

WILLIAM NETTLES

Out of the scrapheap—Herms' assemblages, from left, "Poppity Pop Goes the Motorcycle" (1989), "Sphere" (1988-89) and "Doughnuts for Duncan" (1988).

Artistic Alchemy

George Herms' 'Secret Archives' is a walk through 30 years of transforming found objects and images into assemblage portraits

By HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA

A square of rusted yellow steel lay in the middle of the Pacific Coast Highway, where most of the drivers swerved to avoid it. George Herms pulled his car off the side of the road and with a hasty admonition to his son—"Don't ever try to do this"—leaped from the car, dashed into traffic and rescued the corroded castoff. Herms took the treasure to his downtown studio and eventually attached a small rusted tin can, transforming the undesirable junk into an assemblage portrait of an old friend, photographer Edmund Teske.

"I'm a junk sculptor," Herms explains with glee. "These things have been thrown away and have become the raw materials I build my pieces with."

The portrait of Teske will hang with other assemblage portraits of the artist's friends and older works in the 30-year survey "George Herms: The Secret Archives," opening Wednesday at the Municipal Art Gallery at Barnsdall Park in Los Angeles. It is the significant undertaking and parting gesture of the show's curator, gallery director Ed Leffingwell, whose position was eliminated in a recent budget cut.

Leffingwell has known Herms



RANDY LEFFINGWELL / Los Angeles Times

since they were neighbors in Topanga Canyon in the 1960s. He didn't so much curate as excavate. He undertook the herculean task of sorting through the 2,500 square feet of junk collected by the artist during four years. Herms had come to use the chaos as part of the working process, discovering associations of objects and images to transform into

art. (When he lost the lease on his studio in May and was forced to move, the task required 11 13-foot trucks.)

Curator Jeffrey Herr organized "Annex to the Secret Archives," a companion show of works on paper at the nearby gallery of the Junior Arts Center. He sorted through more than 20,000 sheets of Herms drawings, collages, po-

ems, booklets and pamphlets. Much of this is the effluvia of an old printing press that Herms has employed prodigiously since the mid-'60s, known as the LOVE Press.

Herms had a retrospective in 1978 at the Newport Harbor Art Museum, so Leffingwell has focused on works made in the last 13 years, especially what Herms

calls the "Celebration Series" of assemblage portraits.

With nearly 100 pieces in the show, Leffingwell and Herms decided to let the event be something of a free fall. For instance, the show is not hung chronologically. The catalogue is a Duchampian design by Jerry McMillan, a cardboard box containing booklets of essays, including a historical analysis by Susan Larsen, a poem by David Meltzer and such disparate stuff as a Wide-Lux photograph of the artist's overstuffed studio and a transparent sheet of printed trunk-lining paper. Finally, Herms will bring his many thoughts, words and deeds together in a theater piece called "The Twentieth Century" on Oct. 17 at the Barnsdall Theater.

The last century of this millennium seems a fitting subject for an artist of the philosophical and spiritual proclivities of Herms, who has simultaneously and enduringly produced paintings, sculptures, collages, films, poems, theater, photographs and prints. During an interview in his new downtown Los Angeles studio, a brick-walled room of 850 square feet that is already full to bursting, he gave a short, self-deprecatory chuckle and said, "I

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wanted to celebrate the 20th Century. We've ruined the air and water, but at the same time some great art has been produced."

This statement is less callous than it might sound, a demonstration of Herms' indefatigable optimism, his obsession with the process of alchemy. "You know, how to take something gross and make something fine out of it," said Herms, his thoughtful gray eyes trained on the silver lining.

Herms, a squarely built, athletic man of 57, speaks in thoughtful digressions. With a sweeping gesture at one wall of the studio, he indicated a few of the portraits: "The thrust is how an artist can capture the spirit of someone." Especially when using nothing but junk.

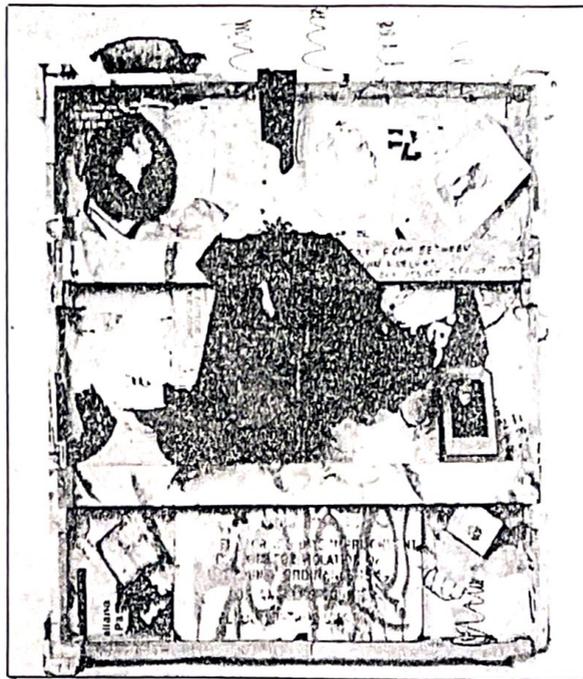
The hard-bitten Teske piece was hung at a rakish angle, like Malevich's black square gone to seed. "Teske was a photographer who opened my eyes to weathered wood," Herms said. "When I go visit him, he shows me photographs that really turn me on. Also, I wanted to do something very pure, and in the words of Theonolius Monk, 'Simple ain't easy.'"

Herms grew up with the brilliance of jazz in the '50s, with the sounds of Charlie Parker and John Coltrane, and created a sculpture for the late saxophonist Sonny Stitt. "I wanted that feeling of a page of musical composition, but in my medium," he said. The result is a white crumpled sheet of metal dotted with six rusted cans like a hopping line of musical notes.

Nearby, there hung an iron bedstead with a worn leather briefcase, a faucet and a rusted circle of metal. This is "Homage to the Irregular Verb (For Jess)," a portrait of the eccentric Bay Area artist. Herms also saluted poets like the Topanga visionary Cameron and the late Robert Duncan.

The portrait of assemblage artist and poet Wallace Berman is titled "The Berman Peace." Herms, who spent the last four years publishing a facsimile edition of Berman's 1950s magazine *Semina*, explained: "History is named after wars. I thought, 'Why not label history according to the peace we had? What if this era we passed through was the Berman Peace?'"

The baroque altarpiece of the show is titled "Drugstore for Artie," a memorial to his friend Expressionist painter Artie Richer. On old shelving salvaged from a drugstore, Herms attached objects that evoke memories of his friend. One of the most telling is a folded clipping from a 1958 *Life* magazine: "Lawrence, Kansas vs. Venice, Calif. Squaresville U.S.A. vs. Beatsville," which features photographs of Richer, his wife and son and young Herms, all barefoot and bohemian, in contrast to the clean-cut Midwestern nuclear family. "All the kids in Lawrence saw that



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Herms' "Pandora's Box," a 1992 mixed-media assemblage.

and wanted to become Beats," Herms mused.

The portraits hail from the '80s and '90s, but Herms has examples of work from the '50s, '60s and '70s in his studio. Studying them, he observes that there has been little formal change. He concludes that this has to do with the integration of his art and his life:

"Somehow, the development of assemblage as a medium, the found object, allowed me to have my entire life be raw material for the work. Which is sort of what the 20th Century has been about, overthrowing the academic idea that there was only one fit subject for art, that it was classical and you did not bring popular items onto the agenda."

Herms led his life as though he knew it was to be material for art. After growing up as the son of an agronomist in Woodland, a high school sportswriter with a gift for math, he had some false starts: a year of engineering at UC Berkeley, some early work with computers. Then, on his 20th birthday, in 1955, he was staying in a cabin in Topanga with a friend who made sandals. Beat poets Robert Alexander and Berman wandered down the path. Berman gave Herms a book of poetry by Thomas Merton, "The Tears of the Blind Lions." "That was the beginning of a long and interesting editing of the 20th Century and all its ups and downs," Herms said.

By 1957, he was rejected by the draft board. "This applicant wears a full beard for strength. He receives instruction from God in the form of dreams and in his work as an artist. . . . This shows an obvious delusional pattern," his draft board report read.

"I'm a searcher first of all," Herms explained. "The great key was that it was OK to be crazy because I had a very rational upbringing. One wanted to find a foundation that one could build

upon, and rationalism wasn't doing it for me. So I discovered poetry and art."

He continued: "I met those people, and John Altoon, and they were artists in full stride so I emulated them. I didn't know that you were supposed to go through school. I started out making master works. I just assumed you shot your best shot, that you did outlandish, bold work because that's what I saw these people doing."

"The spirit of those times was experimental and primitive. You'd hear John Cage and aboriginal drumming on the radio! Culture had a breadth to it without commercial possibilities. It was as if you belonged to some religious order and there was no real hope of striking it rich. You were just taking care of the business of the order which was art and poetry."

Herms was 25 when William Seitz, curator of the Museum of Modern Art's 1961 exhibition "The Art of Assemblage," came to call. "I was living in a shack with no electricity, cold water, babies, dogs and cats. He stood laughing in front of 'Librarian' and then bought a piece of mine. He put 'The Poet' in his exhibition, and it traveled the world. He was kind, gentle, sophisticated, and I thought, 'If this is the art world, it's going to be wonderful.' Herms laughed and added, "Naturally, I've yet to meet another William Seitz."

Seitz also wrote an influential essay, Herms recalled: "He said that the great tragedy of the late 20th Century was this division between spirit on the one side and intellect on the other because it was producing a schizophrenic society."

Seitz wrote that found objects are "associationally alive." "That gives you a great jump if you are thinking of making a poem out of objects," Herms said. "It's a lovely phrase but a difficult trick to turn. It's about the involvement with

life. The separation of art and life can be dissolved in assemblage."

Herms became an artist at a time when discussions of spirituality were not fraught with the negative associations of today. He still signs every piece with the letters L-O-V-E-3, meaning "Love is hate backward." He adopted the lessons of Berman, his mentor, who used to say that "Art is Love is God." Herms refers to artists as "spiritual athletes."

"The '60s were a very spirited, ecstatic time," he said. "There's a piece in the Junior Arts Center called 'Dance in a Circle and Prophecy.'" Herms giggles, remembering the moment that produced such liberation. "There is a sense that the spiritual is somehow not bally and that part of the word becomes effete and attenuated. But when the spirit gets down into the masses of people, then you have dancing, singing, music, work that people can react to. In my case, sometimes hostilely."

Herms is so much the cosmic gentleman, it is hard to comprehend such hostility. He receives grants and awards like the Prix de Rome. He is on the faculty of the Santa Monica College of Design, Art and Architecture. Yet "Moon Dial," a public sculpture that he was asked to lend to Beverly Hills in 1988, caused a storm of controversy. One citizen was so outraged at the sight of the rusted junk that she circulated petitions to get it removed. She copied a photograph of one of Herms' earliest pieces, "Flat Cat," a piece of road kill Herms had found and framed, and told anyone who would listen that Herms was planning to bring more of the same to Beverly Hills.

As for "Moon Dial," Herms said, it is now "scattered around L.A. like the body of Osiris. The 'Moon Dial' will rise again, but who knows where or when."

Herms is represented by L.A. Louver, a gallery with a long-standing affiliation with West Coast assemblage artists such as Berman and Ed Kienholz. Yet it is clear that the commercial aspects of the '80s in art left little impact.

Said Herms: "If I didn't want to have film, theater, music and poetry open as paths of possibility, I would have a right to claim a certain amount of value for my work."

"But it's experimental. I like to go back to square one continually. Maybe it's from raising so many children," said Herms, the father of four.

"I've never known what to do with money, because the most valuable things for me are priceless. I'd love to get the collector brothers together, Art and Bill, and have them talk to each other."

"That's what LOVE is. A reminder to me that I better love it because that's how I started. Then I'll make something I really covet, and I'll know it's good." □

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