

## Billy Al Bengston: *Plenty Aloha*

May 20—June 25, 2016

Franklin Parrasch Gallery is pleased to announce *Plenty Aloha*, the gallery's third solo exhibition of works by Billy Al Bengston. This show comprises collage and painting made in the artist's Hawaiian studio between 1982 and 1984.

In 1979, one year after a two-month sojourn to Hawaii, Bengston established a studio in Honolulu and embarked upon a new chapter, working both in Venice Beach and at his new island home. The lush, tropical landscape and rich folkloric tradition Bengston encountered on Oahu provided near limitless inspiration which continues to inform his art making to this day. His boundless energy and ever present sense of humor are clearly apparent in these early Hawaiian works.

While Bengston is most well known for the works which incorporate his signature dracula and chevron icons, this series employs a fresh crop of imagery inspired in great part by the tropes encountered in Hawaiian *Ka 'ao*: fanciful stories meant to entertain. Watercolor was (and still is) Bengston's favored medium while working in Honolulu and he quickly began pushing past the status quo of his relatively conservative watercolors from the mid- and late-1970s by developing new manners of working with the material, which resulted in increasingly complex collages. Small, layered sawtooth—or “earthquake”—edged watercolor collages featuring depictions of inverted draculas and local flora were common in 1981, but by 1982 Bengston's works on paper had evolved to vibrant and outrageously sculptural depictions of various characters: most commonly kahunas in conversation, flying fish and planes, thin running men, sailboats, moons, and women with floppy, round-blown bangs. Within a year, this imagery made its way to Bengston's works on canvas as well. In her essay for Bengston's 1988 career survey at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, Karen Tsujimoto writes:

“Bengston's turn to figurative imagery reflects his belief that change is crucial to any artist's inquiry; and the change that occurs here is marked.... Whereas the earlier motifs of the sergeant stripes and draculas had no symbolic meaning, the viewer is now meant to read metaphor and narrative into Bengston's work. The artist's freewheeling and experimental attitude about making art and his exploitation of vernacular subject matter is not unique among contemporary artists. H.C. Westermann and John Altoon, two figures Bengston admires, similarly based their work on storytelling. But Bengston's audacious wit, combined with his brilliant sense of color and line, result in works that are uniquely his own.”

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Billy Al Bengston's work resides in the permanent collections of numerous public institutions in the United States and abroad, including the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York, NY), the Museum of Modern Art (New York, NY), the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York, NY), The Corcoran Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.), the Philadelphia Museum of Art (Philadelphia, PA), Yale University Art Museum (New Haven, CT), The Art Institute of Chicago (Chicago, IL), the Contemporary Art Museum (Houston, TX), the Los Angeles Country Museum of Art (Los Angeles, CA), and Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris, France). Bengston was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Grant in 1967, a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship in 1975, and was a Fellow at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in 1968, 1982, and 1987.

Plenty Aloha will be on view at Franklin Parrasch Gallery, 53 East 64 Street from May 21—June 25 with an opening reception from 6—8p on May 21. For images, biography, and further information, please contact Katharine Overgaard at [info@franklinparrasch.com](mailto:info@franklinparrasch.com) or at 212-246-5360 during business hours (Tues-Sat, 10a-6p).

On view at Andrew Kreps Gallery (537-535 West 22 Street) is *Warm California*, a companion exhibition of works by Bengston dating from the 1970s.