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THE NEW YORKER

BILLY AL BENGSTON

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In the nineteen-sixties, Bengston was one of several California artists whose so-called finish fetish took the form of smooth abstractions made of acrylic, resin, and other high-gloss materials. But in the nine affable paintings and collages here, made in Hawaii, in the early eighties, abstract precision gives way to figurative enjambments of palm trees, anthuriums, airplanes, and loopily limned human figures. Cloudy backgrounds of mauve and indigo give the canvas works a dreamy air. The collages feature jolting watercolor splatters, marks of improvisation. Unconstrained by fashion or his own past, the Bengston seen here recalls another artist who pushed through dogma to invention: Sigmar Polke.