



George Herms, Beat Artist, on His New MOCA Show 'Xenophilia'

George Herms: beat legend, assemblage artist, free jazz enthusiast, Mexican marijuana fan. At a sprightly 75, he's still producing vast amounts of work in his Topanga Canyon studio. He's also the focus of a new show that opened last Friday at the Museum of Contemporary Art in the Pacific Design Center, entitled "Xenophilia (Love of the Unknown)."

Xenophilia is a group show organized by star curator and beat history enthusiast Neville Wakefield, who met George Herms in Florence in 2008 through menswear designer Adam Kimmel. Wakefield introduced Herms to a flock of young New York artists, many of whom are featured in the show. Artists including Rita Ackermann, Kathryn Andrews, Lizzi Bougatsos, Dan Colen, Nate Lowman, Ari Marcopoulos, Ryan McGinley, and Jack Pierson, all participated and often produced works that responded to the free play and open spirit of Herms' art.

On Friday, *L.A. Weekly* tracked down Wakefield and Herms, who had long left the gallery for the bar next door. The sound of Brian Eno rippled through the speakers and over the plaza -- we hadn't fully left the land of pink seersucker suits and horn-rimmed glasses yet. All the same, Wakefield and Herms were at ease, joking with each other over their glasses of wine. We sat down and talked.

How did this project get started?

George Herms: A mutual friend, Adam Kimmel, was interested in the beat generation for a clothing line that he was developing. Someone said, "You know, Adam, one of these guys is still wandering around the hills in Topanga," and sent Neville and Adam to Dennis Hopper, who called me up and said, "These guys should buy something from you, a couple of pieces at least." They came up to Topanga and it was an immediate mesh -- this relationship has been a mesh from the very beginning.

Neville Wakefield: It was a strange thing, because we didn't know -- the legend preceded the man, let's put it like that.

GH: They found an all-too-human human.

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How did you find the younger artists? Did you have them in mind before you began planning this exhibition?

NW: Most of the artists are people who I introduced George to through this thing that we did in Florence. Three years ago, Adam was celebrated at the Pitti Immagine event in Florence, and the collection was inspired by [artist] Wallace Berman and by George, basically. The way we decided to use the award was to fly everyone out to Italy -- all the people we were working with and liked in New York -- and George, because we thought there was an affinity of spirit. We spent four, five days in Florence with all these young New York artists and George, and everyone hit it off.

GH: Neville is the linchpin in an arch. One stone that everything else floats upon. Everytime we walk under an arch, we kiss. We're starting a new tradition -- what the hell, it's 2011!

How would you describe your new pieces?

GH: Recently the Getty went through all the papers I never threw away in fifty years -- a horrible mess -- nothing was in any order, I just kept things because I liked them. What happens at an archive or a research institute -- if you have a date on a document or a letter, they don't need the envelope it came in. So that's the piece upstairs, called *Winow*. Those colors of those papers, those were the original collages.



George Herms: *Winow*, 2011

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It seems like a lot of the artists are consciously responding to your legacy and your work. Is your work a response to theirs?

GH: The one that started it was a Jack Pierson piece, the one that goes way high into the space. It's called *Abstract #4*. It's made out of letters, but they're more like a Rorschach. If you're standing in front of it, you look at the next wall, and there's a round piece of mine that has two metal Es above an O.

That's what I thought I would be doing with everyone, but it became an exercise in the unknown. The unknown part of it is the rant which I go on about the xenophobic. They have had their day. It's bullshit, you don't want to give it to your kids -- ever. Get them off the stage, the radio, the TV, and let's have xenophilia, love of the unknown.

NW: From the other side, I think it's been a huge journey and revelation for the younger group of artists, who are trying to collage aspects of their lived lives into their art.

GH: [Artist] Kathryn Andrews came to Topanga, and for two hours she went through my old envelopes and made a selection, and then made her pieces. So she was the closest thing I got to a collaborative piece, other than when Aaron's thing came through. In the fifties, when I tried to work with another artist, we got into a fistfight!

How do you work?

GH: I've just gone through all the Pacific Standard Time preparations [PST is a collaboration of various museums looking back at postwar Southern California art, starting this fall]. I get up every day and make new art. That's what I did today, but they want me to be at the head of this boat, like a wake in the ocean, this bubble from 1962, and I'm getting a crick in my neck from doing that. [MOCA director] Jeffrey [Deitch], when he said we should do something, I said, Couldn't we do something called 2011? We had the 1968 summer of love, in San Francisco, and now this -- the summer of 2011 -- is the summer of love the unknown. See, I think we're making progress!

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Kathryn Andrews: Letter, 2011

Do you look for strange or unknown elements when making your collages?

They're all made in my friend's backyard in Irvine. I used a lot of magazines that are part of a media bombardment in advertising. That's why one turns the magazine upside-down -- to cut through that Pavlovian stuff. I don't like anyone telling me what to do.

In 1965, my Iris Firewater collages were all from booze ads out of Life magazine. I was going to take booze ad collages, sell them, and the money would go to legalize marijuana. That was my idealism!

What's your next project? Are you planning another collaboration?

NW: It comes full circle from this in a way, because Adam invited George to do a piece for Barney's that is a performance piece. It will be a witnessed creation, a live creation, that then ends up in the New York window.

GH: When the invitation came, Adam told me I should think outside the box. I said, to hell with the box, what is this thing called thinking? I know exactly what's going to go down. You saw how, on the side of the building here, they took one of the collages and blew it up big? The two most exciting things happening to me right now was that, and the other ones are the recumbent bikes [wired together in an assemblage]. So basically, when I wire those things together, there's a drill. There'll be a driller, and a guy who cuts the wire and ties them together.

I can't melt them in front of people because then I would kill the whole room. I bombed a lot -- as a comedian -- but I never want to kill. It's different, you know. The last one will be a six-inch hot plate where I take old DVDs or CDs and do the same thing. Because a friend said, Hey, I've got

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some great jazz, I'll burn you a CD, and I said, great idea, I think I'll burn you a CD! That's how shit gets started.

Note to the reader: Over the course of our conversation, it became apparent that Herms is as spry and humorous as ever. I'll leave you with six of his best tidbits:

On his 3-step collage process:

Step One: Look at the magazine upside-down.

Step Two is called Terrorist. I want to reclaim that word. I rip the page out of the magazine.

Step Three is to pan for gold -- look at the colors and everything.

On art historians:

They weren't there, where I was, but they write books about it and were all at the table talking about 1964 New York. I would say, "Was you there, sweetie?" None of them were! And then they know about Andy Warhol, because they have his papers from the Factory, but then across town, I'm doing the sets for a Michael McClure play, in Diane's Poet's Theater. So then you cut to the other radio voice: "Meanwhile, Across Town, In The Poet's Theater..."

On government secrets:

I tell the people up at the Getty: get me in a witness protection program, I'll tell you everything I know, and when I'm done, I'll start making stuff up!

On his favorite jazz musician:

In February, I did a free jazz opera, so I would have to say Bobby Bradford. I had lunch with him the other day.

On moving to L.A.:

I'm born in Northern California, so people often ask me why I'm down here, why L.A.? San Fran was the painters, the light. The only thing I could think of was the proximity to Mexican marijuana, and they had a twenty-four-hour jazz station! That was a cultural boon.

On pithy quotes:

A great sculptor named César passed away. In his obituary, he said, "I'm not an intellectual. I think with my hands." Yes!