

## L.A. artists get, well, artistic

*At a time for decoration, the traditional is 'out'*

By Hunter Drohojowska

In L.A., "tradition" can sound like a dirty word. Even during the holiday season, the trend-setters seek ever new and novel ways to decorate their homes. One trendy furniture store in the Beverly Center, By Design, is selling black artificial trees (from Italy, of course) for between \$495 and \$795. Clearly, strings of popcorn are too low-tech for Christmas in Los Angeles.

Artists, however, have to come up with unique holiday decorations, using more ingenuity than cash. One artist is remembered for flocking his tree pink and ornamenting it with black licorice whips and marshmallows. Another hung his conifer with small cages of canaries.

Constance Mallinson, who shows her detailed landscape paintings at the Ovsey Gallery, said she avoids the holiday craziness and opts for skiing vacations. But she has amassed a collection of about 150 antique Christmas cards, which she posts around the house. Another artist, Nancy Reiss, said her house is decorated in plaids and rustic Americana to look a

little like Christmas all year.

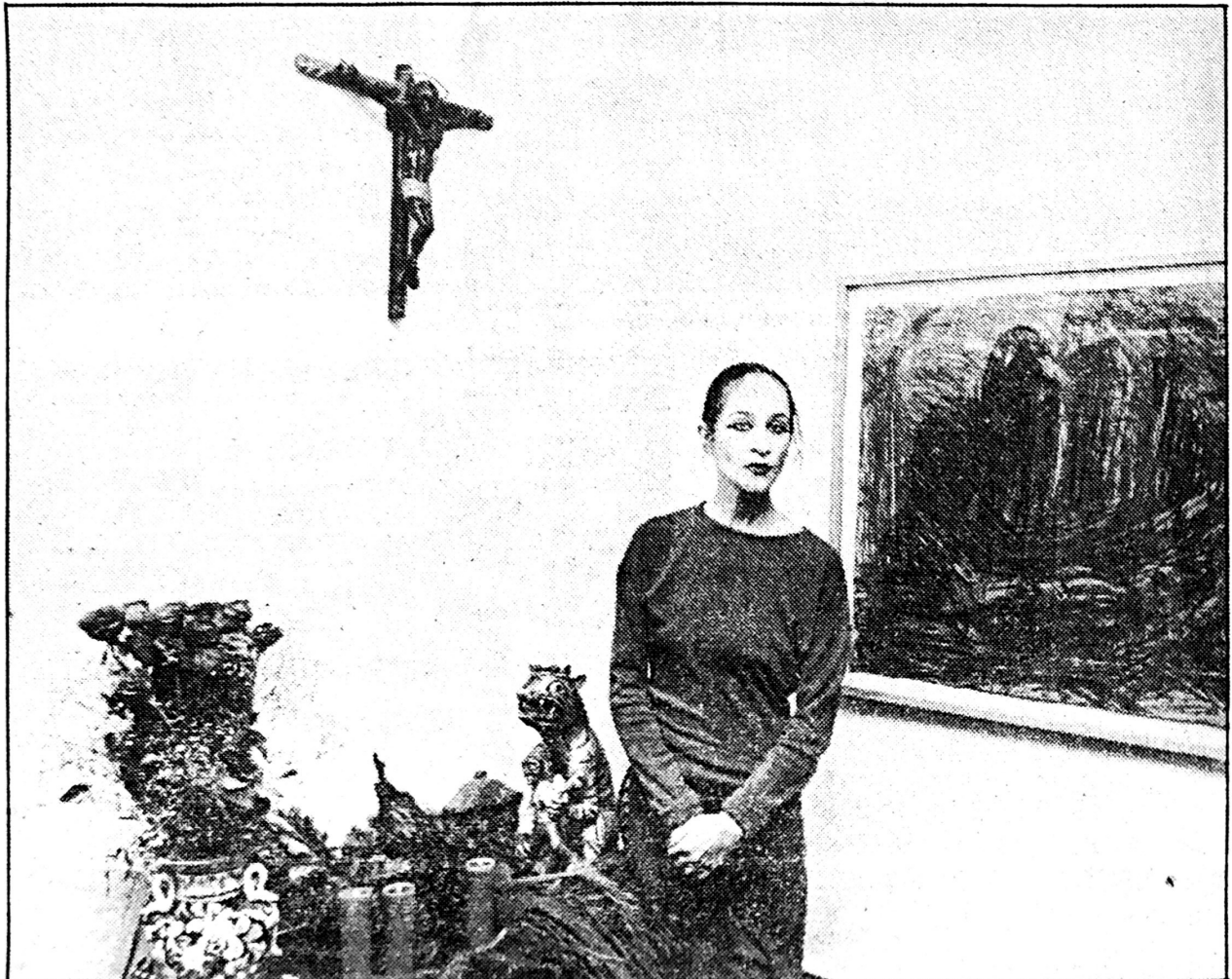
Other artists get more serious. Peter Shire is Jewish but was raised a Methodist; his wife, Donna, is second-generation Japanese and Buddhist. What to do? At home, Donna and daughter Ava decorate traditionally. But in Shire's Echo Park ceramics studio, the tree is decidedly unconventional.

Shire is known for his teapots and furniture, frankly humorous combinations of art history and popular culture in brilliant colors like purple, pink and lime shown at the Saxon/Lee Gallery.

His invented ornaments are in the light-hearted spirit of his work. Long, fluorescent Japanese fishing lures, wiggly pieces of galvanized aluminum from the hardware store and white ceramic bomber jets adorn the branches of a planted tree. And there is Shire's favorite: a copper float in the toilet tank. Instead of an angel, a nude Japanese Barbie doll perches atop the pine. On an adjacent shelf, Shire composed a creche made of ceramic portraits of friends, representing the three wise men, Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus.

But Shire, like others, turns humbug about the

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For Christmas, artist Nancy Riegelman decorated her Silverlake home with ethnic art, including pieces from Mexico and India.

Javier Mendoza/Herald photographer

## Artists

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 holiday season and what it has come to mean. "Christmas is a mess," he said. "It's a different trauma every year. No one hangs loose."

Artists Steve Arnold and Dennis Dombrovski live in a loft organized like a theatrical set, draped with exotic, glittering fabrics, adorned by images drawn from mythology. It sort of looks like Christmas all year, but for the holidays Arnold created an altar piece of three wooden figurative sculptures, each painted gold. The center figure is crowned and a halo of gold paper radiates from behind, a pair of plastic sea horses are propped upside down in front, and pyramids flank either side.

Arnold, wearing a glittering smoking jacket from the movie "Pennies From Heaven," said, "I'm into symmetry, so things are organized in pairs. I call these 'spirit guides.' If you crossed to the other world, these guys will help you get across."

The artists don't practice a religion, calling themselves "inter-dimensional." Says Dombrovski, "We're sort of anti-traditional." Arnold's sculptures and photographs and Dombrovski's paintings can be seen at the Attack Gallery.

Artists Pierre Picot and Nancy

Riegelman have a cozy house in Silverlake where their artwork shares wall space with ethnic art and other paintings. This appreciation for the art of other lands has affected their approach to Christmas.

"Pierre is half-Catholic and half-Jewish, and I'm Jewish," says Riegelman. "So instead of a tree, I love all the Mexican traditions. I think they are more powerful and encom-

pass more than a national identity." On a carved wooden chest from India, the artists have piled evergreen branches and red candles between the Mexican figure of a leopard who has caught a devilish man, and a patterned Mexican vase holding roses. On the wall is a new "Christo" they just bought in Mexico.

On another wall is a collection of "retablos," paintings of Christ on

tin. Riegelman has been so influenced by them that she started a series of small paintings on tin. Both artists show at the Jan Baum Gallery, which also displays African art.

But they, too, want to avoid some of the seasonal craziness. "We're going to Oaxaca," Riegelman says.

*Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.*



Peter Shire's untraditional Christmas tree is covered with such ornaments as fishing lures and ceramic bomber jets, and topped with a nude Barbie doll.



Steve Arnold's loft kind of looks like Christmas all year, with its exotic, glittering fabrics and images drawn from mythology.