

# Feeding the Coyotes

## Lyn Kienholz's crusade for Los Angeles art



This page: Lyn and Ed Kienholz, circa 1970s. Opposite: Lyn Kienholz circa 1970s. Photos: Courtesy Estate of Lyn Kienholz.

Since her death in January, Lyn Kienholz has been widely honored—an honor she never fully received during her lifetime—for planting the seed that flowered into the Getty Foundation's Pacific Standard Time, the sprawling exhibition series in 2011 and 2012 that broadened the scope of American art history, propelling under-recognized West Coast artists like Doug Wheeler, Mary Corse and John Outterbridge into a canon previously ruled by East Coast powers.

I met Lyn several years before, in 2007, during a stint in the USC Annenberg/Getty Arts Journalism Fellowship, a program whose mission was partly to expose mid-career arts journalists to the abundant cultural universe of Los Angeles. This had also been Lyn's personal mission almost her entire adult life—the fervent enlightening of writers and of practically anyone she met that “the full story” of Los Angeles art, as she once described it to me, remained unknown and untold. She proselytized one meal at a time, throwing dinner parties at her Hollywood Hills home, where she'd bring together artists, curators, critics, musicians and filmmakers for conversation and casual home-made food. (“You wouldn't get filet mignon,” her friend Thomas Rhoads told *The Los Angeles Times*. “You might get meatloaf and lots of wine, and you could smoke as much marijuana as you like. Meanwhile, she'd be out probably feeding the coyotes.”)

I arrived for one of these dinners primed with only the basics: how she'd entered the art world as the assistant at the storied Ferus Gallery in 1961, just before it presented Andy Warhol's first commercial show; how she'd married Ed Kienholz, a gallery founder and a titanic figure in the L.A. art world, in 1966; how in the 1970s, after their divorce, she'd briefly run an illegal restaurant in this same house; and how in 1981, she had sold her ex-husband's controversial sculpture *Back Seat Dodge '38* (1964) to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art to help bankroll her nonprofit, California/International Arts Foundation, which promoted California art. I'd decided I needed to know her even before I stepped through her funky Dutch kitchen



door that night. By the end of it, taken by her riotous laugh, I was helping her do the dishes, and we were on our way to a friendship.

After returning to New York, I wrote a piece for *The New York Times* about the encyclopedia of L.A. artists she'd worked on for years. Published in 2010 as *L.A. Rising: SoCal Artists Before 1980*, it was a colossal undertaking: a compendium of 497 Southland artists that has become an indispensable reference.

On a trip back to Los Angeles, she invited me to stay in one of her guest rooms, conferring membership to a club that included museum directors, like the Centre Pompidou's Alfred Pacquement, artists like Rick Lowe, and a host of lesser-known creative types, like me—basically anyone she enjoyed having around and/or wanted to promote and encourage.

A stay always involved a dinner, usually assembled with fixings from Costco. That's how I got to know Olga Garay, then L.A.'s cultural affairs commissioner; and Sammy Hoi, then

president of Otis College of Art and Design; and Joan Weinstein of the Getty Research Institute; and the artist Suzanne Lacy, whom I later wrote about, and so many more. Even today, people I was too jet-lagged at the time to remember, say to me, “Yes, I met you at Lyn's!”

On one trip to Casa Kienholz, as Lyn called it, I—like many others—received my own key. That was partly because Lyn wanted her friends to feel free to come and go, but also so she could be free of us, for she had work to do. When you came down to breakfast, Lyn would already be in her office beside the kitchen, swearing like a sailor at her computer as her longtime collaborator, the curator Elizabeta Betinski, sat calmly by. She'd soon speed off to meetings in a car whose trunk was jammed with catalogs destined for museum bookstores.

Under the auspices of her foundation, she organized more than a hundred exhibitions, at least 13 of which traveled internationally, starting with a show of California sculptors for the 1984 L.A.

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Olympic Arts Festival; published scores of catalogs; and operated two websites, launched on dial-up in 2001, that included video interviews with such important L.A. figures as the artist Betye Saar and the architect Frank Gehry.

Then there were the archival projects, like the one that gave rise to *Pacific Standard Time*. As the story goes, Lyn and her good friend Henry Hopkins, the founding director of the Hammer Museum, realized that the archives of local artists, collectors and dealers were disappearing as their owners died, and the two sounded the alarm to the Getty, which had the resources to take on such a vast rescue operation. Armed with two research grants, Lyn established the 2002–04 L.A. History Project and began formally documenting the endangered material. When I met Lyn, she had secured yet another Getty grant to research the archives of local African-American galleries and artists, whose histories were even more deeply buried than that of other neglected West Coast art scenes.

Despite these hard-won achievements, Lyn was celebrated mostly—at least by the time I knew her—as a hostess and social connector. I think that's partly due to the very disregard of California's art that she had fought so long to overturn. But it was also because she was constitutionally unable to toot her own horn. Her two favorite expressions were "I'm only a schlepper" and "I'm a sherpa."

That's what she had said when I interviewed her about the encyclopedia. "I'm not a scholar, I'm a schlepper!" Then she rattled off a list of all the categories particular to California that she believed had to be included: assemblage; video; performance; light and space; finish fetish; textile art; plein air, hard edge and realist painting; muralism; public sculpture; and surf and custom car culture—just for starters. Even if an artist didn't interest her, she said—firmly and authoritatively, sounding nothing like a schlepper—"it's important that they are in the book." And when they did, she was thrilled, as with her inclusion of the custom-car-painting pioneer Kenneth Howard, better known as Von Dutch, legendarily the first to apply flames to the nose of a hot rod.

I've often wondered if Lyn's ostentatious demurrals were just the most effective way she found to get things done as a straight, attractive, intensely driven woman in a midcentury, macho man's world. Born in 1930 in Chicago and raised nearby, she'd come west as the wife of a Caltech engineer and had briefly paid dues as a bored suburban housewife, a memory that made her shudder long after the marriage was over. Sprung free in L.A., she landed the job at *Ferus* after first pursuing a film career. "I desperately wanted to be a producer," she once told me. "But in those days, a woman couldn't get into the union."

Instead she directed a light opera company and worked at the gallery, before marrying the ultimate macho man, Kienholz. "There were five wives—I was number four," she said. She leapt into the art world with both feet, running Kienholz's studio during the making of some of his greatest assemblages, like the powerfully disturbing *Five Car Stud* (1969–72)—which depicts the lynching of an African-American man by five white attackers. "Ed said, 'When you married me, I became your career.' I believed him."

Yet from his career grew her own. She was deeply inspired by their European travels, which allowed her to meet museum people and understand how art made it into institutions and into art history. When people would tell her, "There's no good work being made in L.A.," she'd practically yell: "There's *lots* of good work!" After the divorce, she set out to prove it.

That's how she became the city's art sherpa, guiding European curators through L.A. artists' studios. As one of the few non-museum members of CIMAM, the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art, she pushed for the group's first annual meeting west of New York, organizing it herself, in L.A. in 1990. She consulted on important European exhibitions of Southern California art, like the 1997 "Sunshine and Noir" show, which opened at Denmark's Louisiana Museum and traveled, and the Pompidou's 2006 "Los Angeles 1955–1985." In 2012, she received her most public honor, from another country: a Légion d'Honneur for her support of Franco-California relations.

Long after *Pacific Standard Time* opened, as neglected artists' careers finally took off, Lyn's freewheeling role in making it happen was never fully understood; it took until her obituaries for that understanding to emerge. Despite the fact that she loudly declared herself but a handmaiden, I think she secretly craved recognition for having played a part in such a turning point for the city she loved. Who wouldn't?

Yet she always seemed so self-sufficient, so self-contained over the years of our acquaintance that it was hard to know how to make this happen, or what to give her. So, Lyn, I give this to you now, my tribute. You did what you set out to do: rewrite art history. The sherpa led us to the mountaintop.



Edward Kienholz, *Back Seat Dodge '38*, 1964; paint, fiberglass and flock, 1938 Dodge, recorded music and player, chicken wire, beer bottles, artificial grass, cast plaster figures.