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ART : He Will Keep You in Stitches : Jim Isermann's world encompasses decoration, design and '50s kitsch--he's into sewing right. There's something high-end about the lowest common denominator of popular design

March 20, 1994 | HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP | *Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is chair, department of liberal arts and sciences, Otis College of Art and Design. and*

Jim Isermann is a man who sews.

He spent the past year stitching together swatches and remnants purchased at swap meets and fabric stores, making bed-sized compositions of faded plaids and cornball florals that subtly remind one of an earlier time, a time of "My Three Sons" bedspreads and "Shindig" bell-bottoms.

These works are on view at the Richard Telles Gallery, in an exhibition that conjures immediate references to homemade quilts, specifically the AIDS quilt. Isermann's patterns are complex and rather strange; his work clearly has as its basis a sophisticated awareness of modern painting. Hence, it is doubly useful that the nearby Sue Spaid Gallery is offering a survey of the artist's unconventional work of the last decade--from his retro furniture and lamps made in '50s and '60s style to his more recent "paintings" composed of brilliantly colored stained glass or shag carpet.

To see these earlier works is essential for viewers who may have missed Isermann's debut--a 1982 installation at the Inn of Tomorrow, near Disneyland. The artist filled a motel room with his own re-creations of '50s style furniture, including a giant chartreuse console for the TV set. Aware that surrealist artists like Hans Arp and Joan Miro had influenced the biomorphic shapes of modern design, he felt he was bringing things full circle by presenting his furniture as high art.

"Fifteen years ago, when I started that work, I was aware of the high-art references. What directly influenced me was the lowest common denominator of popular design," Isermann explains.

A celebration of '50s style has since come into being everywhere from "Pee-wee's Playhouse" to Ed Debevic's diner, so it is difficult to imagine the initial impact of this work. Isermann recalls that "the old work, when it was made, sat on a fence between what was out of style and what is trendy. It had an edge you don't see today because those styles have come in and gone out again in terms of popular influences. When I show slides of that work to students today, they have no idea what it was like to look at that work when it was made."

Spaid's show is notable for another reason. With the accumulating critical interest in a younger generation of artists--Steven Crique, Chris Finley, Carter Potter and others--who revisit the formal conventions of modern painting and sculpture in the materials and colors of popular culture, Isermann looks like a stylistic godfather. Yet Isermann appears uncomfortable with this notion. "Some of that work I'm drawn to--I'm attracted to the superficialness--but I don't

understand the logic. I think there is a rigorous formal logic in everything I've done that I find that lacking in some of this other work."

He points to his own labyrinthine hand-sewn sheets hung on his studio wall and says, "The patterning is so complicated that it's almost impossible to see."

With his dimpled grin and James Dean haircut, Isermann, 38, looks a bit young to be considered anyone's fatherly role model. His Santa Monica loft, where he has lived since 1986, is filled with an eclectic mix of '50s and '60s paraphernalia, like ceramic hanging lamps from defunct coffee shops and a collection of yellow happy-face mugs. There are dozens of white mugs with red smiles as well.

"My mother collects them for me. They aren't worth much now. But they will be," he says with assurance. In the area serving as his living room hangs a drawing by Lari Pittman and several photographs by Judy Fiskin, both of whom he met while he was a graduate student at CalArts.

Isermann moved to Los Angeles in 1977 to get his master's degree but he was equally drawn by the L.A. aesthetic and its relationship to classic '50s design. "For me, there has never been a separation between decoration, design and art. I never looked at furniture or architecture or design as anything but art, it is all of equal influence. My earlier work walked some kind of line between good and bad taste. I was drawn to the populist nature of these things. Part of my interest is the planned obsolescence of design."

Although he grew up in a modern Prairie-style home in Kenosha, Wis., most of his early knowledge of modern design and pop culture came from books. At the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, where he earned his bachelor's degree in fine art, his teachers were less than sympathetic to his paintings of '50s cars and his affection for Andy Warhol. In fact, the school forced its students to take classes in such crafts as sewing.

"I hated taking them but I learned to sew," recalls Isermann.

As his toy fox terrier Riley barks for attention, Isermann confesses some startling statistics--he spent 500 hours sewing his first fabric piece at the end of 1992. As he grew more adept, the pieces took some 200 hours to complete. "When I saw them hanging together as a group at my opening at Feature (gallery in New York in January of 1994), I realized I was looking at a year of my life and it meant so much more to me than other shows--there is an emotional impact that wasn't present in the other work."

One of the pieces hanging in his studio nearby pulses with its eye-straining combination of Day-Glo colors. It is sewn, in part, from a fabric Isermann designed for last summer's "Unite" project, for which an international cast of artists--including Isermann and Raymond Pettibon from L.A.--was invited to create installations in an apartment building designed by Le Corbusier in Firminy, France. Isermann designed fabric in a vibrant pattern of overlapping crescents of lime, lemon, turquoise and hot pink. "It's a dream of mine," he jokes, "to become the Vera of the '90s."

For the installation, all the walls of one apartment were covered in the fabric, the floor in an identical pattern on a larger scale in linoleum. The bed, cushions and case for a TV monitor were also covered in the fabric. For all its absurdity, the work paralleled the extremity of Le Corbusier's own modernist conceit of creating furniture and accessories to match his own excruciatingly exacting architecture. With this piece, Isermann turned the theory of life-as-design into a hellish cacophony of color.

Working with fabric inspired Isermann's decision to sew. "I wanted something I could spend an incredible amount of time making, but fold up and have something that was easy to move. Part of it is investing that amount of my life into something."

Even at the height of the '80s, when it was most fashionable and theoretically correct for artists to have their work fabricated, Isermann built his own lamps and chairs for installations. Between 1988 and 1990, he not only painted by hand the hard-edged geometric panels for his paintings, he hand-hooked the shag rugs that became the matching components. Isermann says his obsessive involvement in the fabric pieces came after spending two years making stained glass pieces that, after all the time spent, were both fragile and difficult to move. "All of my work is labor intensive but this is extreme."

After a long and thoughtful pause, he adds, "There is something about being a gay man and making this work that is important. Something to do with interior decoration being accepted but not talked about in a way. I've been excluded from shows of gay work. I don't know if it's not politically correct enough to present or what."

"I feel as much a Martian in that world (of gay artists) as in any other world. When you see gay shows with naked men and activist work, I obviously don't belong in that kind of show. I'm not bitter. The sensibility of what I'm making isn't being recognized as gay. But I'm curious about why it's not recognized. It's like an unspoken gay sensibility as opposed to the sensibility that they want to present to the world. All the things I'm interested in and my sensibility are really about the ideas of camp and kitsch that are part of that subculture."

During the '80s, when ironic distance was the privileged position in contemporary art, Isermann's retro furniture and his "flower power" shows of '60s-derived paintings were received as ironic commentaries on lost innocence. But in 1992, Village Voice art critic Peter Schjeldahl praised Isermann's stained glass windows for being "without a whisper of irony of any sort." Schjeldahl wrote: "They brighten the prospect of art's near future, when we may again be going to artworks rather than texts for the important information on culture's unfolding ways."

Isermann, thrilled with this acknowledgment, feels that his art has been misunderstood. "My work was suspected of being ironic and arch, but underneath there was a total belief in the images and what influenced the images. Maybe dropping the specific references helped people see the kind of pure belief that was behind all of it. The stained-glass was used to make something that would transcend the materials instead of transcending the pop culture reference. But my work has always been so private. It's not influenced by a theory."

Pausing for a beat, he adds, "It's more a heartfelt impulse to make things I couldn't have, but wanted--to complete my world somehow."

** Isermann's current work is on view at the Richard Telles Gallery, 7380 Beverly Blvd. through April 16. A show of highlights of earlier work continues at Sue Spaid Gallery, 7454 1/2 Beverly Blvd., through March 30.*