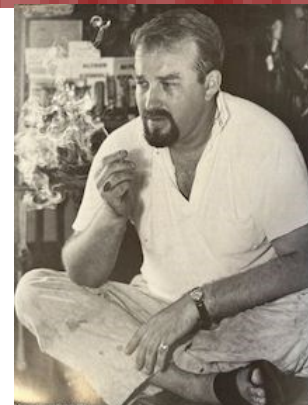


American Anomaly: Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz

By Ricki Morse



Edward Kienholz was born in 1927 in Fairfield, Washington, into a farming family of Swiss immigrants. Trained in the skills required of the rancher, he learned carpentry and basic mechanics. His father kept a hunting lodge in the Idaho mountains where the boy acquired hunting and foraging skills, an affinity for the native people and a deep identification with those hills. In high school he lettered in team sports and painted in oils and watercolor, sometimes challenging himself to make a painting a



Edward Kienholz in his Los Angeles studio, 1958.

day. After a dropped semester at a teacher's college, he began a decade long meandering journey through the west, working odd jobs in sales and construction. In Minneapolis he happened into a Rembrandt exhibition. "You know, I thought, 'Geez, if that's a Rembrandt and he's such a hot shot, you know, there might be a chance for me.' . . . I had the intention of becoming an artist, and an artist makes art. And that was good enough for me."



Edward Kienholz, *The Little Eagle Rock Incident*, 1958, Paint and resin on plywood with mounted deer head, SBMA, Gift of John Gabbert.

In 1953 he arrived in L.A. driving a 1932 Buick refitted as a pickup truck with his dog, a Great Dane, and began to search for a gallery to show his work. His first experience of a serious private art gallery came in 1954 when he entered the Felix Landau Gallery with its pristine white walls and thought, "this is the way it should be;" however, none of the galleries would take his work, so he rented the lobbies of two movie theaters, painted them white, and began to mount shows of local artists. His first one-person exhibition took place at Los Angeles's Vons Café Galleria in 1955, followed by a solo show at the Coronet Louvre Theater later that year. In 1954 while working at an All-City Art Festival in Barnsdall Park, he met Walter Hopps, a UCLA art student and aspiring gallerist. The two hit it off and by the end of the afternoon had written a five-year partnership agreement on a hot dog wrapper to develop contemporary gallery space. They opened the legendary Ferus Gallery (1947-

1966) on North La Cienega Blvd, showing unknown LA and SF artists, providing exhibitions particularly to the students of Otis Art Institute, Chouinard Art Institute and Art Center. Kienholz first showed *Joe Doe* there in 1959.

Unlike most emerging artists, Edward Kienholz turned not to art history or contemporary movements for inspiration. Ferociously individualistic, he painted out of his own personal past and his experiences of man's brutality to his fellow man and woman. Emerging in his work was a committed social consciousness and a willingness, even eagerness to confront bigotry and propriety. We are fortunate to have in our collection some of this early work, as he moved from canvas toward assemblage. His first appropriation of an object into a painting, *The Little Eagle Rock Incident* (above), contrasts the freedom of the bird with the indig-

nity of the up-side-down antlered deer mounted below. Also the title refers to a contemporary racial confrontation, declaring his work's relevance to social issues. The 1959 *Joe Doe* (right) was his first step toward

the tableaux which became his hallmark .

Kienholz's projection of covert meaning within his figures becomes paramount in the *Joe Doe* series. The viewer must explore the sides and backs, even the interiors of the figures to discover their inherent properties. Thus the viewer becomes a participant, a voyeur, a perpetrator. Our *Joe Doe* is not only mounted on a baby carriage but he is hollow, and we have participated in exposing his impotence.

Kienholz's searing memory of his teenaged visit to a

brothel in Idaho evolved into the first tableau, *Roxys*, which became the initiating model for his life work. The scene is set in 1943, a photo of General MacArthur saluting, amid Victorian furniture, bouquets, fruit, a black attendant offering a towel and the strewn body parts of nude women. The work evolved as

Edward Kienholz, *Roxys*, 1960 , Installation. Mixed media. Eight figures, furniture, bric-a-brac, goldfish, incense, disinfectant, perfume, juke box, clothing, etc., Pinault Collection, Paris.

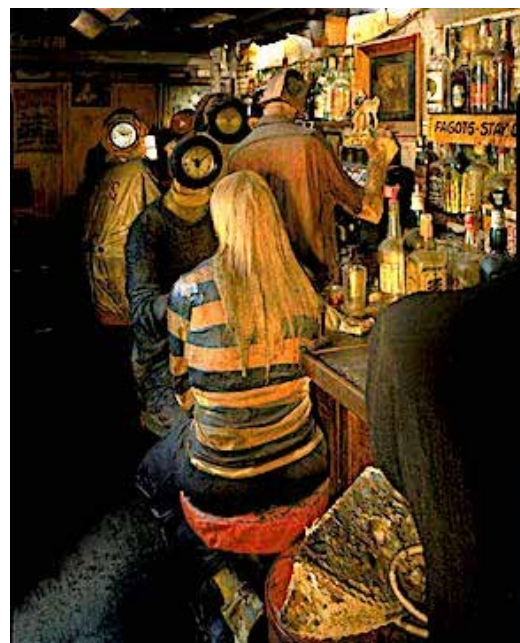
individual figures, one of which he sold and then had to replace as his vision expanded into a scene which the viewer could enter. The figures gained names—the aging Five Dollar Billy atop the sewing machine can be undulated by depressing the treadle—and the viewers become participants in a horrific, depraved event.

The Beanery, a 1965 recreation of Barney's Beanery on Santa Monica Boulevard, not only posits the variability of the passage of time—time in *The Beanery* is always 10:10, but also displays the tenacious endurance of prejudice. While the customers have found a way to stop time, to take a break from life, Barney, the owner, refuses to remove the "Fagots Stay Out" sign, because it is a traditional part of the bar.

And the sign actually remained in place through decades of protest. Kienholz had long seen LA as a place without time, no history, no future, just Now! And *The Beanery* captures that experience.



Edward Kienholz, *Joe Doe*, 1959, Oil, metallic paint, resin, plaster, and graphite on mannequin parts with wood, metal, plastic, paper, rubber, and stroller, LA Louver, Venice, CA.



Edward Kienholz, *The Beanery*, 1965, assemblage, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



Nancy Reddin Kienholz, undated.

The piercing commentary of figures with unmoving clocks for faces may be Kienholz’s ultimate delivery of covert meaning. It is not surprising that Kienholz returned to Hope, Idaho, each summer, renewing his connection to his personal history.

In 1972 Kienholz met a local photojournalist, Nancy Reddin, and within the year she became his fifth wife. Like Kienholz, she had no formal art training, though she often referred to 20 years of Kienholz as her pedigree. Observers of their combined work noted a subtle shift, from the anger and outrage of tableaux like *Five Card Stud*, completed the year they met. Circled car headlights illuminate the castration of a black man found with a white woman—a scene almost too painful to view, requiring that we turn away initially. A young boy observes from one car, modeled on Kienholz’s son Noah, brought to observe the event, adding a contemporary viewer to the scene.

The couple moved to Hope, Idaho, with his two children and her daughter, all from previous relationships. That same year Kienholz received a grant from the German Academic Exchange Program which allowed them to live and work in West Berlin and Idaho. Their first joint work, *The Middle Island No. 1*, 1972, (no image) was granted a Guggenheim Award in 1976.



Edward Kienholz, *Five Card Stud*, 1969-1972, assemblage, private collection, Japan.

In 1981, Kienholz declared all the work since their marriage to be joint creations. Nancy Reddin Kienholz’s name was officially added to all works from 1972 onward. European galleries were eager to show their work, and many major tableaux were acquired by European museums and given major exhibitions.

Kienholz’s sudden death at 60 in 1967 became the site of his last tableau, one he had meticulously planned for decades. He bought a small mountain in Idaho, Howe Mountain, left plans for its excavation into a burial site and specified the placement of his embalmed body in the passenger seat of his 1940 Packard Coupe, with his dog’s ashes, a bottle of Chianti, a deck of cards. As they had planned, Nancy drove the Packard into the grave as her final farewell.



Our recent acquisition of the 1982 *Scenes from a Marriage* series will be installed in our Contemporary Gallery in late January 2023. *Round Bout Eleven* is an anonymous gift to our museum, grounding our contemporary collection with this major tableau by one of the foremost artists of the 1950’s LA scene. Housed in piping, rather than the earlier boxes, the wife leans on a window ledge of her “prison,” a girl hood picture staring out a window on the wall behind her. The pipes also define

Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz, photograph by Chris Felver, 1989, Berlin studio.

a boxing arena, but there is only silence, the husband engrossed in his own world, oblivious of hers. A palpable yearning emanates from her figure, and we experience Nancy Reddin Kienholz' contribution to their work which extends it into our personal world.



Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz, *Bout Round Eleven*, 1982, assemblage, SBMA.

Edward and Nancy had established a second home with their three children in Houston when they returned from Berlin, and it was here that Nancy settled after his death, often working with museums and galleries to restore and install their tableaux. Her greatest challenge came when the Los Angeles County Museum of Art decided to restore and install the tableau, *Five Card Stud* (1972) as their contribution to 2021 Pacific Standard Time, the celebration of Los Angeles as an international art center. The work had been shown only once, at documenta 5 in Kassel, West Germany, in 1972. Purchased by a Japanese collector and stored in Japan ever since, LACMA brought the storage containers to their workshops. In 2005 Nancy began the several year refurbishment, sometimes reconstruction, of the tableau. She gave moving presentations to the press and curators about the origins and continuing relevance of the work. *Five Card Stud* by Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz became a highlight of Pacific Standard Time exhibitions in 2011.

Nancy Reddin Kienholz died in Houston in 2019 at 76.

Robert L Pincus, *The Art of Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz*, Univ of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1990.