

Heartney, Eleanor, "George Herms at Tony Shafrazi", ART IN AMERICA, March 1996.

Art in America

Eleanor Heartney

A veteran of the California Funk movement which flourished in the 1960s, George Herms has continued to produce collages and assemblage sculptures that reveal a remarkable continuity of concerns. Despite the fact that all the works in this crowded exhibition look time-worn and comfortably battered, many are newly minted, created at the large work table in the back of the gallery which the artist occupied during a good portion of the show.

The sense of continuity derives in large part from Herms's choice of materials. Like a down-at-the-heels Joseph Cornell, he pieces together bits of urban detritus in ways that bring out their natural absurdities, unexpected convergences and hidden mysteries. However, not just any detritus will do. Deliberately excluding objects which might speak overtly of a post-'60s world, Herms collects odds and ends that seem suspended in time: magazine pages, machine parts, battered clocks, musical instruments, wooden end tables and television consoles.

A 1982 work titled Shoe Tree is a mobile made of old shoes, browned with age, that twist on a wire frame apparently composed of straightened clothes hangers. Similarly, Drugstore for Artie, from 1991-92, is an open shelf display whose contents--rusty tools, old cans, tattered magazine pages, bits of unidentifiable machine parts and broken bottles and forks--look as if they have lain untouched for years in some basement workshop.

The best of the works exhibit a dry wit and a playful fondness for visual and verbal puns. For instance, The Russian Thang, a funky tribute to Russian avant-garde art, features a Suprematist composition fashioned from an arrangement of fabric scraps, some of which, like a patch of old denim and the cuff of a red leather jacket, betray their proletarian origins. Zodiac behind Glass (Gemini) presents that sign in a boxed assemblage which also includes a pair of wire figures dancing before an old Pontiac hub cap; at their feet, a set of metal letters spells out the word "duet."

Beneath the play, however, is a deeper current of melancholy. These clusters of discarded artifacts are reminders of the transitory nature of the human lives of which they were once a part. Crusted with age and discolored with rust and yellowed stains, Herms's creations are like relics from an America which was just discovering the dubious joys of a throwaway culture. From our perspective, deeply enmeshed in ecological, economic and social consequences of that culture, these works are poignant reminders that we were not so guiltless even in the hallowed innocence of those years.