

Drohojowska-Philp, Hunter, "Hot Set", ARTNET MAGAZINE, 16 March 2005.

Hot Set

by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp



["George Herms: Hot Set," installation view, Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2005](#)

Personal, handmade, eccentric, these qualities appear in so much of the work being done these days by young artists. So it seems especially timely to take a look at the art of the consummate Beat Generation artist George Herms, who is spending this year as a visiting scholar at the Getty Research Institute.

An influential figure in Northern and Southern California in the 1950s and '60s, Herms is featured prominently in "Lost but Found: Assemblage, Collage and Sculpture, 1920-2002," Nov. 5, 2004-Mar. 28, 2005, at the Norton Simon Museum of Art in Pasadena. Herms' collages and assemblages are also on view in "From George Herms with Love" at the Tobey C. Moss Gallery through May 7 (prices range from \$300 to \$20,000).



[George Herms
Thelonius Sphere Monk
2004](#)

Last but not least, "George Herms: Hot Set," a survey of his large scale assemblages and wall works, is on view at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, Mar. 5-May 14, 2005. The show was organized by Walter Hopps, founding director and now curator of 20th-century art for the Menil Collection in Houston as well as curator of 20th-century art at the Guggenheim Museum. Hopps has known Herms for nearly 50 years and first showed his work at Ferus Gallery, which he opened with Ed Kienholz in L.A. in 1957.

That lengthy history and friendship, rich with anecdotes, was apparent in a conversation between these legendary L.A. septuagenarians held before a large crowd at the Santa Monica Museum on Mar. 8. Ed Ruscha, who had loaned work to the exhibition, was one of the first to arrive and offered his unreserved appreciation for Herms' rusted and faded sculptures and collages. "I just love his work," he said.

Joe Goode, whose paintings and sculptures were included in early Pop art shows, said that Beat artists like Herms, with their use of language and objects, had a definite influence on him. "When I made those sculptures using milk bottles, I think that idea could have come from the assemblage artists."



George Herms
Beauty
1978

The audience included Joan Quinn, Caldicott Chubb, Thomas Crow, Allen Ruppberg, Hudson Marquez, Michael McMillen, Kenny Scharf and Tobey Moss. Hopps explained that he had organized "Hot Set" because, "there are so few assemblage artists who are left in America. I want to make the point that the making of art with found objects is beautiful and natural. Wallace Berman and Ed Kienholz are close to Herms in the west, but the tradition goes back to the 1930s."

Hopps, whose curatorial credits include organizing the first retrospective of Dadaist Marcel Duchamp (at the Pasadena Art Museum), also has such a reputation for tardiness that when he was director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., his staff took to wearing buttons saying, "Walter Hopps will be here in 20 minutes." At the scheduled dialogue at the Santa Monica Museum, however, it was Herms who arrived 20 minutes late, due to the predictably unpredictable L.A. traffic. Herms was introduced by museum director Elsa Longhauser as "one of the great assemblage artists in L.A." and Hopps as "a true treasure we all revere."



George Herms
Flat World
1974

Moderator Anne Doran got the old friends to swap stories. Hopps had a recollection of an evening chez Herms during the 1960s in Topanga Canyon. "Spaghetti dinner with the kids and his wife, we talked into the small hours got quite wasted. I despaired of driving back to Pasadena and George said, "My whole family sleeps in one bed. You can join us or you might prefer the dogs – German shepherds. I chose the dogs. I had to throw away my jacket and pants because the eau de canine would not come out."

In terms of organizing the present survey, Hopps and Herms had been discussing it for five years. "We talked about what works," said Herms. "If they can only see three things, what three things they should see?" Later Herms confessed that the pair had actually spent most of their time talking about jazz, which may account for the gallery of pieces that Herms has dedicated to musicians like Thelonius Monk.



George Herms, Walter Hopps and Anne Doran at the Santa Monica Museum of Art

Hopps said that he was pleased to find so much variety available, that he was able to borrow major wall pieces from actors Dennis Hopper and Dean Stockwell.

Herms recalled that when curator William Seitz selected his work for "The Art of Assemblage" at the Museum of Modern Art in 1961, "It was one of the greatest moments of my life. He bought a piece. I was about 25. I thought, 'This is going to be a fantastic life.'" With a self-deprecatory laugh, he added, "Has my work been back to the modern or have I met a curator as cool as Bill Seitz since then?"

Explaining how they had first met, Hopps said that photographer Charles Brittin was living in Hermosa Beach and his upstairs neighbor was the singer Anita O'Day. Herms interjected, "You could see her in the backyard in a white bathing suit on occasion. It was fantastic!" Hopps continued, "Charles had told us about this junk garden made of old rusted objects." That turned out to be Herms sculpture.



Joe Goode, Caroline Huber, Ed Ruscha

Herms added, "I was just trying to find out what I was going to do with my life. Walter took me along when he set up the first Ferus show of Wallace Berman. I saw an art gallery transformed into a temple that night and thought that was what I wanted to do with my life." Instead of going to art school, Herms apprenticed with Berman and John Altoon, "who were in full stride."

After Berman died, a posthumous show of his work was held at the Timothea Stewart Gallery. Berman's grandmother attended and Herms recalled guiding her around the gallery until they came upon a drawing of "a girl giving a blowjob to a big dick." Abashed, Herms looked at Berman's grandmother, who shrugged and said, "You know, you could never tell what he was thinking."



Al Ruppensberg and Santa Monica Museum of Art director Elsa Longhauser

One of the largest tableaux in Herms show is dedicated to painter Arthur Richer, who periodically told him that "this rusty shit is never going to make it – you got to learn to draw." Herms, however, considers his rusty wall pieces to be paintings. "My assemblage was always more painterly than my paintings. When you are assemblage artist, the whole planet is your art supply store. I did not spend money on art supplies, I couldn't afford to, I had to put groceries on the table for babies. I wasn't rebelling. I was a bell-ringing in the environment."

After the conclusion of the dialogue, Hopps, 73, was asked about his busy schedule of organizing exhibitions. He paused and said, "The favorite thing I ever heard from a dealer talking to some ambivalent clients was, 'Rest assured, art always rewards.' I think it's true."

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Podium shot of Walter, Anne and George