



*Billy Al Bengston: Dentos 1965 - 1970 at Parrasch Heijnen Gallery*



*Billy Al Bengston, Dentos, installation view courtesy of Parrasch Heijnen Gallery*

Billy Al Bengston: Dentos 1965 - 1970

[Parrasch Heijnen Gallery](#), Los Angeles

September 23 - November 4, 2017

By **SHANA NYS DAMBROT**, SEPT. 2017

Billy Al Bengston is kind of a badass. Despite the sweetness and sunkissed beauty of his saturated palettes, expressive abstractions and popular symbolism, much of his inspiration over the years has come from edgier and more adventurous places -- smoke-filled clay studios, motorcycle races, mechanics' repair shops, lost summers trekking penniless through Europe, relying on the kindness of strangers, living by his wits, rule-breaking, night surfing. He was after all, born in Dodge City.

In Los Angeles where he has lived and worked for basically all of his career, people are more familiar with the "Dentos" series than other audiences, and they are frequently cited as favorites. That said, it's been since about 1970 that a significant selection of them has been exhibited in LA, which is a shame, because they are awesome. Although by the time he started making them in the mid-1960's Bengston had already moved to embrace painting rather than the ceramics that had captured his earlier attention. The salient influence of his friends and studio-mates Peter Voulkos and Ken Price would nevertheless endure throughout his career, especially in his interests in variegated surface textures and translucent, layered pigmentation.



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But as of 1965, Bengston was still a professional motorcycle racer, and his inspiration to create paintings using distressed sheet steel and automotive enamel paint was a literal, direct translation of the visual excitement he felt interacting with those materials. Wielding an array of tools, he bent, dented, poked, punctured, creased, and rippled his metal; sprayed, splattered, stenciled, and poured his enamels, and sealed his surfaces with another medium inclusive of the counterculture -- the polyester resin used on surfboards.

Modernism was concerned with the language of cultural shorthand and the narrative significance of chosen materials. West Coast artists in particular were enamored of phenomenological expressions of light and

movement. In the “Dentos” Bengston merged both modes of inquiry into single works of immense visual appeal and individual character. The range of personality he was able to achieve with a small kit of materials is itself a wonder -- from exuberant Abstract Expressionism, to meditative and refined color fields, auric central-image pictorialism, mystical mandala-like patterning, cosmic and geological metonymical naturalism, bright and splashy artificial tangy tartness, and earthy radiance. Across the eclectic aesthetic languages, viewing the collection of about 20 “Dentos” all together deeply reveals the truly materialist inspiration for the series, which Bengston pursued for about five years.



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*Billy Al Bengston, Fighting Kentuckian, 1968, lacquer and polyester resin on aluminum, 28 x 27 inches, courtesy of Parrasch Heijnen Gallery*

Apparently, he had first called the series “Canto Indentos,” which is roughly meaning dented songs, or perhaps it’s more like damaged poetry, and certainly there are shades of Dante in that title, which echo in the overall motif of layering and nesting conceptual and compositional structures -- and in the idea of undertaking dangerous adventures in pursuit of a beautiful woman and a deeper knowledge of life. Both of which resonate with Bengston on a personal level as well as a creative one. Aside from the material inventiveness and the engaging spectacle of their reflective, energetic physique, the most surprising thing about the

“Dentos” is their freshness. These paintings demonstrate a vivacity that is so contagious, one almost forgets they were made over 40 years ago in the context of West Coast late Modernism; as they could convincingly be hot off the block, examples of repurposed, post-industrial upcycling and the infusion of poetry into a conversation about masculine energy in abstraction. **WM**

[parrasch-heijnen.com](http://parrasch-heijnen.com)



*Billy Al Bengston, Girls Demand Excitement, 1970, lacquer and polyester resin on aluminum, 23x22 inches, photo by Shana Nys Dambrot*

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1326 s. boyle avenue  
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www.parraschheijnen.com  
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*Billy Al Bengston, JWS Series, 1968, lacquer and polyester resin on aluminum, 12 x 11 inches, courtesy of Parrasch Heijnen Gallery*

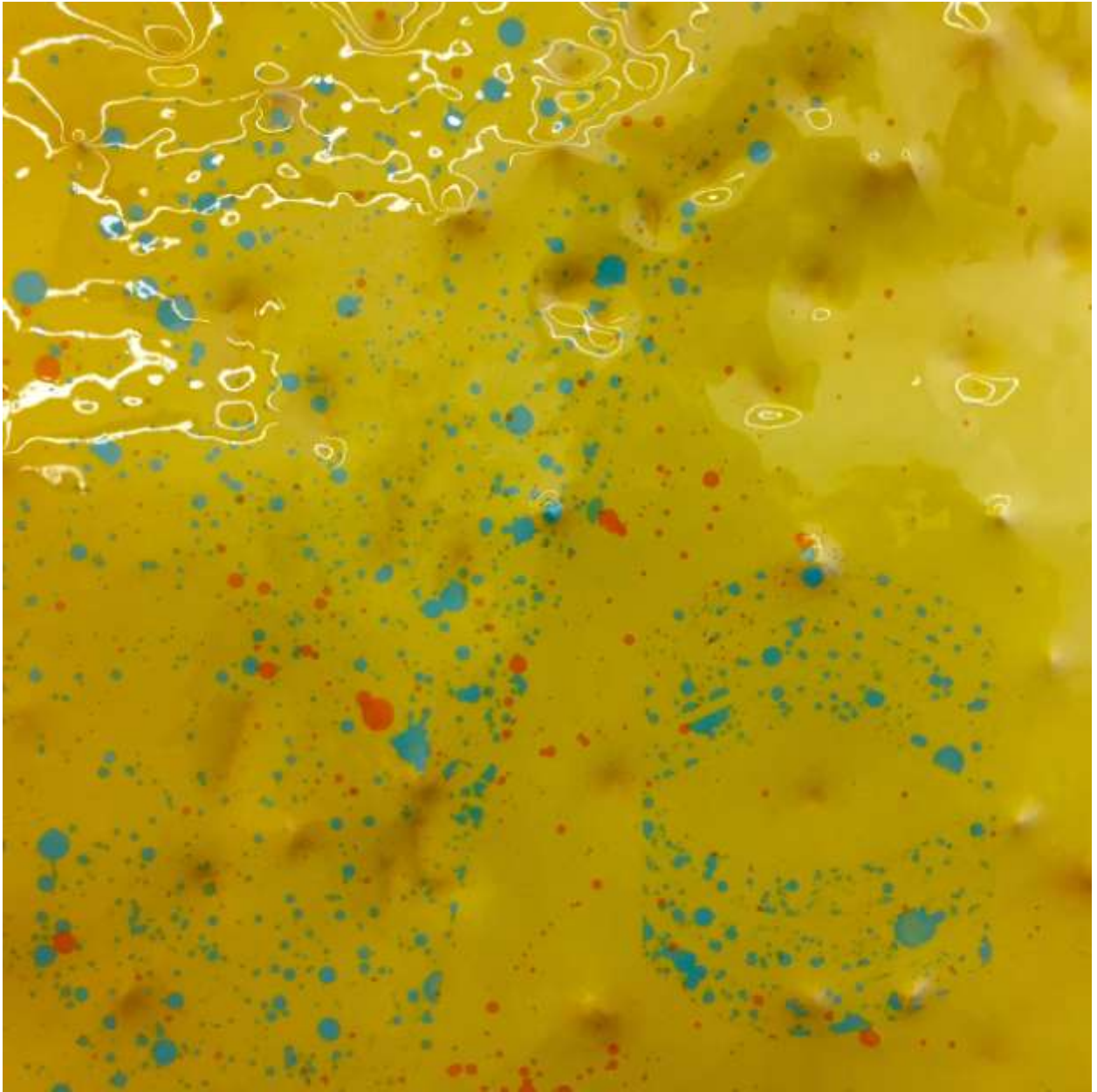




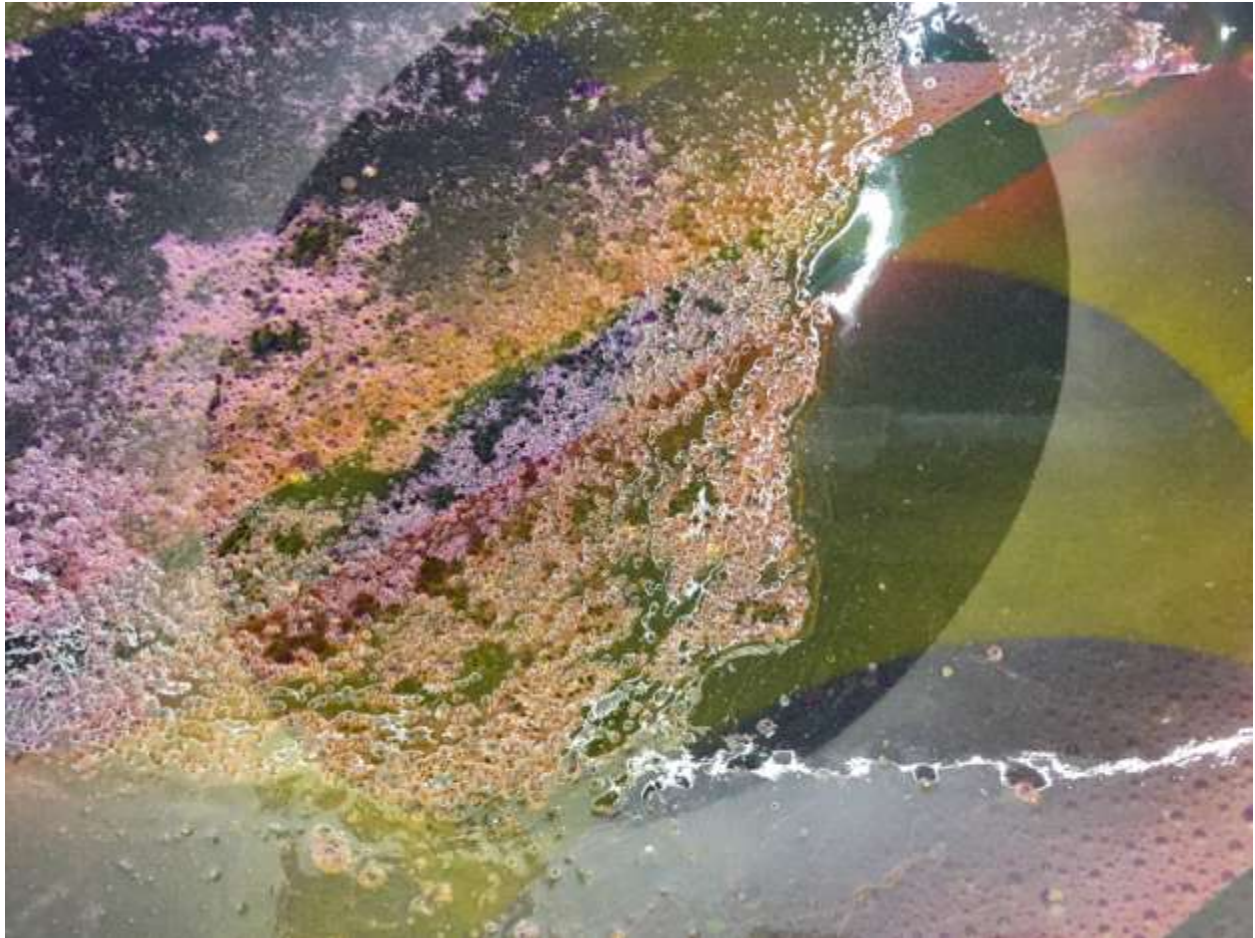
*Billy Al Bengston, Lady for a Night, 1970, lacquer and polyester resin on aluminum, 36 x 34 inches, photo by Shana Nys Dambrot*



*Billy Al Bengston, Lawless Nineties, 1970, lacquer and polyester resin on aluminum, 34x36 inches, photo by Shana Nys Dambrot*



*Billy Al Bengston, Life of Jimmy Dolan, 1970, lacquer and polyester resin on aluminum,  
21x20, inches photo by Shana Nys Dambrot*



*Billy Al Bengston, Seven Sinners, 1969, lacquer and polyester resin on aluminum, 36 x 34 inches, photo by Shana Nys Dambrot*

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*Billy Al Bengston, Seven Sinners, 1969, lacquer and polyester resin on aluminum, 36x34 inches, courtesy of Parrasch Heijnen Gallery*



*Billy Al Bengston, Three Faces West, 1968, lacquer and polyester resin on aluminum, 87x77 inches, photo by Shana Nys Dambrot*

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*Billy Al Bengston, Untitled, 1967, lacquer and polyester resin on aluminum, 10 x 10 inches,  
photo by Shana Nys Dambrot*





*Billy Al Bengston, Wake of the Red Witch, 1968, lacquer and polyester resin on aluminum,  
34 x 33 inches, photo by Shana Nys Dambrot*



*Billy Al Bengston, Wake of the Red Witch, 1968, lacquer and polyester resin on aluminum,  
34 x 33 inches, photo by Shana Nys Dambrot*