

GEORGE HERMS: Xenophilia (Love of the Unknown) at MOCA PDC, Los Angeles

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Facing the decay of an erotic relationship, Theodore Adorno describes the pain of recognising the transience of one's own feelings [and] the idea offered to us as solace that in a few years we will not understand our passion, and will be able to greet the loved woman in company with nothing more than fleeting astonished curiosity.¹

George Herms's practice of preserving and representing the artefacts of his creative life, however degraded, seems like an attempt to halt the wilting of such affections while also struggling to overcome the transience of memory. Through his assemblages of faded everyday objects, Herms negotiates both aging and decay by maintaining the link between what culture once was and what it has become.

George Herms: Xenophilia (Love of the Unknown), on view at MOCA in Los Angeles, asserts that something old is not necessarily obsolete. In Herms's work, the original functions of his materials—the ladling of a spoon, the warmth once possessed by a scrap of blue velvet—are superseded by their formal qualities, as with two planes of metal rusted to complementary colors. These objects function as symbols of past cultural moments, such as 1950's domesticity and '60s counterculture. In the present show, this process of recombination and juxtaposition extends to other artists. This is done in typical Herms manner: an improvised

chaos, a celebration of form, and an amazement at the debris of modern life.

The gallery space is densely filled. With the exception of a precise installation by Amanda Ross-Ho consisting of an alcove containing re-purposed household and studio objects, the physical boundaries between Herms's many pieces and those of the other artists are less than clear. At times the general sense of spontaneous collaboration seems forced, such as in *Untitled (Flower/bullet hole large single collaborative painting on canvas)* (2011), a smug and messy work by the New York cohort Dan Colen, Leo Fitzpatrick, Hanna Liden, Nate Lowman and Agathe Snow. As it tracks a trajectory of experimental practise from the 1950's through the present, the exhibition's strength lies in subtler sparks between adjacent works.

Kathryn Andrews's *Letter* (2011) is the most straightforward enactment of the connection between objects past and present. Andrews presents three opened envelopes in a long frame—each addressed to Herms, each from a different decade—accompanied by a chrome, three-seater bench. This common prop lends a calm gravity to the letters, now rarefied enough to be the subject of their own small cinematic scene. On the other side of the gallery, an assemblage work by Herms consists of hundreds of letters and other personal documents skewered onto a ream of wire, fanned and cascading into the room. The letters Andrews chose are from 1976, 1981 and 1995; the

style of post-codes, stamps, and Herms's addresses all change over the years. Andrews's piece complements Herms's own mission of collecting artefacts of bygone days and presenting them side by side, showcasing the distinctive design of each era, and highlighting the fleeting nature of aesthetics.

Melodie Mousset's *Downward Dog* (2011) synthesises two sides of utopian thinking particular to Los Angeles in a single sculpture: a small mountain of ceramic folds describing a body in that bum-pointing-to-sky yoga position which signifies the adoption of eastern practice by so many westerners. The work's surface is stamped with geometric indentations based on Frank Lloyd Wright's Hollyhock House, creating a perforated, lace-like effect. *Downward Dog* speaks to the different cultural ages of Los Angeles in which its architects, artists and gurus tried to create enduring cultural forms, however utopian or self-absorbed.

With *A Selection of 400 Collages* (2009-11) Herms embraces a single medium in order to explore the endless variations possible when attempting to order aesthetic clutter. His glitzy collages include images of fast cars, silk swirls, watches and breaking waves. Advertising images are again re-purposed, subverting the desirability of the objects through abutment, as when diamonds curve into a cut-out section of coral. The collage works, and by extension this collaborative retrospective, collate disparate visual elements in order to question the lasting worth assigned to materials, implicating fluctuations in the relative cultural value of objects.

Though the exhibition is billed as a solo show, Herms insisted that curator Nev-

ille Wakefield include younger artists—representatives of the unknown future. His decision reshaped the usual backward gaze of a retrospective into a selection of contemporary American practices. Herms seemingly prefers that his assemblage resonate with current work, for what could be worse than having no way to connect the production of a lifetime with the world in which one currently lives?

Note:

1 Adorno, Theodor W., "Messages in a Bottle" in Mapping Ideology, ed. Slavoj Zizek (New York, Verso, 1994).