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Art in America

The Meandering Path: Q+A With George Herms

by *brienne walsh* 07/13/11

"Xenophilia," George Herms's current exhibition at LA MOCA's Pacific Design Center is peculiar because, as the artist says, "It's a one-man show with other artists as guests." That the godfather of West Coast assemblage would want to share his spotlight with a generation of younger artists, and his close friend and contemporary Robert Rauschenberg, is less out of the ordinary when you consider his half-century of collaboration and collectivity around Southern California.

As curated by Neville Wakefield, Herms' sculpture is the symbol for a peripatetic and meditative approach to making art. His collage and sculpture comprise webs and totems of cast-off objects that possess the alchemical patina of age and wear. They're made from everyday objects collected during his wanderings, and assembled in the homes of friends. He keeps neither a home nor a studio anywhere in the world, although his practice, and his life, is decidedly rooted in the West Coast.



George Herms, *Xenophilia*, 2011, collage, 22 x 28 in., courtesy of the artist, © George Herms

The exhibition traces Herms' influence beyond California, on 19 international artists including Nate Lowman, Dan Colen, Agathe Snow, Ryan Trecartin and Sterling Ruby. *A.I.A.* phoned Herms last week, as he sunbathed in a friend's Topanga backyard the morning before "Xenophilia" opened on July 10.

BRIENNE WALSH You're considered to be one of the pioneers of West Coast assemblage. I wonder if the young, 30-something artists Wakefield included in the show work in the spirit of the original assemblage movement?

GEORGE HERMS Whenever someone asks me that question, I make that gesture where I put my thumb on my nose and wiggle my fingers. These artists have the same irreverent attitude towards life that we had. They're here to have fun. They don't get hung up on themselves.

For me, assemblage is about using the objects I cross paths with in life. It's about taking my rusty dusty old junk and making it into something beautiful. I think in some ways artists like Dan Colen and Nate Lowman, with their urban angst, are making their own version of that. They're beachcombers of urban junk.

WALSH To your mind, is there a political aspect of the "beat" pose of today?

HERMS There's definitely something in the artists' attitudes, in their material, that is freshly anti-authoritarian. But they're not bound by the tyranny of history. They don't care about that. They're living in the now. I don't know yet what it means to be an artist in the 21st century-but they're on the cusp of defining it.

WALSH How do you think they'll define it?

HERMS Well, the 19th century was different from the 20th century in that there was a shift from photography imitating painting to photography and motion pictures. This generation has grown up with all kinds of new mediums. Someone like Ryan Trecartin, for example, is holding up a mirror to a society inundated with information and imagery, and he's doing it creatively.

WALSH How much do you think the dialogue on the 21st century, as posited by the exhibition, is shaped by in Los Angeles, rather than New York?

HERMS New York is really the most provincial place in the world. That's not to say I don't love it. I lived there in 1964. I used to go out to the jazz clubs, stay out until 4 am, and then miss my appointments with curators at museums the next day.

But in the past, the writers were in New York, so that's where your reputation got made. Today, the art world is global. Artists coming out of the art schools, they're going wherever there's a project. They just hop on a plane, and in a few hours, they're wherever they need to show up.

WALSH Are you global as well?

HERMS I used to keep a studio, but I don't anymore. I stay with friends, and I work in their backyards. The whole planet is my art supply store, and the whole planet is my studio.

WALSH You've defined "Xenophilia" as "love of the unknown." Is that a rule that defines your general practice?

HERMS My work is just about opening your arms and embracing life. I always put the word "Love," with the "e" backwards, as the finishing touch on every piece I make. That's imperative to me. I first started making art as wedding presents and birthday gifts. Then it was ending up in museums and shit. I always know a work is finished because it gets to the point where I don't want to give it away. Then I know it's cool.