

Overlooked pioneer gets his due at last: Work of Nicholas Krushenick surveyed

by Amy Griffin March 11, 2015



Eyeliner (1969), acrylic on canvas, 60 x 52 1/4 inches

There are well-known Pop artists — Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein come to mind — and well-known abstract expressionists — Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko to name a couple. But how many Pop abstraction artists can you name? Nicholas Krushenick combined elements of Pop and abstraction to create his own singular style, but wasn't fully recognized for his influence during his lifetime. With "Nicholas Krushenick: Electric Soup," the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery give the artist his due with a major survey of his work from the 1950s through the 1990s.

It wasn't as if artistic success eluded Krushenick. Indeed, he had plenty of solo exhibitions through the 1960s and '70s, including a retrospective at the Walker Art Center in Minnesota, when he was just 39. Yet as the years passed, recognition began to elude him and he died in 1999. Interest in his work was revived with solo exhibitions in New York in 2007 and again in 2011. He's been called the "father of Pop abstraction," and artists including Kathy Butterly and Thomas Nozkowski have cited his influence. In reviews of the shows, critics called for a museum retrospective. The Tang is the first museum since to rise to that challenge.

Featuring 20 of his boldly colored paintings, the Tang show also includes collages, drawings and prints, some very rarely seen. Though Pop and abstract expressionism are the two genres that come to mind first, Krushenick was also informed by the work of minimalists, Op artists and color field painters. These experiments and influences made it difficult to pigeonhole.

His paintings, with bright colors outlined by thick black lines, are charged with energy. They vibrate and almost seem ready to pop off the walls. The op art influence is particularly seen in "Five Silver Dogs," 1969, which appears to move so much some of the lines seem to blur.

"Son of King Kong," 1966, also plays tricks on your eyes. A black horizontal line splits through yellow and red vertical lines just above the halfway mark. A repeated blue and orange form, and the disjointed stripes give the effect of a mirror image that's been jarred into two distinct canvases. It's hung in a gallery with other shaped canvases, so it seems to be two separate pieces, though it's all contained on one canvas.

Rope-like forms and warp-and-weft structures repeat through many of the works. The colors combined with the way these biomorphic forms tend to bulge in non-uniform ways make the paintings seem to breathe.

Although the work is starkly graphic in photographs, in person more evidence of the artist's hand is visible. Brushstrokes and underpainting are visible and give the paintings texture. With "Quick Red Fox," it almost looks like a completely different painting is underneath the surface that we see.

In the Winter Gallery are sketches and collages that appear to be studies for the larger works. With painted forms cut out and pasted together, you can trace the artist's process. Some much earlier work from the '50s, has him experimenting much more with abstract expressionism in muted colors, before he'd fully developed his graphic style.

Whereas Warhol made representational works that dealt with consumerism or the cult of celebrity, Krushenick stayed away from commentary. His abstract paintings rejected many conventions of his day to employ graphic elements from comics but without a narrative, or realism, merging genres into his own distinctive style. The results are both engaging and energizing.