

Art in America

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Vern Blosum, the Pop Painter who Punk'd MoMA

by Brian Boucher



Vern Blosum, *STOP*, 1964, oil on canvas, 66 3/4 by 47 3/4 inches.

Fictional artists like Reena Spaulings and Bruce High Quality seem perfectly normal today, but in the early '60s?

The first fall show at New York's Essex Street Gallery is devoted to paintings by the fictitious Vern Blosum, supposedly a Denver native who lived in Illinois and was invented as a hoax, according to the gallery, by an unnamed artist who finished his studies in New York in 1961. The canvases are on loan from the anonymous artist, whom the gallery's Maxwell Graham has encouraged to reveal himself—when the time is right.

"I talked to the artist this morning on the phone," Graham told *A.i.A.* this morning. "He shows his own abstract paintings. He has a doctorate. He likes to talk Kant. These paintings were designed to mock Pop art and the market for it."

Paintings by Blosum have been repeatedly exhibited at New York's Museum of Modern Art after one of them was sold to the museum by no less than legendary dealer Leo Castelli. The paintings haven't been on view since MoMA director Alfred Barr realized that he had been put on. Others fell for it too, Graham said; Blosum appeared in *Artforum* and in Lucy Lippard's 1966 book *Pop Art*.

Five of the eight paintings on view, each measuring 40 by 30 inches, are titled for the variety of flower they depict, against a plain white background. Each has text, in black serif lettering, along the lines of "Black-eyed Susan, *Rudbeckia hirta*, toss their gold-and-brown heads" or "Pink loco, *Oxytropis lambertii*, lovingly lures horses and cattle to their death."

Three paintings depart from the floral (blossom, get it?) theme: one shows a cartoonish black cat, captioned, in all uppercase, "PLANNED ANTICIPATION"; in another, a pigeon stands above the text "PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE" (both are from 1963). A canvas showing a stop sign is footnoted with the deadpan text "STOP." Dated 1964, it's the latest work in the show. (Five days into the show, all works have been sold, Graham said; he declined to reveal their prices.)

"He thought Pop art was bogus and represented a de-skilling," Graham said. "He believed in Pollock and Greenberg. So he made a fake Pop artist, and he was included in many museum shows. When the paintings did well, though, it wasn't exactly a win for him. He didn't even like Pop art!"

Graham admits that the paintings are not of the caliber of a Warhol or a Lichtenstein, and, moreover, maintains that the works have more in common with Conceptual art than Pop. He is much more closely aligned with artists like John Baldessari, Lutz Bacher, or Joseph Kosuth, who are interrogating the relationship between text and image, and exploring mediated image, he argues.

"So if those paintings in the MoMA collection ever go on view," Graham wondered, "which room would they go in?"