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A Victim of Too Much 'LOVE'

Robert Indiana: Beyond LOVE
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'I was the least Pop of all the Pop artists," Robert Indiana once said. That's probably why, so far, he's finished just out of the running for a medal in the field. (Andy Warhol, of course, got the gold, Roy Lichtenstein the silver and Claes Oldenburg the bronze.) The problem seems to be that Mr. Indiana—who was born in 1928 and changed his surname in 1958 from Clark to that of his home state—was an anomalously sincere Pop artist. Unlike the ethereally ironic Warhol, the deadpan faux-comic-book Lichtenstein or the facilely absurd gigantist Oldenburg, Mr. Indiana meant absolutely every word he ever stenciled onto a canvas or one of his early totemic sculptures. But when—with one all-too-famous work of art—he fatefully decided to subscribe to Warhol's dictum that "making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art," Mr. Indiana managed only to exacerbate his outlier status in the New York art world.

The work of art in question is the 6-foot-square painting "LOVE" (1966)—four large capital letters, in a brightly colored

"Mate" (1960-62). oil on wood and steel-and-wood wheels.

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Clarendon Black font, set in a quadrant composition, with the "O" in the upper right adroitly tilted clockwise. Mr. Indiana was collectively inspired by Charles Demuth's "Love, Love, Love. Homage to Gertrude Stein" (1928), in which the word appears three times; by one of his own poems from the late 1950s with an "L" and an "O" stacked above an "V" and a "E"; and, some say, a banner hoisted during the 1964 Free Speech Movement in Berkeley with a rude anagram formed by the first letters in the motto "Freedom Under Clark Kerr." Mr. Indiana's first iteration of the word-image was in his commissioned Christmas card for the Museum of Modern Art. The big painting came soon after.

And following from the painting were large-edition prints, a LOVE ring, a tapestry, big outdoor sculptures in English, Spanish and Hebrew, and a postage stamp. All that bric-a-brac with Warhol and Lichtenstein images upon it notwithstanding, the growing anticommercialism artworld blowback on Mr. Indiana's reputation was such that a 1975 gallery show in New York was virtually ignored by the critics and went without a sequel for 14 years. In 1978, the artist packed up and moved to Vinalhaven, a small island off the coast of Maine, where he has lived and worked ever since. He has never had a museum retrospective in New York until now. Fortunately for us, this is an awfully good one—astutely selected, emblematically colorful and beautifully installed. The exhibition should earn Mr. Indiana a belated place on the Pop Art podium—a tie for third with Mr. Oldenburg, at least.

Mr. Indiana was adopted, but his parents' marriage was fractious in an almost Bonnie-and-Clyde way; while his mother was away testifying on behalf of her sister-in-law in a murder trial, Mr. Indiana's father struck up a relationship with another woman, for whom he abandoned the family (with the artist's mother in pursuit, armed with a revolver). By the time he was 17, Mr. Indiana had lived in 21 different homes. His art talent was, however, discovered and nurtured in public school and, after a stint in the Air Force, matriculation at the Art Institute of Chicago and a trip to Europe, he landed in New York determined to be either an artist or a poet. In 1956, he met and became the

lover of the already-well-known painter Ellsworth Kelly. "All of a sudden," Mr. Indiana said, "I was in the 20th century."

His painterly calling cards were words and an unabashed sign-painter's aesthetic. "While Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns had incorporated found objects and images of everyday life into their art some years earlier," writes the exhibition's curator, Barbara Haskell, in the catalog, "they had always done so with gestural paint handling. No painter had so openly challenged the boundary between fine art and commercial advertising." She's right. Using mostly simple stencil lettering—somehow straightforwardly American—Mr. Indiana fashions gorgeous visual mantras from such short, blunt words as "EAT," "DIE" and "ERR."

He tackles not only the highway enigma of disembodied road signs, for example in "Terra Haute" (1960), but forgoes mystery when he wants to lay a political opinion directly on the line ("The Confederacy: Alabama," 1965). And he's not afraid to acknowledge openly American artists of the same century who were at least his equals; in fact, Mr. Indiana's many almost-symphonic elegies to Demuth's "I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold" (1928) are among his best work. "The Brooklyn Bridge" (1964), his grisaille homage to Joseph Stella, isn't all that bad, either. Almost without exception, Mr. Indiana's paintings are economical (even when they're ornate), tightly conceived, wittily colored (or uncolored), and—without much sentimentality—genuinely felt.

What we don't get to see all that often—and what the welcome context of a retrospective gives us—are Mr. Indiana's totemlike sculptures with wheels attached (they don't roll, though; the wheels are fastened above the bases) from the early 1960s. They're made from salvaged lumber and hardware, and their railroad-yard rawness makes the stenciled words in "Two," "Bar" and "Four" (all finished in 1962) seem almost poignant. To read into them a longing on Mr. Indiana's part for a lost Midwest might be going a bit far, but they certainly don't subtract from the notion of Mr. Indiana being the least disingenuous of all the Pop artists.

Though Mr. Indiana's career was dealt a paradoxical setback by the excessive success of "LOVE," he still dreams of having a sculpture of it in every major city in the world. So far, there are seven. At age 85, perhaps one should be immune from proffered advice. Still, a tip from this quarter: Be careful what you wish for.

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