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Interview

## George HERMS

By CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN  
Photography ROBBIE FIMMANO



George Herms Mixed-Media Artist, Bohemian Pioneer— The closest thing to a West-Coast art shaman, 75-year-old sculptor, painter, assemblage master, and jazz lover George Herms has roots so deep in the Los Angeles creative community that his vertiginous three-dimensional collages could be described as odes to timelessness and decay while unquestionably running on a Pacific Standard clock. Herms, a Californian by birth, who originally studied engineering at Berkeley, decided to pursue a life as an artist when a drifter in a Sacramento bus depot sat down next to him and said, "There's the makers, the takers, and the fakers. Which will you be?" Around that time, Herms met Wallace Berman, the epic Beat artist, in Topanga Canyon, and even helped him hang his first show in 1957 at the equally epic Ferus Gallery, "when it was behind Streeter Blair's antique store. You went down a little passage and there was the gallery and John Reed slept under a work bench, courtesy of Ed Kienholz, whose shop it was." Herms went on to become associated with the influential assemblage Southern-Cal art group Semina, creating found-object poems that range from sculptural balancing acts of detritus to ripped and semantically re-anchored textual wall collages. Herms has a home in Irvine, but he keeps a basement laboratory in a friend's house in Topanga Canyon, stuffed full of scraps, cuttings, boxes, and rusted metal that look like finished works waiting for the right venue (actually, the studio is the right venue—only the mass audience the works deserve would disrupt the tranquility of the place). "The feeling I get when leaving a jazz club is how I want people to feel when they leave an exhibition of mine," Herms says. Right now, he is working on the stage setting for an avant-garde opera to be performed at REDCAT, CalArts' experimental art venue, in 2011—a visual piece that may or may not include spiral staircases, paper plates stamped with Herms's own mysterious music notes, an abstract sculpture suggesting a giant clarinet, and even the inclusion of a cardiogram screen. The project fuses his deep love of music with his eye for visual pyrotechnics. "This whole town is an opera," he says.

George Herms in his Topanga Canyon Studio, October 2010. Robe: Tom Ford. Pants: Herms's Own.