

(AN APPROPRIATE DISTANCE) FROM THE MAYOR'S DOORSTEP

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“THE DE LUXE SHOW” AT KARMA

by Piri Halasz



“The De Luxe Show” at Karma, installation shot. Far right: picture by Robert Gordon; far left: picture by Peter Bradley. Center: sculpture by Anthony Caro (foreground), (behind it, sculpture by James Wolfe); Back wall in center: picture by Al Loving. Courtesy Karma, New York

Way back in 1971, 31-year-old Peter Bradley curated “The De Luxe Show.” Held in a disused movie house in Houston’s historically African-American Fifth Ward, it was one of the first, maybe even the first of the major racially-integrated exhibitions in the U.S. Now two galleries are honoring its 50th anniversary with exhibitions. The Los Angeles show is at Parker, 2441 Glendower Avenue (through September 18). The New York show is at Karma, 188 East Second Street (through September 25). I’ve only seen the Karma exhibition, but believe me folks, it’s a wow.

The thing is, in 1971 Bradley was both a painter and a dealer. By day, in his capacity as associate director of Perls on Madison Avenue, he wore handmade suits, drove expensive cars, and sold blue chip paintings to celebrities.

But by night, he painted – abstract pictures, sometimes using a spray technique that may have a lot in common with Jules Olitski’s spray technique but produces highly individual pictures that look completely different from Olitski’s sprays.

And he managed to keep in touch not only with a lot of other artists of color who made abstractions but also with the mostly-Caucasian so-called “color-field” artists and the critic most often associated with them: Clement Greenberg.

By the early 1970s, the civil rights movement of the ‘60s was leading to more opportunities for African-American artists – but mostly when their work was figurative and thus had political implications.

Bradley felt it was important to have abstract work by African-American artists receive comparable recognition.

As he saw it, abstraction was the forefront of artistic development, and African American abstract artists should be getting their day in the sun just like the figurative ones.

So when John de Menil, the Texas-based oil-services mogul, philanthropist and art patron suggested to Bradley this multicultural abstract show, and offered to underwrite it (with his wife, Dominique) Bradley jumped at the idea.

Greenberg jumped at it, too. He seems to have been invited to the opening, but he arrived a few days early -- and helped hang the show.

Still, the artists in "The De Luxe Show" -- both artists of color and color-field artists -- were -- and are -- the real attraction. In both categories, the paintings and sculpture on view are well worth the generous space they're given.

Only one work at Karma actually appeared in the 1971 show, "The Bull" (1970), by Anthony Caro. But virtually all the rest are from the period, vintage work created in the late 1960s or early 70s.

Crammed into two sizeable gallery spaces, "The De Luxe Show" at Karma includes both well-known artists and less well-known ones.

In the back gallery, for example, large and excellent acrylics on canvas by Jules Olitski ("Before Loosha," 1970) and Kenneth Noland ("Sky Island," 1969) share wall space with "Paris" (1971), a smaller but equally lovely dry pigment on paper by Ed Clark.

A small but exquisite welded stainless steel on a pedestal by Richard Hunt is titled "Model for "Of the River Mounds and Bridges" in East Saint Louis" (2010).

Sharing Hunt's location in the center of this gallery is "LARSA" (1978), a larger Corten steel floor piece by Michael Steiner, but I found particularly provocative two similarly-sized and similarly-composed paintings hung catty-corner to each other.

One was Dan Christensen's acrylic "South Delray Way" (1970) and the other was an untitled oil painting by Daniel LaRue Johnson, painted in 1971.

Both paintings are very handsome; both are about five feet high and very brightly hued, with solid vertical and horizontal bands of color. Although I've known and admired Christensen's work since I featured it in Time in 1969, Johnson's name was new to me.

Turns out he was born in Los Angeles in 1938, died in New York in 2017 and although talented as a painter, was better known as a sculptor. His 50-foot minimalist steel monument to Ralph J. Bunche, America's first black Nobel Peace Prize laureate, was dedicated in 1980 in the small park across from the United Nations in New York known as Ralph Bunche Park.

Johnson was married to Virginia Jaramillo, the only woman and only artist of Latin American descent in this show. Her 2018 dark blue minimalist acrylic is in the front gallery space of the Karma show, right at its entrance. It is titled "Site: No.12 38.4824° N., 22.5010° E."

Sam Gilliam is also here, and represented by "Drape" (1970). This is one of his trademark draped paintings, and a big, commanding one, too. He is famous for such paintings (though as I've said elsewhere, I prefer his canvases on stretchers).

I wish I could be more enthusiastic about "The Plains # 2", the Darby Bannard, too. To be sure, it was done in 1970, and from a historical point of view is appropriate for the show. But in 1970, Bannard was evolving away from hard-edge minimalism and into painterly modernism. So what we have is a very pale and delicate transitional piece.

The same applies to "Henry -- Michael," the 1971 Larry Poons here, and for much the same reasons -- though I responded more strongly to its clouds of pink and cream.

What I found truly overwhelming was the three largest paintings in this space, surround-

ing and playing off the Caro "Bull." (And what a tough, muscular piece it is, industrial steel wrought into high art!)

To its right (as one faces toward the back of the gallery) is a most unusual untitled abstraction from 1966 by Robert Gordon. It is made of horizontal bands of fabric. The ones I noticed, as being closer to eyelevel, had patterns of small images, flowers or such, but closest of all was a band with a larger and most unusual pattern, of little boys riding creatures that are either large fish or small dinosaurs.

Gordon is the other artist in this show who was new to me. He seems to have been at least scheduled for a show at Alden Projects in March 2020, just as the pandemic closed down the art world.

But, according to Todd Alden's statement posted online, apparently in conjunction with this show, "Robert Gordon eludes us: no one knows who he is, and no one knows if he's dead or alive."

Alden adds, "From around 1966 to 1975, Gordon moved in elite circles of advanced contemporary art, exhibiting widely at top galleries and museums." Then somehow he disappeared.

The back wall of this front gallery space at Karma is clearly visible over "Bull" (though the tip of an untitled steel floor piece by James Wolfe from 1971, painted a light gray, is also barely visible behind & over the top of "Bull.")

On this back wall hangs "Bowery Morning" (1971), a huge and most impressive shaped canvas by Al Loving. Composed of those honeycomb forms that he was so fond of employing, in this case the composition looks more like a series of square open boxes.

The colors are mostly lighter blues and black and/or navy blues but one red box highlights them all, lending extraordinary light to the whole ensemble.

Catty-corner from the Loving, and directly across from the Gordon, is the largest and most ambitious Peter Bradley that I've seen yet.

"Circle of Fifths," an acrylic on canvas done in 1973, employs the subdued palette so widely employed by color-field painters in the 1970s and 1980s, with a field of greens and blacks. Yet it too has its highlight, a marvelous spray of mauve across its middle that startles yet charms the viewer.

What a show! When are we going to see so many stars in the same space again?