

Billy Al Bengston's Hawaiian Idyll

The Artist's House and Studio in the Kalihi Valley

TEXT BY HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN VAUGHAN



THERE IS A LONG TRADITION of artists moving to new landscapes for fresh sources of inspiration. One thinks of Gauguin in Tahiti, Matisse in the south of France. Though their styles had already rooted, they flowered in the balmy air and tropical colors of a foreign clime. Old habits were discarded and a heightened excitement attended the rendering of subjects lit by an unfamiliar sun.

"It didn't take me more than a year or two to realize that when you're in your studio all day long, you wind up painting your studio," explains Billy Al Bengston. "To change your painting, you change your studio." Like his Postimpressionist predecessors, when Bengston made the change, he sought relative isolation and breathtaking beauty. This Los Angeles artist found both in Honolulu and began working there in 1978. Three years ago, he moved his studio to a converted church that had been part of an artists' colony in the 1920s.

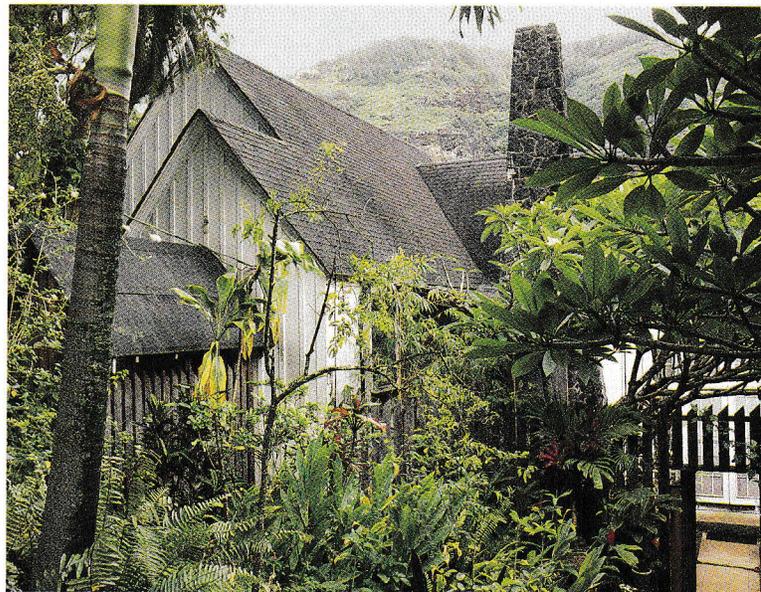
Bengston first went to Honolulu in a fit of pique because it had rained in Los Angeles for a week. "I develop a serious personality flaw when I can't see my shadow," he confesses. The first two visits were disappointing, but then he fell under Hawaii's spell. "It's the weather," he continues. "The air. You feel very powerful. Your shoulders drop. The light is very white. I'm a sunset and sunrise watcher—I get up at 5 A.M.—and you can't do either in L.A. without freezing."

But there is another compelling reason for the artist to visit his island studio nearly every month. "The phone never rings. There are no distractions. I've gone five straight days without saying anything but 'Bring me a menu,'" he adds. "There's clarity and concentration. You see what you're doing in a clearer light, so it's much harder to delude yourself."

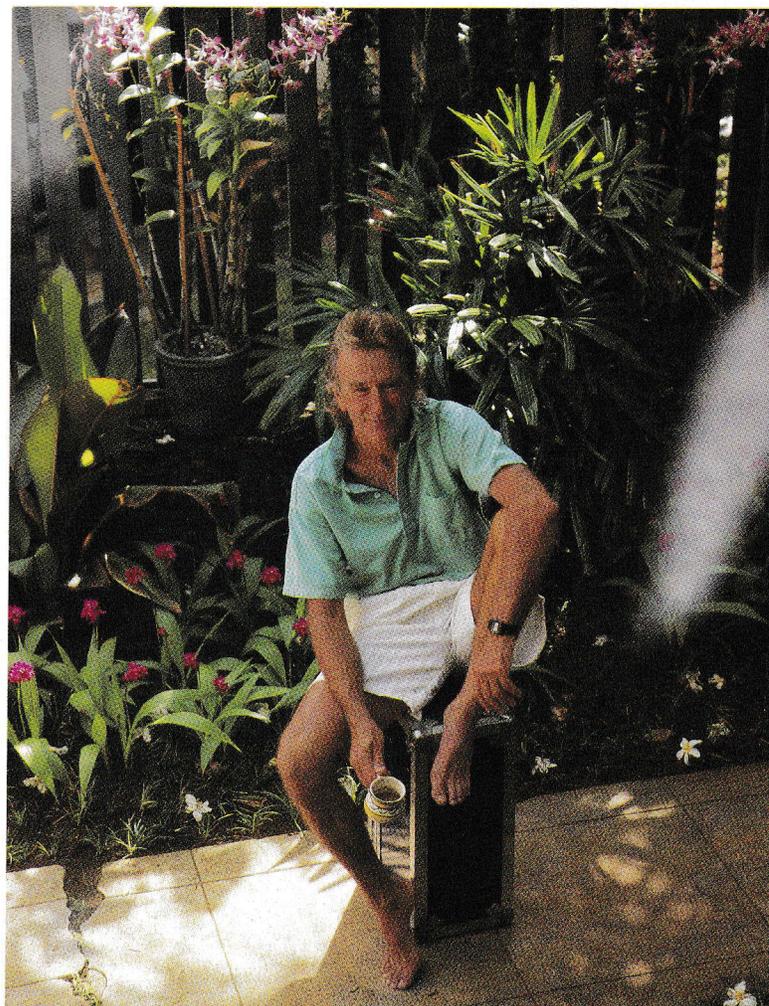
Bengston admits that changing his studio definitely inspired him to create new formats. For a time he had been working with the iris, chevron or other icon floating in the center of a rectangular or ovoid boundary. After 1978, he began to compose with jagged diagonals in a more diaristic and figurative manner full of Hawaiian symbology: fish, birds, plants, water and 747s—along with tourists, girls and the Big Kahuna. "I may have made some mistakes in that period, but if there's no risk of making a mistake, it's no fun," he says.

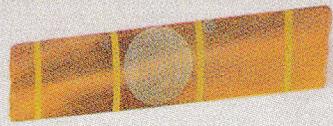
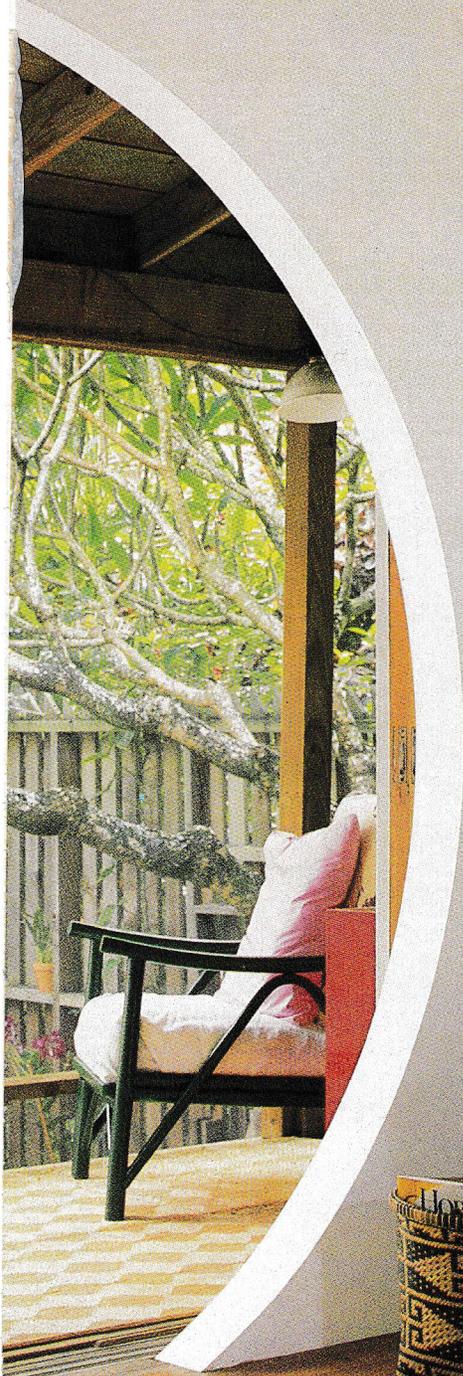
Unlike many working in the fine arts, Bengston eagerly rises to the defense of the applied arts, happy to argue against the hierarchy of marketing and the European prejudices that lend painting a position of supremacy over pottery. Bengston began as a ceramicist and throughout his career has designed everything from furniture to T-shirts.

Billy Al Bengston's modest white batten cottage with a stone chimney is nestled in a volcanic valley in Honolulu. One enters directly into the studio with its twenty-two-foot-high peaked ceilings, the light pouring in from windows and French doors on three sides. The room contains little that isn't directly related to the production of art. Even the fireplace is used to store rolls of paper. One side



ABOVE: A converted church nestled in a volcanic valley in Honolulu is now the studio of artist Billy Al Bengston. "My place is pretty righteous," he says with a smile, "but not very big." BELOW: "I only work in watercolor here," says Bengston, "because I find the weather conducive. The moisture keeps the paper flat; the water has a softer nature. And when you're finished, you can roll them up and take them with you." OPPOSITE: Sunlight streams into the studio filled with works in progress.

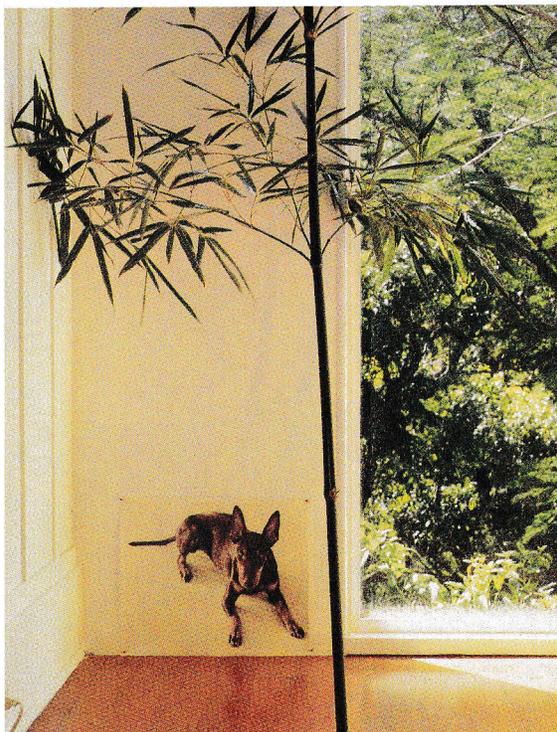




can hear the Kalihi flowing below, is a perfect example: The top, made of exotic woods, is shaped like the archetypal Hawaiian blossom, the anthurium, but inlaid with a pair of small sailboats that may read as eyes in a face. The table legs can be seen as a fish and the face of a kahuna, or as angular abstract shapes. Thus the object has functional and sculptural and iconic purposes.

Why is this so important to the artist? The answer explains more explicitly his reasons for being in Honolulu.

"Beauty and time," Billy Al Bengston says. "Those are the two most important things. You only have a block of time, and if you can't put in enough beauty, then you've lost it and your chance to have a better life." □



ABOVE: "Color is different in Hawaii," observes Bengston. "There are clouds in the sky going by at a million miles an hour in all directions. You're always in the presence of uninvited shadows." Of his new works—spheres floating in space in grids—Bengston comments: "They are very formal paintings, point and line to plane."

LEFT: "There is so much bamboo here you don't need vases," says Bengston. "I just cut a piece and put it in a room." The photograph of Bengston's Manchester terrier, Dodger, is "larger than life, because that's what you need when you're away from your dog." RIGHT: Bengston designed the sitting area's rug and *Mano* table. Kenneth Noland collage, right.

