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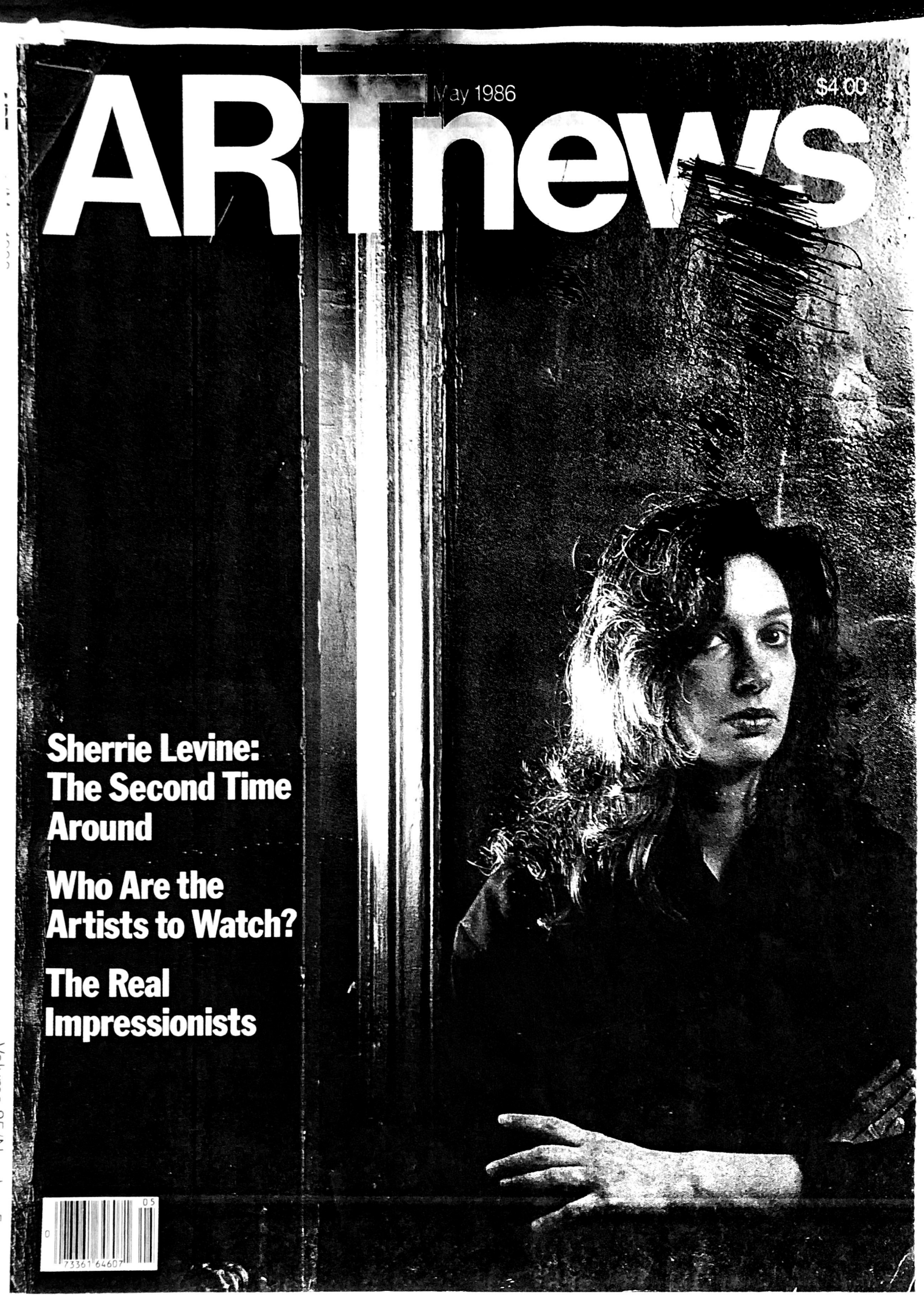

## Sherrie Levine: The Second Time Around

## Who Are the Artists to Watch?

## The Real Impressionists

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# ARTISTS THE CRITICS WATCHING [ARE]

It is tempting to think that the diversity of styles and intentions of the 17 artists chosen by our critics for this special section illustrates some principle—the eclecticism of art in the '80s, the tendency of artists to reflect regional trends or traditions in their work, the soft but audible voicing of a renewed interest in spirituality.

There *is* a remarkable variety of styles being pursued, and in some cases regional generalizations appear to hold. Jim Isermann's cheerful installations of early '60s-style formica-top tables and splashy "wall decorations" look like showrooms for California patios; Bill Cass' altarpiecelike triptychs show the influence of Chicago's preoccupation with folk art; Richard Beckett's murky encrusted paintings partake of New York's growing interest in biomorphism.

But for each of these artists there is an opposite. Most of them, of course, cannot be "placed." Albuquerque artist Allan Graham's restive, iconic wall constructions appear to owe little to the contemplative solitude of the Southwest; Randy Hayes' edgy nocturnal portraits give no hint of the delicate Tobeyesque heritage of traditional Seattle painters.

And just as one begins to detect a growing interest in the personal quest for meaningful forms and symbols, as in the paintings of Pia Stern or the kinetic sculptures of John Scott, along comes Jeffrey Vallance, whose whimsical search for not so private symbols has led to such works as *Connie Chung Tiki*—a melding of the Polynesian god Kon Tiki and NBC anchorwoman Connie Chung.

Our one certain conclusion is that there is a wealth of richly interesting work being done around the country. While this is no news at all, we enjoy demonstrating it again every so often.

*Jeffrey Vallance.*
*BELOW* ***Rarotonga Surfboard****, 1983, enamel, duct tape and plastic tape on surfboard, 56¼ by 21 by 13 inches.*

# JEFFREY VALLANCE

JEFFREY VALLANCE has cast himself as the unofficial cultural ambassador of the United States. Over the past four years, he has made visits to small islands in the South Pacific, and to the islands' polar opposites, Iceland and Switzerland. His art incorporates the experiences and mythologies of those places, how they have been affected by encroaching Western culture and how, in turn, our culture has assimilated their influences. All of this is manifested in drawings, objects, paintings and installations that are painstakingly detailed yet unrefined, like observations in a traveler's notebook.

"The artists who traveled with the early explorers are a big influence for me," he says. "The difference is that when I got there, most places already had snack bars and heavy industry. They had been explored, commercialized, but I explored them anyway. You find the same symbols as in primitive cultures, but they no longer belong. So discovery now is in the incongruities."

Vallance, 31, looks the part of the cultural anthropologist. His wire-rimmed spectacles give him an owlish appearance, his blond hair is combed tidily to one side. He carries an attaché case. He grew up in Canoga Park in that much-maligned section of Los Angeles known as the Valley. He inherited his artistic proclivities from his family. His father made models of campsites, and his grandfather and mother also made forms of folk art. Vallance's slightly out-of-sync world view was established at the age of five, when he started drawing the reptiles and wild dogs that still populate his art.

At the age of ten, Vallance built an accurate replica of the spooky mansion from the mid-'60s TV series "The Addams Family." He sent a photograph of it to the cartoonist Charles Addams, whose thank-you note contained a sketch of the character Wednesday. It was the first incident of art-as-communication, the leitmotiv of Vallance's art.

Throughout his career, he has used the old-fashioned mail service to reach culturally symbolic popular figures. He corresponded with Colonel Sanders and Oscar Meyer, sending them souvenirs to autograph and return. He asked Senator Strom Thurmond, a Democrat, to sign a statue of the Republican elephant. Through this process, Vallance excavated the recent cultural past of his own country, and this led to his curiosity about foreign lands.

Vallance graduated from California State University at Northridge in 1979, and by the time he finished his M.F.A. at Otis Art Institute of Parsons School of Design in Los Angeles two years later, he was already considered a working artist, pursuing the links between the mediated imagery and myths of this country as connected to other cultures in a project called "Cultural Ties."

Vallance corresponded with heads of state around the world, sending them a necktie and asking for one of theirs in return. The neckties—or headdresses from some nations—and letters from the various presidents, prime ministers, chieftains and kings were exhibited, to acclaim from critics and the mass media. The seeming simplicity of the project was paradoxically revealing, humorous and poignant. Vallance had broken through the diplomatic barrier to the men and women behind the titles. "You read about these people in the newspapers and magazines," he says. "I wanted to bring out a different side of their personality. It helps me understand who they are. It has more to do with humanism than politics."

COURTESY ROSAMUND FELSEN GALLERY

Vallance considers "Cultural Ties" a "passive exploration." In 1983, he set out on his first "active" voyage, beginning where Gauguin did, in Tahiti, and visiting other islands in the South Pacific.

On the island of Aitutaki, Vallance researched the origins of Tiki, the Polynesian deity who was brought to America by sailors after World War II and translated as a whimsical decoration. Tiki torches for backyard barbecues, Tiki decals, Tiki statuettes in Hawaiian restaurants all became popular, especially in Southern California. On the island, Vallance found that Tiki had been a potent fertility god, the subject of legends and lore. He found older islanders who remembered the original power of their gods. "Symbols in the society have lost their power and been corrupted," he explains. "Polynesian gods became just a motif. In Switzerland [where he traveled in 1984] the heraldry that identified soldiers in battle now exists in modern graphics or on license plates. I bring those symbols out where they have a new meaning."

Vallance's exhibition of work inspired by his first journey was titled "Aitutaki" and included a written explanation of the Tiki myth. He showed island Tikis alongside his own invented Tikis. He created a surfboard Tiki and a Kontiki that was shown with his *Connie Chung Tiki*, named after the NBC anchorwoman.

Last year, Vallance returned to the South Pacific to meet the king of Tonga. With a letter of introduction from Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley, Vallance chatted with the king and presented him a pair of super-extra-large swim fins. Apparently, the king, an avid swimmer, had trouble finding his size. Vallance says, "He put his huge hand into one of the fins, smiled and said, 'Ah, these will fit very nicely.' " We'll see the result of this cultural tie in Vallance's next exhibition. —*H.D.*

MARVIN MAGNUS

*Jim Isermann.* ***BELOW Flowers,*** *installation at Kuhlenschmidt/Simon Gallery, Los Angeles, 1986.*

# Los Angeles

## JIM ISERMANN

COURTESY KUHLENSCHMIDT/SIMON GALLERY

JIM ISERMANN'S interest in design of the late '50s and early '60s became so intense that, finally, it overtook his art: he creates installations of period rooms replete with lamps, clocks, coffee tables and chairs in the saturated colors and ameboid shapes that once represented the future to America. The artist, 30, sports a shock of blond hair and has the fresh-faced glow of a boy who walked right off the set of "77 Sunset Strip." He drives a red and white '65 Marlin. Usually, these incidental details would have little to do with an artist's oeuvre, but for Isermann they are extensions of his artistic statement.

Isermann's art is frequently labeled "pure California," but its apparently wacky edge has a history that has informed artists as wide-ranging as Kenny Scharf, Peter Halley, Rodney Alan Greenblat and Julie Wachtel. All are reexamining the colors, motifs and stereotypes of the early '60s as history, as cultural determinants of the present and as a nostalgic glance at a time when America seemed a simpler and more optimistic place.

Kenosha, Wisconsin—not California—is where Isermann grew up, in what he calls a modern Prairie-style house. His family owned a clothing store, which Isermann also remembers as having a modern interior. "That's the way I thought things were, modern. I really thought life was going to be like the Jetsons." Fom his earliest memories, he wanted to be an artist, while his twin brother, Bill, became an accountant. At the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Isermann began a series of paintings of objects, of '50s cars and 45-rpm records with the spectrum on their labels. Influenced by Pop art, he says, "I thought Andy Warhol was God." His teachers were conservative and not terribly sympathetic. "They never understood that you could be serious about art while having fun."

After graduation in 1977, Isermann came to Los Angeles for the first time and felt right at home. "In Wisconsin there were not too many suburbs, so that look was thought of as being Californian, not '50s. When I came here, that look was everywhere."

He entered the progressive California Institute of Arts in Valencia the next year and began to translate his paintings into objects. "I started making things that I wanted to have at home," he says of the first replicas of '50s and '60s furniture. "I never saw the difference between a painting and a decoration. I always thought paintings were wall decorations," he adds. "My work was never about any kind of struggle with paint." At Cal Arts, his ideas were encouraged by such teachers as Jonathan Borofsky and Judy Pfaff.

"I think of furniture as sculpture, even the old furniture that I collect," Isermann explains. "I studied the origins, and how '50s biomorphic furniture was influenced by artists like Miró, Arp and Pollock. I studied Eames and Saarinen and how their furniture came out of the war technology. That was the first time they had the means to make furniture look any way they wanted it to. The future look became so popular, and then people got tired of it.

"I didn't think of it as being functional," he adds. "I thought of it as being optimistic, futuristic. I also liked it because, at first, nobody else liked it."

In 1982, Isermann presented an installation of furniture that alluded to the early '60s but wasn't from any single source of inspiration. "Motel Modern" was held for two days at The Inn of Tomorrow in Anaheim, adjacent to Disneyland; the bushes were cut into topiary shapes of Mickey Mouse, Mary Poppins and Dumbo. Isermann filled the room with his own creations, including an oversize chartreuse console for the TV set, a clock shaped like a model of an atom, even a futuristic cover for a Kleenex box.

Since then, Isermann's exhibitions have been total environments. His most recent show included paintings of flowers on wood panels, a circular seating arrangement and an elaborate lighting arrangement with hanging globes as the pistils of the flowered ceiling panels. The paintings, though deceptively simple in their flower-power style of the '60s, allude to the history of modernism, from Stuart Davis to Andy Warhol, from Bridget Riley to Kenneth Noland.

"I made the paintings because there is an idea that art is different in objects and in paintings. I can't think of something being as precious as that, a painting isolated on a wall. I wanted something that would function in the total environment," says Isermann. "The things that influenced me most came from popular culture but were influenced by fine art. In the '50s and '60s, there was a close relationship between art and popular culture, like the Op-art dresses and designs. The art becomes popular culture and then the masses accept it and the artists reject it. My art is about fine art becoming popular culture and then coming back around to fine art. But people don't think of my work as fine art. That's why I made paintings for that show."

*—Hunter Drohojowska*