

# Los Angeles Times

## Review: Vern Blosum's paintings at Tomwork take aim at Pop art

By Christopher Knight

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Vern Blosum painted "Giant Expiration," oil on canvas, in 1963.

Paintings by Vern Blosum have been experiencing a bit of a revival in the last few years, which is quite something considering that they pretty much fell off the cultural radar screen by the late 1960s.

In the initial rush of Pop art exhibitions and writings nearly 50 years ago, Blosum's bloodless renderings of things like parking meters, stop signs, mailboxes and other street furniture turned up alongside work by artists as diverse as Andy Warhol, David Hockney and Marisol. Their subsequent disappearance isn't too surprising, given paintings designed to function as a withering denunciation of Pop art by a painter actually committed to the primacy of Abstract Expressionism.

Blosum, whose training included brief study at UCLA in 1958 with apocalyptic abstractionist Adolph Gottlieb, is even a pseudonym. The artist's real name and actual identity are known by some but have never been publicly revealed.

A fascinating exhibition at Tomwork shows what Blosum was up to. In 13 sleek paintings made between 1962 and 1964, a single object is centered on a clean white canvas (some backgrounds have apparently been repainted) with a descriptive text below. The style mimics commercial illustration.

Five show parking meters with the time terminated or running out. The German roots of Modern Expressionism are evoked by a foreign meter paired with the word *abgelaufen* (expired).

Elsewhere, a bright red fire-box registers alarm, a mailbox cautions that deposit is forbidden and a stop sign demands a halt in moving forward. (According to an interesting text by filmmaker William E. Jones, available at the gallery's front desk, two versions of the street sign were Blosum's last Pop works; he stopped too.) In this context, the parking meters aren't still life paintings in a contemporary idiom warning of life's transience as much as thin jokes deriding Pop art as a momentary flash in the pan.

Perhaps most instructive is 1964's "Telephone," which can be usefully compared to Warhol's version of the same subject, a 1961 painting now in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary

Art. Blossum painted a 10-cent pay phone, casting Pop art's communication as limited to a cheap commercial transaction. Warhol's shows an old-fashioned black "candlestick" phone, a style discontinued before World War II, next to a flat black stripe -- a sly suggestion that Modern abstraction had become an obsolete medium of communication.

Warhol's "Telephone" is an astute critique of evolving art culture, one made resonant through its contradictory use of painting to question the nature of its own worldly situation. Blossum's social commentary pales in comparison, especially as art's mercantile context was hardly novel. His "Telephone" seems provincial.

"No Pressure," a yellow fire hydrant with the cap off, seems a put-down of Pop as weak tea, although the painting boomerangs back on itself. "Homage to Ivan K.," which refers to the Leo Castelli Gallery's Pop art enthusiast, Ivan Karp, is a blue hydrant that echoes an erect phallus -- perhaps partly as a lament for Karp's having stolen Blossum's girlfriend.

The sexual innuendo of the Karp picture makes one wonder about Blossum's pseudonym. It can be read in two ways.

Pronounced with a short "o," the name is said to have been chosen as a reference to "vernal blossom." The artist did paint a series of spring flowers (recently shown in New York but not exhibited here), which could be seen as a Pop interpretation of Abstract Expressionism's privileging of artistic autobiography as subject matter. A vernal blossom, like fleeting time on a parking meter, is short-lived.

However, when pronounced with a long "o," which is what the spelling would suggest, the name utters a vulgarity about fictional Vern's Pop route to art world success. Since Blossum's other art is a satire aimed at Pop, his flower paintings take on a different cast: Flowers were long dismissed as a genre suitable for female hobbyists, not serious art -- one reason Warhol chose flowers as a caustic subject. The overtones of the artist's chosen name are implicitly homophobic, especially given social norms amid the prominence of gay men in New York's emerging Pop art movement.

Whatever the case, the show is a provocative bit of history. Take it as an admonition: Paint what you love, not what you hate.

Tomwork, 2045 S. La Cienega Blvd., (310) 815-1100, through Oct. 26. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays. [www.tomworklosangeles.com](http://www.tomworklosangeles.com).