

Vern Blossum does not exist. The story holds in a few lines: in 1961 an artist painted five canvases inspired by pages in a horticulture book, reproducing illustrations and textual fragments in oil paint. Then came a series of parking meters bearing temporal commentaries, water hydrants with personalized inscriptions, mailboxes, and other items of urban design, as well as animals. Some of these paintings were shown at Leo Castelli Gallery, and sold to collectors and public institutions. Among them, the Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired a 1962 parking meter entitled *Time Expired*. Blossum was subsequently included in several reference exhibitions on Pop Art in the United States, and his career seemed to be progressing normally, were it not for a rumor that emerged regarding his true identity. Alfred H. Barr, the Director of the Museum of Modern Art, started to worry about it in 1964, and after a thorough inquiry (questioning Castelli, who seemed unaware, then checking government records—the State of Colorado, where Blossum was supposedly born, declared in 1973 that it had no trace of him), came to the conclusion that Vern Blossum did not exist. The paintings vanished from the collections and his career evaporated. But then again, the artist had already painted, in 1964, two paintings of stop signs bearing the word “Stop,” as his final works.

His rediscovery is due to the work of two gallerists, Tom Jimmerson (TomWork Gallery, Los Angeles) and Maxwell Graham (Essex Street, New York). Critics then remarked how his work appeared simultaneously with that of Andy Warhol, John Baldessari or Ed Ruscha, and interpreted his pseudonym (whether in a Duchampian sense—Rose Sélavy—or as a social critique), discussed his relations with ‘invented’ artists such as Philippe Thomas, John St. Bernard and Reena Spaulings, and spoke of ‘appropriation’, ‘deconstruction’, and a critique of the then nascent ‘contemporary art’ market.

What we know for certain is that an artist, who was committed to an abstract, non-objective practice (Abstract Expressionism, which was dominant at the time in New York), produced in the span of a few years a body of works involving print, language, reproduction, graphic stylization, banality and a regime of designation. That in order to do so, he invented an auctorial figure distinct from his official identity and that, some years later, he decided to put an end to this production. The fact that, a few years later, he delegated the task of producing works we might associate with Op Art to another avatar, this time bearing a Germanic-sounding name, indicates that we are indeed dealing with a strategy, a play of signatures and delegation, which presumes a critical function.

Vern Blossum does not exist, but his work does. And that is precisely what this exhibition aims to show, bringing together almost thirty paintings executed between 1961 and 1964 – the major part of his total output, which is estimated at 45 paintings.

Vern Blosum is curated by Lionel Bovier, Director of JRP|Ringier, Zurich.

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