



The New York Times Style Magazine
MEN'S FASHION SPRING
MARCH 13, 2011



Bold strokes Roger Herman, the godfather of the Los Angeles art scene and beyond, in his Solano Canyon studio.



THE LAST BOHO STANDING

ROGER HERMAN
MIGHT JUST BE THE
MOST IMPORTANT
ARTIST YOU'VE
NEVER HEARD OF.

BY ADAM FISHER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL JASMIN

Ceramics is the Rodney Dangerfield of the art world: the medium gets no respect.

So why is there such a glittering crowd at the Acme gallery on Wilshire Boulevard for the opening of “Los Angeles Museum of Ceramic Art”? The women are model-y swans, the men are rugged and fashionable, and this being L.A., there’s even the requisite celebrity — John C. Reilly — mingling among the crowd. And everywhere, just everywhere, are the young art stars that twinkle in L.A.’s firmament. They’re mostly painters, and they’ve been drawn here by the gravitational pull of an artist that most outsiders have never heard of: Roger Herman.

He co-curated the show, contributed much of the work, designed and printed a pair of posters, and is now tending bar, a spot that gives him a chance to spend a little time with everyone. The artist Cyril Kuhn is one of those who came to pay his respects: “Every painter in the last 30 years who has come out of Los Angeles owes a debt to him,” he says. “Every few years the New York art world gets bored of itself and rediscovers us. They descend like flies, pumping him for the names of the hot new artists in L.A.” Kuhn pauses, then adds, “They completely forget about the old master.”

Herman was once an art star, too. Born and educated in Germany, he moved to California in 1977 and started

churning out canvases of Schwarzeneggerian proportions. Painted with a loose, colorful hand, they managed to be simultaneously expressive and conceptual, with traces of Georg Baselitz and Anselm Kiefer, and Herman was recognized as the West Coast wing of the '80s neo-Expressionist movement. Gagosian snapped him up and positioned him as the California counterpart to David Salle and Jean-Michel Basquiat. In the late '80s he teamed up with the performance artist Chris Burden and the sculptor



//

HERMAN'S HOUSE IS LIKE HIM: CHAOTIC, IMPROVISED, INTELLECTUAL. THE SECOND FLOOR IS BUCKLING UNDER THE WEIGHT OF HIS BOOKS.

//

Charles Ray to transform U.C.L.A. from a stuffy backwater into the hottest art school in the country. This last decade he pulled another rabbit out of the hat by putting L.A.'s Chinatown on the map with the opening of the Black Dragon Society, a gallery-cum-clubhouse tucked into an anonymous storefront on Chung King Road.

"We started out selling \$100 paintings," says Herman, showing me financial statements that record annual gross sales of \$1.1 million by 2008. "It got to be just obscene, really," he adds, explaining why he closed the gallery at the height of the art bubble ("a feeding frenzy"). Herman is a throwback to a time when being a painter was tantamount to taking a vow of poverty, when artists lived in ghettos and bohemia was more than just a brand of cheap Mexican beer.

Herman, in fact, still lives in the ghetto he moved into in 1986: a poor Mexican-Chinese immigrant neighborhood near downtown called Solano Canyon. The walls of his giant warehouse studio are covered with evidence of his central place in the West Coast art world. The living area is chockablock with paintings from colleagues — George Condo, Larry Poons — and grateful alumni of the Black Dragon Society: Jasmine Little, Gustavo Herrera, Nick Lowe. Near the bathroom are a dozen pen-and-ink drawings by the artist Raymond Pettibon, whose brother founded the hardcore band Black Flag. (In his younger days Herman was active in the California punk scene and was married to Tamra Davis, the film director.) In the garden is a sculpture by Urs Fischer.

Herman and his third wife, the celebrity photographer Eika Aoshima, share neighboring houses in a Frida Kahlo-Diego Rivera setup. Herman's house is like him — chaotic, improvised, intellectual (the second floor is literally buckling under the weight of his book collection) — while Aoshima keeps her spaces more orderly. Even her storage area is a spare study in minimalism: it's filled, floor to ceiling with cabinets packed with meticulously archived photographs of everyone from Angelina Jolie to Van Halen. Both houses were designed by Frederick Fisher, an architect known for his arty civic spaces, including MoMA P.S. 1 in Queens.

The compound is the site of frequent dinner parties and

sits at the center of an emerging Solano Canyon scene: Urs Fischer and Cyril Kuhn share the house down the street; the garden designer Judy Kameon and the artist Erik Otsea have settled across the way; the local art impresarios Miguel Nelson and Sherry Walsh host their semiregular "Secret Restaurant" at their place nearby. And Al Renner, a community garden activist and fixture in L.A.'s slow food scene, tends to his local four-acre farm. "I love it," Herman says. "It's like a little village, hidden right in the heart of downtown. And it's not gentrified yet, thank God."

Herman can walk from where he lives to Chinatown, but he rarely visits anymore. "This is the old Black Dragon space," he says, moodily showing me around the new Jancar Gallery, a denuded white cube. "I hate what they've done to it," he whispers. "It was really just our clubhouse back then — we never had a girl behind a desk."

We're here on Sunday evening, the day after the pottery show at Acme, for an opening of Herman's new work: big, muscular, neon-hued takes on the castle, the conquistador, the nude. The show looks good, but Herman is not happy with it. "I'm sick of openings," he says, bailing out in the middle and retreating to a dive bar. His many young friends and admirers follow, gather round, banter, buy him a Corona. The camaraderie does Herman a world of good. He tells a joke: "Why did the conceptual artist decide to make a painting?" he asks, perking up. "He thought it would be a good idea."

Everybody laughs right along with him. ■





Portrait of an artist Opposite: Herman's original house in Solano Canyon, built by Frederick Fisher in 1986. This page, clockwise from top left: Herman in his dining room with a linoleum cut he did of Van Gogh; hosting a meal with his wife, Eika Aoshima; recent work; the living room; Fisher also built this 2003 addition to Herman's complex; rearranging paintings in his studio; his ceramics on custom-built shelves.