

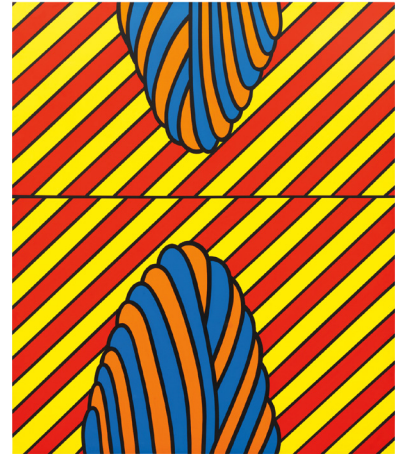
Nicholas Krushenick

GARY SNYDER GALLERY

How to explain the fact that Nicholas Krushenick's art has flown below the radar for so long, despite recurrent attempts to revive interest his work, and despite the fact that it not only is in itself excellent but self-evidently fills a niche that needs to be filled—namely that of the missing link between hard-edge abstraction and Pop art? Alas, he is that cursed thing, an artist's artist. I was reminded of this again last year when I saw a piece of his in "The Jewel Thief" (2010), a remarkable exhibition curated by Jessica Stockholder (with Ian Berry) at the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, NY—what a surprise to see Krushenick's work there, and then a moment later it wasn't surprising: Of course an eye as sharp and unconventional as Stockholder's would "get" him. So do artists such as Tom Burckhardt, Kathy Butterly, Mary Heilmann, Thomas Nozkowski, and David Reed, all of whom have contributed brief statements—love letters, really—to the catalogue for this eye-opening mini-retrospective, whose fifteen paintings and two collages trace the artist's development from 1961 through 1998, the year before his death. The catalogue also includes a thorough essay by John Yau and lengthy excerpts from a 1968 interview for the Archives of American Art.

To a great extent, the look of Krushenick's paintings remained remarkably consistent across the thirty-seven-year span covered by this selection: a limited palette of groovily bright and punchy colors; a combination of large areas of uninflected color with (often stripe-like) patterning; blunt but dynamic compositions; forms outlined, cartoonlike, in black, ostensibly to prevent optical mixing of hues. "When you put blue and yellow next to each other you obviously get a green haze. But the moment you drop a black line in it sort of kicks that whole idea out," Krushenick once explained, but this is also what gives the paintings much of their graphic, posterlike feeling. Yet the subtler changes over the years are telling. The early works, more roughly painted, show clear signs of the revisions that went into their making; there is a bigger dose of Abstract Expressionist spontaneity and improvisation in these works than one would have guessed. Also in this period, Krushenick took to working out his compositions on paper—in particular, through the remarkable collages that clearly show his debt to Matisse's late cut-paper works—before starting on canvas. Beginning in the late 1960s, the partial or complete framelike marking-off of the painting's edge became a recurrent though not invariable feature; compositions became more self-enclosed. And the black outlines grow progressively finer through the years. In sum, Krushenick pursued a consistent aesthetic toward ever greater degrees of decisiveness and refinement.

But how to characterize that aesthetic? One could do worse than Nozkowski's description: "poised between a joke and a scare." There is a strange elision between clarity and confusion, order and uproar in these paintings. The energy they exude is extraordinarily exhilarating, but then you can find yourself uncomfortably lost in the painting as in a vortex—maybe something like the vortex-eye that Saul Bass devised for the title sequence of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, that paean to the ecstasy and torment of scopophilia, or the mazelike lines of faceless modernist architecture Bass came up with for the title sequence for *North by Northwest*. Eschewing the temporal dimension of film, Krushenick consistently captures something of that kinetic tension in the singular image of painting, so that it hits you before you see it coming; the movement is in your brain, not on a screen.



Nicholas Krushenick, *Son of King Kong*, 1966, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 72".