

VENUS

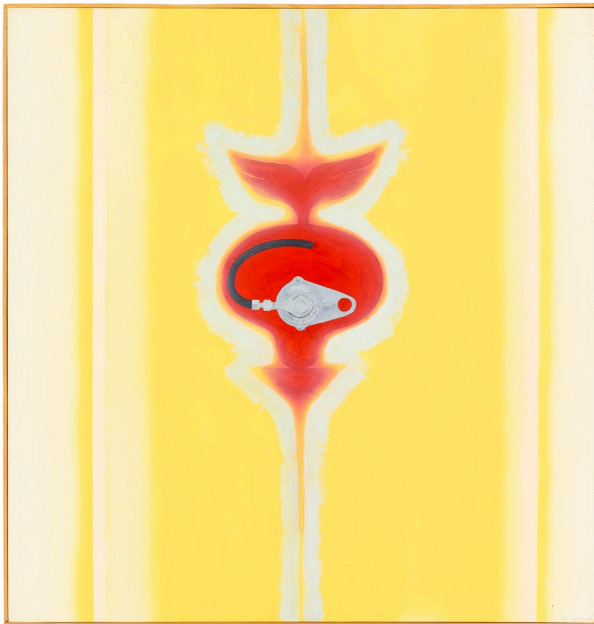
MANHATTAN LOS ANGELES

Gopnik, Blake, "Billy Al Bengston: Riding His Hog to the Brink of Pop Art," *ArtNet News*, October 4, 2016

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Billy Al Bengston: Riding His Hog to the Brink of Pop Art

THE DAILY PIC: At Venus Over Manhattan, Billy Al Bengston's 1961 "motorcycle" paintings, from L.A., rival New York's Pop Art.



I don't think I'm the only one who associates the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles most closely with a single exhibition it hosted in July of 1962: That was when it gave Andy Warhol his first-ever solo show of Pop Art, presenting all 32 of his Campbell's soup paintings.

An exhibition that opened Friday at Venus Over Manhattan in New York makes clear that Ferus deserves credit for more than bringing Warhol to the world. The year before, as the Venus project makes clear, Ferus was already giving a show to the proto-Pop, pre-conceptual paintings of Billy Al Bengston. For that exhibition, now almost completely reprised at Venus, Bengston made paintings based on

various machine parts from the B.S.A motorcycle he'd been racing up until then, and which is on display as a holy relic at Venus. (Weirdly, they wouldn't let me fire it up.) Bengston's bike paintings count as a fully Pop gesture, in my humble opinion, that predates Warhol and much of his New York crowd. But the gesture also seems conceptual to me, in a late-'60s mode, because of how Bengston cedes control of his subject to decisions the bike's engineers made about which parts to use to make it run. (Today's Pic looks backwards as well, maybe with its tongue in its cheek, to the transcendent "zip" paintings of Barnett Newman.)

One downside to Bengston's "hog" show, in 1961 and also as reprised now in New York: It can seem to reflect, and celebrate, the macho, male-centered world of L.A. art at the time. But there's a chance that it's actually more gender-fluid than that. For one thing, motorcycle culture has always had a campy side that undermines its own machismo. As Warhol realized, Brando in *The Wild One* can count as a gay icon. For another: The little red wing on the B.S.A. logo has, shall we say, a touch of camp flutter about it. It's not far at all from the Mobil Gas "Pegasus" sign that hung, and still hangs, on the wall of Serendipity café, the ultimate hangout for Warhol's camp crowd in 1950s New York. It's said that Warhol hung a similar Mobil sign on the wall of his own Murray Hill flat, and he made art about it 30 years later. I can't confirm that he knew of Bengston's Ferus show, but I think he'd have found plenty in it to like.