

Art in America

REVIEWS

Jan 1, 2018

Ferus Gallery: Between The Folds

NEW YORK at Alden Projects

by Elizabeth Buhe



When the legendary Ferus Gallery set up shop in Los Angeles in 1957, it didn't have much to its name but the collective ambition and dedication of its founders, artist Ed Kienholz and curator Walter Hopps. Initially located behind an antiques shop in West Hollywood, the scrappy operation soon became the preeminent gallery in a city whose art scene was frequently described as provincial, inadequate, even barren. "Ferus Gallery: Between the Folds" animated Ferus's evolution through an impressive collection of rare mailers, *Artforum* advertisements, and sixty-some posters for exhibitions held at Ferus and its successors between 1957 and 1973.

Ferus's earliest printed matter, often black-and-white, featured asymmetrical layouts and an array of fonts. Designed primarily by poet and assemblage artist Robert Alexander, who worked on a printing press in a rented storefront nearby, these sensitive, individualized compositions reflect the subcultural intimacy of early Ferus. A 1959 poster for Bay Area abstract painter Hassel Smith, for example, took its cue from the title of the Smith painting it reproduced, *Golden Spur*, by displaying the artist's name in a Wild

West-style slab serif typeface. In another announcement, the superimposition of a periwinkle "2" on the smaller word artists elegantly and economically conveys the dual nature of a Sonia Gechtoff and John Altoon show.

Exemplifying the handmade, artist-studio aesthetic of the gallery's early graphics, a flyer for a show of yarn designs by Dominique Jones (referred to simply as Dominique on the announcement) features hand-cut tipped-in photographs of the garments being modeled.

When Irving Blum joined Ferus in 1958, he updated the gallery's Beat-era aesthetic with a more commercial look that matched the clean white walls of the venue's new location across the street. The posters took on a minimalist, unified graphic identity—with exhibition details arranged in neat rows—and a glossy magazine's air of luxury. Two styles dominated. In one, an artwork appears centrally on a white ground, as in a 1962 announcement for Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup can show that reproduces one of his pepper-pot-stew canvases. In the other style, a black-and-white photograph of an exhibition's artist stretches across the whole sheet, as in a 1962 poster showing a brooding, closely cropped John Altoon in high contrast, eyes cast downward, in an image shot by jazz photographer William Claxton.

Other Blum-era posters openly play with themes of showmanship and self-promotion—depicting, for instance, Billy Al Bengston in the guise of Buster Keaton, or a Kenneth Price ceramic cup crowning the head of fashion model (and Claxton's wife) Peggy Moffitt. A whole suite of posters from the era (1967–73) when the gallery had morphed into Ferus/Pace and, shortly thereafter, Irving Blum Gallery demonstrates the consistency of Blum's self-styling and his increased representation of New York artists, which stood in contrast to Ferus's early imperative to showcase homegrown talent.

Organized chronologically to play up the shifting internal dynamics of Ferus and its offshoots, the museum-quality exhibition elevated printed matter to the level of aesthetic object. In so doing, it restaged the galleries' own play between high and low, art and advertisement. The promotional apparatus so successfully propelled the artists to fame that the advertisements today not only reinforce the historical importance of these now-household names but also attest to the galleries' role in the figures' meteoric rise. Perhaps that was the plan all along.