

Print Article



Roger Herman's pots installed at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2005



Roger Herman
untitled
2005

DIRTY LITTLE POTS

by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

In an art world saturated with youthful promise, it is easy to lose sight of artists with a longer career trajectory. One artist who has pushed his work in ever-new directions is Roger Herman, whose "dirty little pots" were the subject of a brilliant exhibition this summer at the Santa Monica Museum of Art.

Herman was one of Los Angeles' hot young artists in the 1980s. Now he is chair of the department of painting at the city's hottest art school, UCLA, where he is surrounded by bright young things with their own agendas for success.

Herman has been rightly lauded over the years for monumental oil paintings and woodcuts that employ the expressionist line and gesture but are dedicated to coolly intellectual subject matter. Raised in the Alsace Lorraine region of Karlsruhe with its often shifting national allegiances, Herman has drawn from diverse sources in his work, painting from iconic art historical images like van Gogh's boots or photographs from newspapers and magazines. One exhibition included serial paintings in the expressionist style of the same mundane modern apartment block. By amalgamating the overview of Conceptual art with the expressionist language of painting, his work was and is considerably more sophisticated than that of many other who entered the limelight in the '80s.

Artists need to keep moving, reinventing and reexamining. A few years ago, Herman turned to ceramics. Like any number of painters before him -- Picasso, de Kooning --- Herman found it refreshing to work in three-dimensions. He also knew of the late, great West Coast sculptor Peter Voulkos, who began translating Abstract-Expressionist ideas into clay in the late '50s.

After learning to throw pots, Herman did not attempt to craft the perfect bowl. Instead, he adopted the Zen notion of making ceramics of intentionally flawed and rustic appearance. Slightly off-kilter, mostly glazed in neutral creams and browns, they range in size from teacup to mixing bowl. Herman paints the rough clay surfaces with scenes of naked women and men in enough different positions to challenge the *Kama Sutra*. The frankly sexual drawing of Egon Schiele meets *shun-ga*, erotic prints such as those made by Hokusai. Thus are the influences from West and East melded in this collection of naughty bowls and cylindrical vases that are much more about form than function. Herman is no stranger to erotica. There are large paintings of nudes in his past based on photographs and executed in a loose but dark line. The translation of this interest to vessels, of themselves heavy on the distaff symbolism, is brazen and compelling.

With a studied informality, the drawings of women with legs in the air, or splayed at the hips, or



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bent over with their bottoms raised are rendered with a crude spontaneity in keeping with the subject matter. The men appear to be less acrobatic. The human skull also makes an appearance but in the manner of a simple Zen line drawing. The small show at the Santa Monica Museum, which was on view June 11-closed Aug. 13, 2005, was more like a peep show than a porn film. One could not see very clearly what was taking place as limbs wrapped around the natural curves of the bowl or disappeared under a swath of dark glaze. Of course, that made them more titillating and one found oneself looking more closely. Peering. What IS she doing with that enormous. . . ? Oh, you get the picture.

Apart from a few individual vitrines, Herman arranged the pots in all their various sizes, shapes and hues on a single, long table. The erotic promise of the surface drawing was compromised since one could not see each piece in three dimensions. This decision drew some complaints, but Herman has always been willing to confound the viewer's desires. His expressionist-style paintings do not emote; his erotica offers no release. He is a big tease -- but that only makes the art so much more compelling.

With "in your face" art having become something of a pathetic cliché, it is a pleasure to see a body of work operating simultaneously on so many levels of contemplation. Herman's art has an easy familiarity with art history, an awareness of the viewer, a highly controlled presentation and a sense of esthetic adventure. That sort of talent and confidence only comes with maturity and experience.

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Two untitled pots by Roger Herman