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Junkyard dogma with bite

By Christopher Knight
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George Herms' sculpture is trash. By that I don't mean to say he's a bad artist – just the opposite.

Herms' work, which is the subject of a modest yet revealing survey at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, is made from junk. He scavenges from dumpsters, waste bins, the roadside and the seashore. Rather than shoot for transcendence with broken-down furniture, crumbling books, shattered glass, old auto parts and such, he glories in its trashiness.

Take the aptly titled "Beauty" (1978), which hangs on a wall near the entrance to the show. "Beauty" is a still life composed from an ancient length of dusty rose velvet, a worn and tattered piece of paper printed with the title word, a faceted glass bead, a wispy feather and a rusty dustpan. These are arrayed on a hidden circular support, as if a tabletop had been upended and pressed flat against the wall.

Formally, the lineage for this composition is Cubist. It recalls the famous tabletop still lifes painted in Paris in the 1910s by Picasso, Braque and Matisse. Picasso had pioneered the collage and assemblage aesthetic that Herms adopted in the late 1950s, and together with Braque he demolished once and for all the old conceit that a single perspective on the world could reveal truth. Matisse's painting "The Rose Marble Table" – a pink octagon that also turns up in the Frenchman's 1919 "Tea in the Garden," a treasure of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art – registers in the spare elegance of Herms' rose velvet table.

Hanging on a gallery wall, Herms' "Beauty" is an actual tabletop and a picture of one. On an opposite wall a wry little assemblage meditates on the complexity of representing worldly reality in a two-dimensional picture.

"Flat World" (1974) is composed from a globe that has been sliced, flattened and sandwiched behind glass inside a circular wooden frame. A crushed and distorted world seen through a glass pane brings to mind the new ubiquity of television. (Among other riveting televised events in 1974, Richard Nixon resigned.) Meanwhile Herms wired a used paintbrush to the surface of the squashed globe, pointedly suggesting continuity with the historic problem of pictorial representation in art.

The show is not installed chronologically. But the enlightening juxtaposition of "Flat World" and "Beauty" is typical of the deft way that guest curator Walter Hopps has assembled Herms' works to illuminate each other.

The rose velvet tablecloth in "Beauty" is old, water-stained, faded and marred by what appear to be cigarette burns. (Given Herms' advocacy for marijuana reform, maybe they're roach burns.) Yet the velvet's deployment is characterized by an acute sense of precision and care.

Twisted over and bunched at the top, the velvet creates a swag across the right side and drapes just so at the bottom. The tablecloth morphs into the curtain of a theatrical stage, which the artist pulls back to reveal his actors – the corroded dustpan, errant glass bead and other cast-off objects.

Herms came to art in the late 1950s through friendships with Beat Generation poets and artists like the late, great Wallace Berman (1926-1976), whose influence can't be underestimated. See the little glass bead glistening in "Beauty" and your mind tumbles back through Berman's 1949 Surrealist sculpture, "Homage to Hermann Hesse," to arrive at "The Glass Bead Game," the Swiss German writer's philosophical novel about the fragility of cultural tradition in a time of social collapse. Hesse wrote during the fascist juggernaut of World War II, while Herms made his still life in the wake of the Vietnam War and Watergate and on the brink of the age of Reagan.

Herms' junk is easily understood as a metaphor for castoff human beings. That plus a spiritual recognition that life is an irreversible journey through decomposition and decay – ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The artist once called his assemblages "furniture for the soul," and one could add that it's also a theater of common experience. Objects perform as surrogates for people.

"Beauty" is an elegy to pulchritude, which was not exactly an orthodox artistic value in the process-oriented, Postminimal 1970s. Herms' sculpture sweeps it up into the dustpan of history. At the same time, beauty's insuperable resilience is affirmed through the loveliness of this contradictory, self-critical work of art.

What has always been intriguing about the best of Herms' sculpture is how it shifts your point of view. Art's preciousness is not a result of the material object's value or intrinsic merit, his work gently affirms. Instead it is a condition of the caliber of artfulness with which an artist regards an object – the legacy of Marcel Duchamp – and with which the viewer does too. Nowhere in the show does Herms try to prescribe a static concept of “the beautiful.” His beauty is active, not passive.

Art's simple majesty is a function of love. No doubt Herms learned this lesson from Berman, whose famous mantra “art is love is god” applies to both artists' assemblages. Herms began to frame his work with it, placing the letters L-O-V-E in the corners of various works. (The “E” is printed backward, so that the letter faces inward toward the art.) Think of it as an embrace: Love is not a feeling, but something that you do.

Herms is not a pioneer in the assemblage genre. Born in 1935, about 10 years after German master Kurt Schwitters built his house-swallowing “Merzbau” assemblage in Hannover, he's too young for that. Postwar American assemblage fully blossomed in the 1950s, but soon was overtaken by Pop, Minimal and Conceptual art. So his work, applying connoisseurship to trash, has always been somewhat out of step.

With only 44 works spanning 45 years – 1959 to 2004 – the Santa Monica Museum survey is tight. So is the installation. Herms' work requires room to breathe, and many sculptures here are packed cheek by jowl.

There are some surprising omissions – most notably the widely known 1960 tableau “The Meat Market,” which would have filled its own room. Several other works are new to me, including the lovely 1966 collage assembled from sleek magazine pictures of a golden saxophone and a white and yellow iris.

Titled in honor of a favorite musician – Wardell Gray, a fixture in L.A.'s Central Avenue jazz clubs before his tragic 1955 death in his mid-30s – “Beloved Wardell” has a kind of easy, improvisational shimmer. A tenor sax erupts into an exotic, erotic bloom while floating in a puddle of glistening light. The survey is titled “George Herms: Hot Set,” and the slang reference to a smokin' jazz ensemble is apt.

However cramped, the installation does inspire. Hopps has put things together insightfully – almost as if the exhibition were its own form of assemblage art. Works are juxtaposed by affinities.

Sometimes the link is through subject matter. “The Scribe,” made in 1959 and thus the earliest work, is an abstracted image of a hunched writer, recalling Herms' early interest in poetry. It hangs on a wall next to a free-standing triptych made 20 years later. Titled “Alcove of Beginnings,” the assemblage is a meditation on relationships between poetry and objects.

Others are from specific series. A 1965 group of large sculptural boxes on the zodiac theme is plainly derived from the work of Joseph Cornell. But the boxes are formally clumsy and conceptually thin. “Sagittarius,” for example, merely blends together painted, drawn and found photographs and objects related to horses – a child's toy, a centaur, a Baltimore Colt football player, Tom Mix and Tony the Wonder Horse, etc.–to no particular effect.

Perhaps the show's most suggestive relationship comes in formal repetition. Crosses and circles – or cruciform shapes and spheres – show up repeatedly. In the context of Herms' aesthetic, think of these simple forms as representing the four cardinal directions and the encompassing universe. Together they identify the precise location for making spiritually inclined art out of worldly trash.