

An Artist Standing Outside an Either/Or World

L. Brandon Krall seems simultaneously to embrace systems and flights of imagination.

by John Yau
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L. Brandon Krall, "Passus" (1989), oil on canvas, 37 x 47 1/4 inches (all images courtesy Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects)

L. Brandon Krall is a painter, an object maker, and a writer interested in systems, language, and Marcel Duchamp. This combination might make it difficult for viewers to wrap their heads around her work. What makes her defiance of categories interesting, and even challenging, is that she has created at least two singular bodies of work in different mediums. On the face of things, these bodies — language-based, geometric abstract paintings and sculptural objects that refer directly to works by Duchamp and Man Ray — seem to oppose each other. Whereas Krall's paintings often have palpable surfaces (she applies thick paint with a spatula), Duchamp withdrew his hand from his work, rejected opticality, and is widely recognized as the principal figure to have brought about the "death of originality."

While I often wish galleries would provide a chair so that viewers can sit and look at the art, I decided it was a necessity when I went to the exhibition *L. Brandon Krall: Sui Generis—alphabet paintings and other objects* at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects (April 28–May 29, 2021). That need became even clearer

to me when I found myself looking back and forth between a squarish, two-color painting, “MU” (1990) (the title is Japanese for “no” and is often linked to Zen koans), and a sculpture, “Priere de Toucher” (1995) (French for “please touch”).



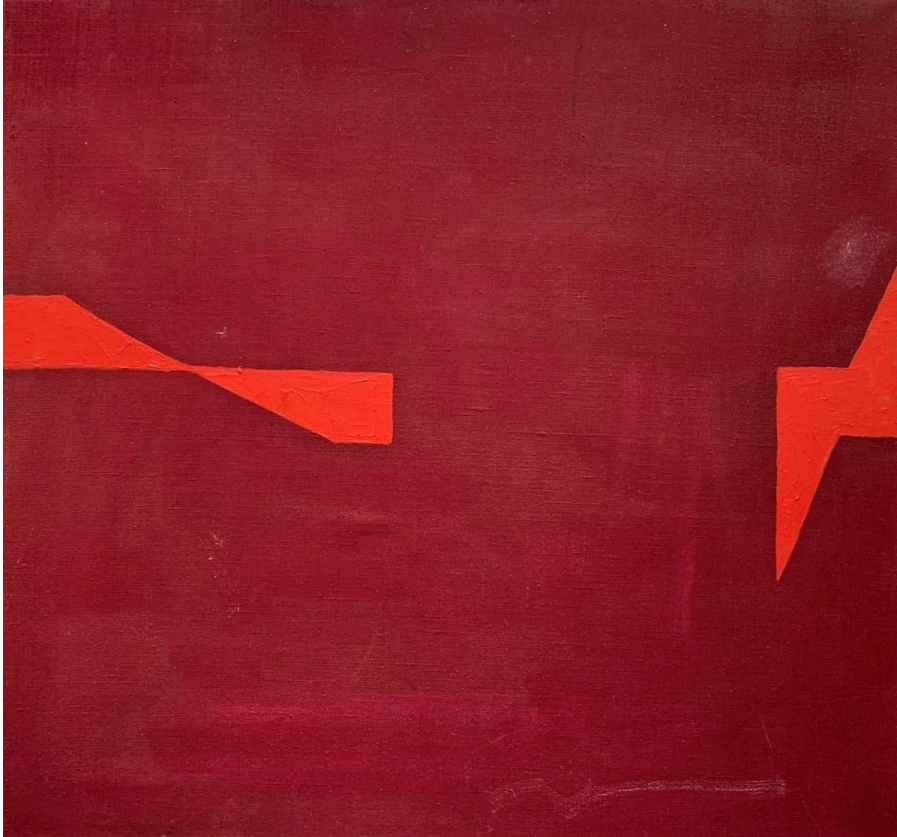
Installation view, L. Brandon Krall: *Sui Generis—alphabet paintings and other objects* at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects

Sui Generis initially struck me as a two-person exhibition of a painter and a sculptor, one working out of Russian Constructivism and the other exploring the seams where Duchamp and Fluxus whimsically meet, even though I knew this was not the case.

“MU” and the exhibition’s other five paintings, all of which were done between 1983 and ’90, incorporate geometric shapes that signify letters in the alphabet. In each painting, the shapes spell out the title, yet Krall’s alphabet does not thinly disguise the letters or riff on their inherent geometry. According to illustrated material provided by the gallery, each letter is represented by a pair of sharply angled trapezoids, except K, which consists of a trapezoid and a triangle. Each part of the pair is done in one color, which remains consistent throughout the painting.

Krall has transformed the alphabet into a set of 26 abstract ideograms, which she can paint in any orientation as long as they spell out the title, in order to open up a contemplative space. She does not see

the painting's surface as a page, but as something closer to a field where viewers can follow the letters until they add up to a word. Looking at "MU," I was reminded of the Buddhist concept of nothingness.



L. Brandon Krall, "MU" (1990), oil on canvas, 26 x 28 inches

The painting's red geometric shapes extend in from the left and right edges, against a wine-red ground. The space between the letters, and the sense that the letters have been cropped by the painting's edges, are integral to our experience. What, we might ask, is complete and incomplete at the same time? Must we live in an either/or world? What held my attention was making the connection between the painting's title and imagery, and contemplating it within that conceptual space.

Rather than upholding an either/or world, Krall seems simultaneously to embrace systems and flights of imagination. Her other titles reference Greek or Latin words (passus, experior, melos, principium, sens) that relate to an attempt to do something, new ways of thinking, and the stanza of a poem. "Passus" (1989), meaning "a division or part of a narrative poem," is a figure-ground painting in which green geometric letters and the black ground try, unsuccessfully, to dominate each other.

Krall's choices suggest a desire to think outside the box. The fact that she made these paintings in late 1980s, in the aftermath of Neo-Expressionism and Neo-Geo, underscores her decision not to join any of the mainstream art cliques. She is one of the rare one-of-a-kind figures the art world seldom appreciates, much to its discredit.



L. Brandon Krall, "Exterior" (1989), oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches

The complexity of her individualism came through when I turned my attention to her sculptural objects, starting with "Priere de Toucher" (1995), which reworks Duchamp's "Bicycle Wheel" (1913), a work Duchamp remade a number of times. Krall's bicycle wheel has been bolted to a low, round wooden table painted silver. A metal painter's palette — which appears to be functionless — has been affixed permanently to the table's surface. A plastic box, on which sit two reception bells, rests atop of the palette.

According to the gallery, the title of the plastic box piece, within the larger piece, is "Habeas corpus," a Latin term that means "[we, a Court, command] that you have the body [of the detainee brought before us]" and has to do with unlawful arrest or detention. Presumably pressed by the prisoner, the bells would announce that individual's illegal imprisonment. Beneath the table is "3D" (2004), a clear plastic box with a metal handle, which contains 3D glasses.

It is hard to say whether these objects form an ensemble or if they can stand alone. Maybe each is — to cite “Passus” — a stanza in a narrative poem.



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As the title “*Priere de Toucher*” suggests, the viewer is invited to press the bell, open the box, spin the bicycle wheel, and discover if the palette can be moved. In contrast to the philosophical questions raised by “MU” and the other paintings, “3D” takes a whimsical approach to the relationship between language and things. Krall’s interest in this relationship between words and things is what motivates and connects her paintings and sculptures. It underscores her deep interest in Duchamp, which led her to write a number of significant essays on him.

Inquiry, rather than conclusion, is the other motivating force — to “try,” as she suggests in “*Experior*.” Her combination of humility and probity is rare in today’s ego-inflated art world. But, more importantly, there is the work, idiosyncratic and engaging.

L. Brandon Krall: *Sui Generis—alphabet paintings and other objects continues at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects (208 Forsyth Street, Manhattan) through May 29*