

Sandow Birk

HUFFPOST

Santa Monica Auctions: Remember the Time...

By Shana Nys Dambrot
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SF

248 Utah Street
SF, CA 94103
+ 415 399 1439

NY

313 W 14th Street 2F
New York, NY
By appointment only

WEB

www.cclarkgallery.com



The next Santa Monica Auctions is around the corner, November 18 - 19 (6pm Saturday and 1pm Sunday), at Robert Berman Gallery in Bergamot Station. This time around, amid the expected salon of true museum pieces, surprises, quirky gems, and holy-grail ephemera, instead of fretting about the uncertain future of the franchise, the holdings celebrate a more recent kind of art history, with a rather sweeping mini-survey of the last two decades in LA. With the rise of street and lowbrow movements, it has been a period given over to storytelling, edgy narrative, and the elevated urban postures of the new contemporary styles that LA has given the world. There is a proliferation of early major works by luminaries of the Lowbrow and Pop Surrealism canon, with a lot of humor and experiment in both material and stylistic idioms from tattoo flash to neon and even black velvet.

Important and monumental drawings by Laurie Lipton, an absolutely joyful sculpture by Ron English, several key paintings from the first days of Faile, a charming work by real-life back-in-the-day Ed Hardy, a raw and emotional early painting by Camille Rose Garcia, a four-panel work by

the Clayton Brothers, and a classic urban surf genre painting by Sandow Birk. All of these pieces are a treat to encounter again, and in realizing how many years have gone by since that universe of style stormed the art-world castle, to note how fresh and solid these pieces still are — and how far these artists have come in developing their own individual voices and shaping the voice of their whole generation.

A neon-lit and gold-encrusted, lavishly heroic car painting by Frank Romero, an emblematic neon work by MONA founder Lili Lakich, an operatic, amoebic velvet and fabric collage mixed media painting by Peter Alexander, and a radically hot pink glowing wall-size sculptural megastar work by Arman 1970. It's a total joy to be reminded that these masters of their modern mediums also had a zanier side, as each infuses the splendor of their own genre — be it Chicanismo, post-Pop, or Light & Space — with an obvious willingness to experiment with the properties of materials, with humor and zeal while also being attentive to their core formal interests of surface, texture, illumination, and movement.

But just in case we risk forgetting, the old guard demands some respect. As you scan the room you'll see them — Warhol, Almaraz, Valadez, Longo, Held — but there's one Ed Kienholz in particular that has one of the best origin stories around. The full detailed account is available on the site, and Alex at the gallery knows all the details, but the nutshell version is this: A couple commissioned a work from Kienholz. The artist agreed but he had strict conditions and specific instructions. He made the work and delivered it covered in a stiff tarp shell, under which it was to remain covered for a period of ten years, and it was to be paid in installments, each of which represented a chance for the deal to be revoked should they be discovered peeking. After ten years, they threw a grand unveiling party — and found a rather gruesome, if evocative, twist on a hunting trophy. Like other work of the Kienholz pair, a performative element in which the privileged position of the viewer is deconstructed with a dark wit that issues a challenge — in this case perhaps a dare to laugh at mortality. Somehow perfect.