



Beach Culvert
1960
Laguna Beach Art Museum

Roger Kuntz

Stripped of oleanders and other abuse-tolerant plants, the freeways, in their geometry and sleekness, have inspired many visual artists, especially in the Midcentury years. One of my favorites is Roger Kuntz.

Kuntz' eerie, human-less, and in fact, car-less images from the early 60s read as both figuration and abstraction, moving between these two opposite artistic stances just as the then-new freeways allowed a transition from urban to rural realities. His paintings of overpasses, underpasses, freeway signs and lane lines are rendered in a stripped-down palette of black, white, grey and CalTrans green. Kuntz' carefully painted images suggest that there's mystery in these monuments of human engineering; the close-up and weirdly cropped images both heighten and undermine the monumentality of the freeway system that architecture critic Rayner Banham delighted in. In his 1971 book *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, Banham called the intersection of Interstates 10 and 405 in West LA "a work of art, both as a pattern on the map, as a monument against the sky, and as a kinetic experience as one sweeps through it." Maybe so, but as drivers and passengers, we experience the freeways as discrete moments, as Kuntz does: did I just miss the 405? can I make that 4-lane change? was that Larry David who just passed me?

Kuntz was born in 1922, and as a child, moved from Texas to Hawaii to California, ending up at Lomaland, the famous Theosophical community near San Diego. He studied art at Pomona College under Millard Sheets and began teaching at Scripps College after service in the Army Air Corps and a study trip to Europe. Eventually he moved to Laguna Beach. He was a widely exhibited landscape painter in the fifties, uninterested in the abstraction that dominated American art in the postwar years. He felt that a return to structure and figuration was on the horizon.

In fact, it was; it was called Pop Art. Kuntz' stark, minimal freeway scenes were initially considered a Pop expression, and he was included in the first national exhibit of Pop Art, held at the Oakland Museum in 1963. After all, freeway signs, like Campbell's soup cans and comic strips, are anti-art subjects. But Kuntz' work is too meditative, too thoughtful, to be Pop.

In the last decade of his life, Kuntz painted melancholy figures in and around bathtubs, on beaches and tennis courts, and fanciful images of the Goodyear Blimp in a variety of unlikely situations. Kuntz died in 1975, only 49 years old.



To Learn More:

Roger Kuntz: The Shadow Between Representation and Abstraction, Susan Anderson, Laguna Art Museum, 2009

To See More:

The Bowers Museum, Laguna Art Museum, Long Beach Museum of Art, Orange County Museum of Art, Pomona College Museum of Art, UC Irvine Institute and Museum for California Art, The Roger Kuntz Gallery in Santa Monica.