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Edward Kienholz: *Roxys*

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David Zwirner is pleased to present Edward Kienholz's (1927-1994) renowned installation *Roxys*, 1960-61. First exhibited at Los Angeles's Ferus Gallery in 1962, this significant large-scale assemblage represents the first of the artist's environmental installations, or "tableaux" as he called them, and has been credited as being one of the earliest examples of what is now ubiquitously referred to as "installation art."

This exhibition follows the recently acclaimed presentation of a related work by the artist (in collaboration with Nancy Reddin Kienholz), *The Hoerengracht* (1983–88), which took place at the National Gallery, London, in November 2009 - February 2010.

An important figure in postwar American art, Kienholz has become best known for evocative assemblages and environments made from disparate found objects and discarded, everyday materials. His work draws from the vernacular of contemporary American life, confronting the viewer with issues surrounding cultural existence and the inhumanities of twentieth-century Western society. In 1953,

Kienholz moved to Los Angeles from his hometown in Fairfield, Washington, and quickly became an active participant in the Southern California art community. Although his early work took the form of abstract wall reliefs and paintings, by 1960 Kienholz's practice shifted to three-dimensional, free-standing constructions and environmental assemblages. His groundbreaking tableaux, which addressed themes surrounding the vulgarity of humanity, gave him the reputation of being a significant socio-critical artist and pioneer of Assemblage art.

Set in 1943, *Roxys* presents a life-size recreation of a well-known Las Vegas brothel. In a furnished room filled with objects and figures, Kienholz accurately displays the history and patina of the period—evoking the era of the artist's adolescence—with vintage props such as a 1943 calendar, movie magazines, a juke box playing familiar songs from the forties, a slot machine, brand-name beer bottles and cigarette wrappers, a call-to-arms portrait of General MacArthur, period furniture, and miscellaneous bric-à-brac. The room is populated by disturbing, provocative figures that represent the remnants of human experience. This elaborately detailed tableau evokes the brutalities of the human condition: by offering an all-encompassing, visceral sensory experience, the viewer is fully and unavoidably confronted with the bleak realities of its subject matter.

The installation consists of a series of figurative assemblages, each placed on tile pedestals to indicate a deliberate separation from their environment. Each of these "characters" has a curious and descriptive name: *Ben Brown*; *Dianna Poole*, *Miss Universal*; *Cherry Delight*; *Cock-Eyed Jenny*; *Fifi*, *A Lost Angel*; *The Lady Named Zoa*; *Five Dollar Billy*; and *The Madam*. These figures—one "male" and seven distorted "women" made out of mannequin body parts combined with absurd, surreal objects—demonstrate the dismal social realities of prostitution. In 1977, thinking back on *Roxys*, the artist recalled: "I went back in memory to going to Kellogg, Idaho, to whorehouses when I was a kid, and just being appalled by the whole situation—not being able to perform because it was just a really crummy, bad experience, a bunch of old women with sagging breasts that were supposed to turn you on, and like I say, it just didn't work."¹

A recurring concern addressed throughout Kienholz's practice, which is clearly pronounced in this important tableau is the effect time has on environments, objects, and human experience; the installation

¹ Edward Kienholz, interviewed by Lawrence Weschler, published in *Los Angeles Art Community Group Portrait: Edward Kienholz, Oral History Program* (Los Angeles: University of California, 1977), p. 231.

intertwines the past with the present, and the artist uses “junk” as a way of referring to, and symbolizing, the relationship between time and death. As Kienholz stated in 1977, “all my work has to do with living and dying, our fear of death.”²

Upon entering the installation, the viewer is greeted by *The Madam*, the operator of the brothel, who has a boar’s skull as a head and is dressed in dark, draped garments which appear to be in a state of decay. As one proceeds into the space, the scene becomes increasingly disturbing, as each figure, stained with splatters of paint, illustrates a grotesque portrayal of prostitution.

Another figure, *Five Dollar Billy*, demonstrates the morbid realities of her occupation. She rests horizontally on top of a sewing machine stand; her torso is tarnished and carved with names (presumably of those who have possessed her). The rose in her throat represents, as Nancy Reddin Kienholz suggests, “the innocence which separates her mind from what her body is doing. She is the whore with a purpose as represented by the squirrel which is stashing nuts (money) against the future (ugliness and old age).”³

The artist’s deliberately awkward juxtaposition of materials is evidenced in *Fifi, A Lost Angel*, in which the face of a child is combined with the torso and legs of a mature woman. A clock is embedded in her stomach, suggesting a method of timing her customers and referring to Kienholz’s concerns with the passage of time. Other figures, such as *Cock-Eyed Jenny*, a spread-legged, faceless body made from a pop-lid garbage can with mannequin legs, address the use of women as “‘dumping’ grounds for man’s physical and emotional advances.”⁴

Each character in *Roxys* has a background story which the artist addresses through various details, such as a letter from the prostitute’s sister in *Cherry Delight*; the papier-mâché jack-o-lantern head of *Dianna Poole, Miss Universal*; and the letter-dispensing machine which acts as *The Lady Named Zoa*’s torso. The only male represented is *Ben Brown*, the towel boy. Written on his head are the words “See No—Hear No—Speak No,” referring to the common pictorial maxim of the three wise monkeys. Wrapped around his waist is a metal chastity belt, suggesting that he is protected from the establishment’s customers.



Roxys, which gives visual form to a broad archetypal experience, was radical when it was first presented and is a crucial work in the artist’s oeuvre. All of the figures depicted in the installation are made to be repulsive, while functioning metaphorically. Kienholz created a vivid and somewhat theatrical experience of the horrific qualities of prostitution; his bordello is grotesque and morbid rather than erotic. The work addresses themes which the artist continually concerned himself with, such as the oppression of women, the bleaker aspects of memory and time, and the troubling cruelties of

contemporary culture. Kienholz finds his inspiration in the detritus of modern existence, and much of his practice can be seen as a vehicle for social critique. His large-scale tableaux, which not only incorporate the physical aspects of human existence, but also draw attention to society’s distorted social conditioning, stand alone within the history of 20th century art.

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Images:

EDWARD KIENHOLZ. *Roxys* (details), 1960-61. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Collection Onnasch © 2010 Kienholz Estate.

² Ibid., p. 342.

³ Nancy Reddin Kienholz, *Edward Kienholz: Roxys and other works*. Exh. cat. (Berlin: Sammlung Reinhard Onnasch, 1982), p. 42.

⁴ Ibid., p. 26.