabilize.

— Anne Prentnieks