

HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

Rediscovering Leslie Kerr's Pop Abstraction

Kerr was an abstract artist with a vulgar sense of humor.



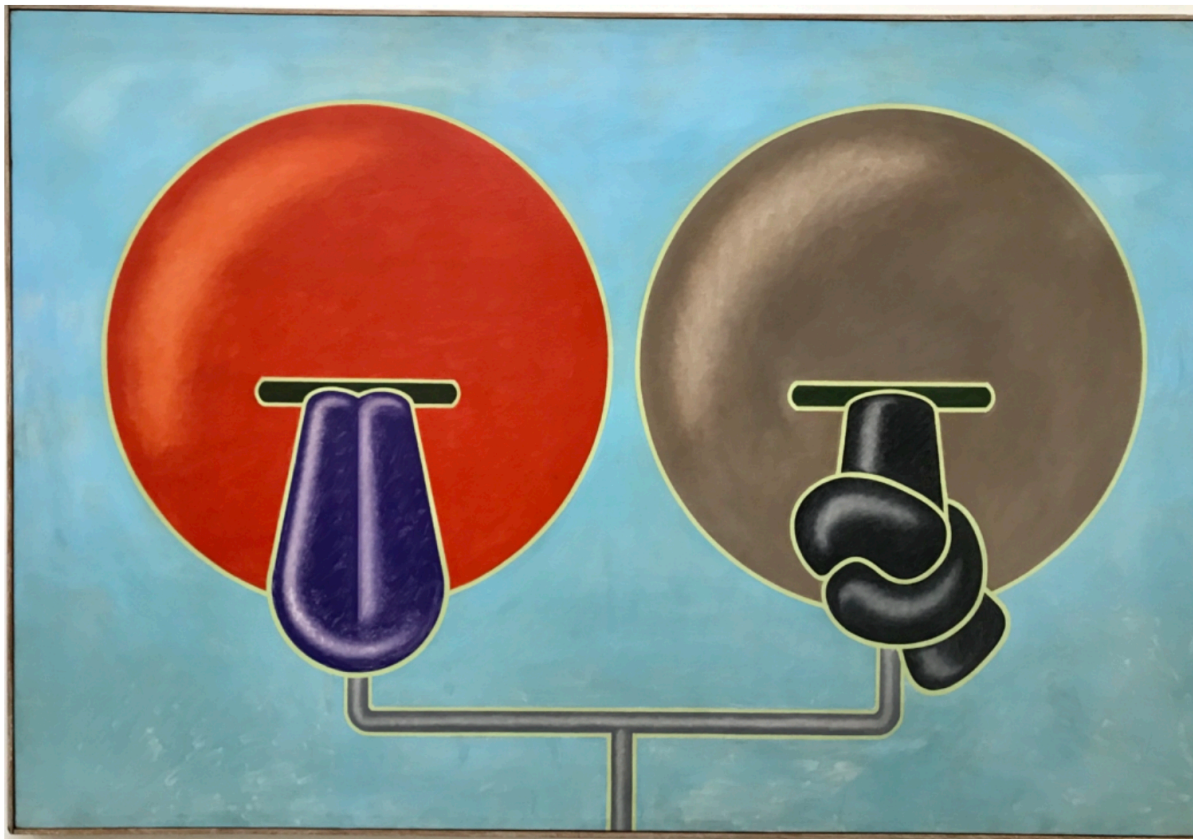
John Yau August 15, 2020



Leslie Kerr, "Raspberry" (1964) (all images courtesy the Landing Gallery)

LOS ANGELES — Even among aficionados of the 1950s and '60s West Coast art scene and the artists who exhibited at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles and the Dilexi, Batman, and Ubu Galleries in San Francisco, Leslie Kerr (1934-1992) is not well recognized. I don't remember Ed Moses — whose exhibition, *A Retrospective of Paintings and Drawings, 1951-1996*, I organized for the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1996 — ever mentioning Kerr, and we certainly had many conversations about Moses's early years in Los Angeles and San Francisco, when he showed at Ferus and Dilexi. Nor do I remember Kerr being mentioned by Bruce Conner, whom I met when I lived in Berkeley, California, between 1995 and '96, and with whom I had many conversations about his life in San Francisco.

As I have often learned about a neglected, overlooked, or forgotten artist from other artists, I ought to mention why I think Kerr slipped under my radar. As small as the art world was during those years, it seems he was not in the different circles I was familiar with. For this reason, I was doubly surprised to learn that he lived in Los Angeles and had a show at the Ferus Gallery in 1958, and that he moved to San Francisco in 1960 and lived at 2322 Fillmore Street, which the poet Joanna McClure dubbed "Painterland." Along with Joanna and her husband, Michael McClure, other residents of that famed building included Wally Hedrick and Jay DeFeo, who, in 1958, began working on her monumental painting, "The Rose." The building also housed Moses, Sonia Gechtoff, Joan Brown, and James Newman, who ran the Dilexi Gallery.



Leslie Kerr, "Twins" (1964)

During the 1960s, Kerr had five solo shows at the Dilexi, which closed in 1969. In 1964, he moved to New York, where he showed at Odyssea Gallery, which I first went to in the mid-1970s, shortly after I moved to New York, and saw the work of Jess and Irving Petlin. By then, it seems that Kerr, who returned to California in 1969, had fallen into obscurity. This is all a prelude to my excitement when I learned about Kerr and saw images of works in the exhibition *Leslie Kerr in the Sixties* at the Landing (July 22–August 29, 2020) in Los Angeles.

There are nine paintings in the exhibition, eight done between 1963 and '66, with "Deluxe" dated "late 1960s." Kerr was an abstract artist working under the influence of Pop Art. He outlined tubular, volumetric forms against a solid or patterned ground. He outlined tubular, volumetric forms against a solid or patterned ground.



Leslie Kerr, "Lover #2" (1964)

By bending, twisting, and swelling the forms, he animated their presence. The swelling form that appears in "Twins" (oil on canvas, 48 by 72 inches, c. 1964) and "Raspberry" (oil on canvas, 68 by 50 inches, 1964) resembles a cartoony, grape-colored tongue extending from an outlined slot.

Bending and folding his tubular forms seems to cause the closed end to swell, through which Kerr evokes a comic tension between flow and freeze, movement and blockage,

and all the ways that stress might be read in bodily terms. In “*Lover #2*” (oil on canvas, 56 x 50 inches, 1964), the tube starts on the painting’s bottom right edge, rising and descending vertically, like a radiator, until it abruptly crosses diagonally back over itself. Kerr accentuates this by first edging the form in blue, turning the final descending band purple in the bottom half, and then red as it rises and swells, culminating in a swollen, baseball bat-like shape.

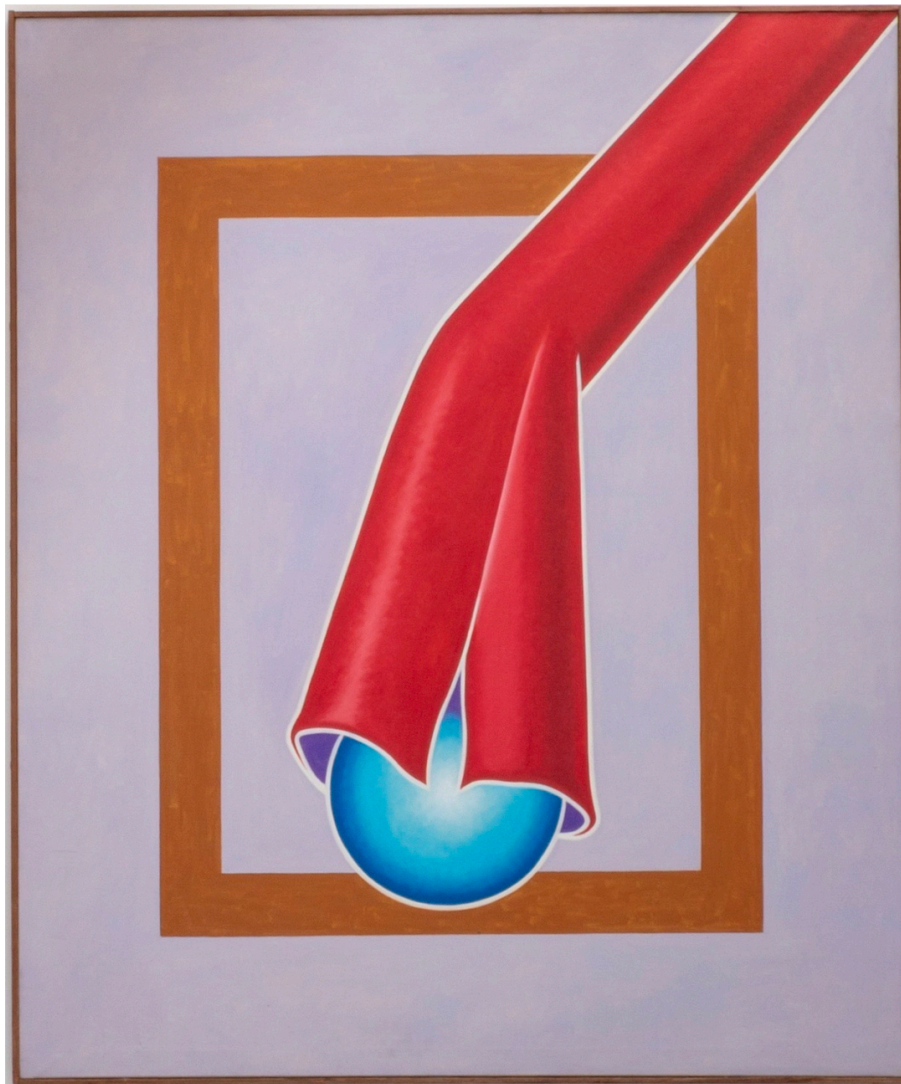
Kerr was an abstract artist with a vulgar sense of humor, which connects him to Nicholas Krushenick, another outlier who gained attention in the 1960s, stepped back from the New York scene in the mid-’70s, and was soon largely forgotten by the art world — though not by artists — until the beginning of this century. Working abstractly, neither Kerr nor Krushenick bought into the commonplace belief that painting had to reiterate its two-dimensionality while banishing illusion.



Leslie Kerr, “Ouch” (1964)

Although they rejected the gestural and painterly, and created work that was tight and cool and of their times, both Kerr and Krushenick did something that their peers — those who were aligned with abstraction or Pop Art — eschewed. They found a way to transform the humor, vulgarity, and outlandishness characteristic of Willem de Kooning’s “Women” paintings into something all their own. That is no small achievement.

Whereas de Kooning visited his vulgarity on the female body, the same cannot be said of Kerr, whose tubular forms come across as distinctly masculine. He seemed to have recognized that the world was changing. A sense of humor, pain, and frustration overlap in a number of this exhibition’s paintings. They resist any literal reading and, in that regard, remain mysterious and eloquent in their muteness. What he did in less than a decade — at least as evidenced by this exhibition — is narrow, fresh, and singular. We may still learn that he went on to make work in the remaining years of his life that we ought to consider. Kerr deserves a second, longer look.



Leslie Kerr, "Lover" (1963)