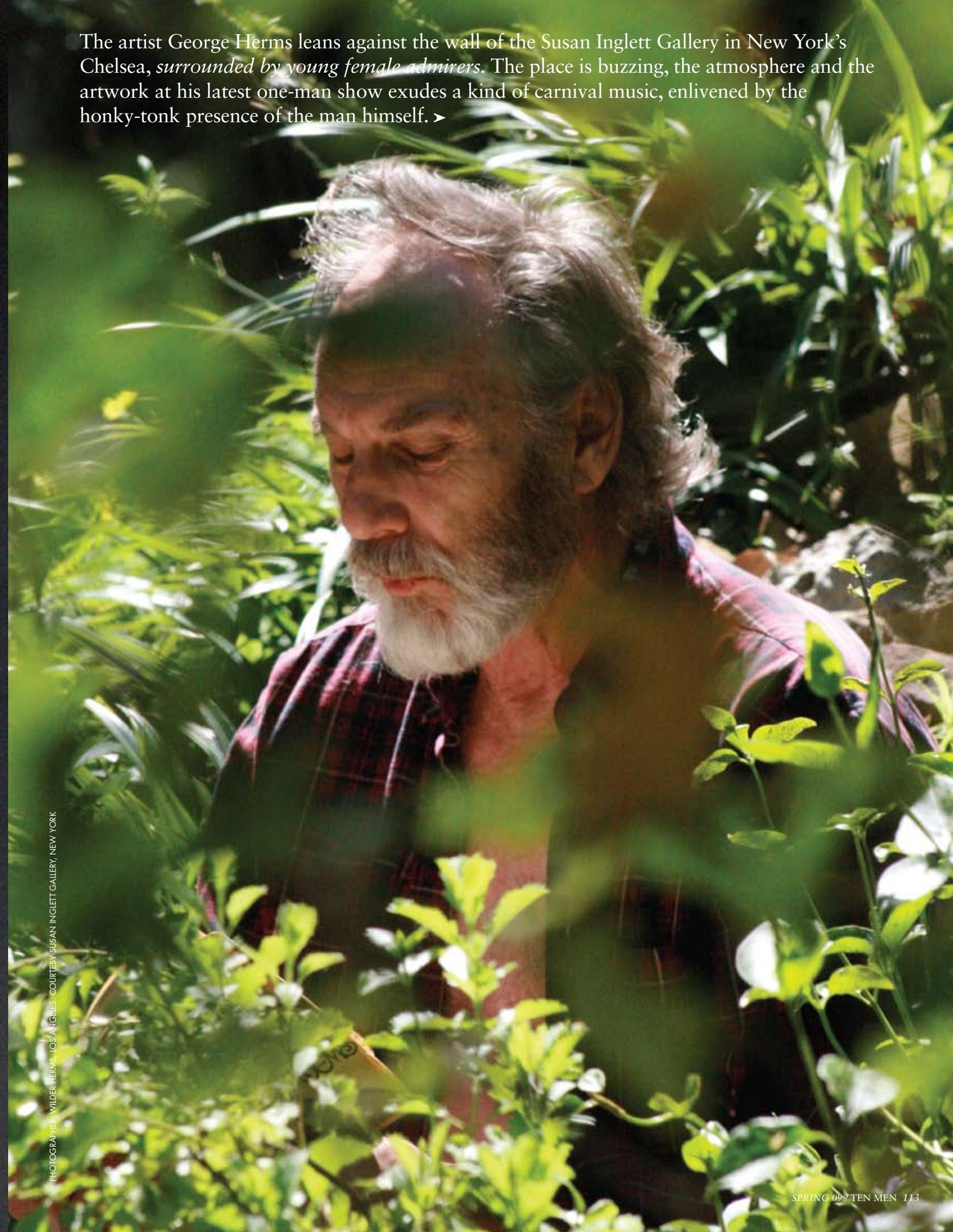


# CARNIVAL MUSIC: DISCOVERING GEORGE by Max Blagg



PREMIUM PYLON (2008); ASSEMBLAGE, 13" X 5 1/2" X 6". COURTESY SUSAN INGLETT GALLERY, NEW YORK

The artist George Herms leans against the wall of the Susan Inglett Gallery in New York's Chelsea, *surrounded by young female admirers*. The place is buzzing, the atmosphere and the artwork at his latest one-man show exudes a kind of carnival music, enlivened by the honky-tonk presence of the man himself. >



PHOTOGRAPHER: WILDER HERMS, LOS ANGELES; COURTESY SUSAN INGLETT GALLERY, NEW YORK



► A kick-ass cowboy who has been mining a rich seam of art for five incredibly productive decades, *Herms has lived the life of a true bohemian with no apparent ill effects, and he still frequents whatever jazz club is jumping at 4am. This lifestyle has polished his coolness to a fine patina, just as his gimlet eye has alchemised so many found objects into exquisite sculpture.*

● George Herms was 20 years old when he met the legendary Wallace Berman, who handed him a shot of bourbon and a book of Thomas Merton poems and reeled him into his circle. Fifty years on, he's still working, unflappable and amused as the curators line up outside his studio door.

Herms feels blessed to have been adopted by Berman, a seminal figure of the California counterculture, guiding light of an art scene that sprang up in the new post-second world war hipster culture that would also produce the Beats. Dennis Hopper, Michael McClure and Bruce Conner were among this loose-knit California crowd. While it lasted, it was a truly communal scene, everyone sharing their ideas and their energy, kicking against the bleak conformity of the postwar Eisenhower years. There was no money in art, but there was no art in money either. As Herms explains, "The success was within the work of art. That's what you wanted to succeed and it was, it was, uh, almost like science experiments, in hindsight. And it was, like, you came and showed the results of your experiments. With language. With colour. With objects. Unlike the savagely competitive art world that exists today, the California scene was laid-back and friendly."

And Herms says, "There was never, ever a critique. I mean, I loved it because, first of all, you didn't have to learn anyone's name, everyone was called man, and, uh, the critique was, you know, 'That's cool.' And you didn't have to get into explaining why you did it. The whole academic analysis of the creative process was nonexistent." Herms thrived in such a free-form academy, as did many other artists and poets who gathered around Berman. He published their works in his occasional magazine, *Semina*, an eccentric assemblage of photos, drawings and poems, the few remaining copies of

which have now become highly sought-after and extremely expensive art objects.

Reacting to the stifling conformity of the times and hoping for that "systematic derangement of the senses" that so many artists crave, Herms and the group indulged in drugs, primarily pot and peyote. "Some people were doing it for mystical or quasi-religious reasons," he recalls, "whereas we were basically getting loaded. And, in a 'quest for identity', I would wander around in the hills of northern California with no clothes on for, like, three or four days." And, subsequently, there was a whole panoply of chemicals that people used to bring round to Herms, "because they know I'm an artist and they want me to try it and see what kind of painting I would paint. And I went for it! I went for it up until the animal tranquiliser, then I said, 'Forget it; that's enough experimentation!'"

"I don't regret any of these field tests," he adds. "Some of them were very profitable, to me, spiritually. But drugs, in the end, are counter-productive." A small sideline in pot dealing also cost Herms six months in jail, when he unwittingly sold a small amount to a narc, got the wrong lawyer and drew the harshest judge in California, who believed everything she had heard about reefer madness. But he survived his stint in the Big House and, not long after, took up residence in a small town in Marin County, just north of San Francisco, not far from San Quentin.

Herms takes up the story: "Wallace Berman had moved out to this little town called Larkspur and he said, 'There's this empty place you can live in.' It was a boathouse, where you rented canoes and things in the 1930s; it wasn't a houseboat. You know, everything else was a houseboat that had these, uh, boardwalks that went to them. And the place that I stayed,

my wife was pregnant and that's where I delivered my first baby, with, uh, no electricity. In fact, the place was inaccessible when the tide was in. So when friends came to visit you, they had to stay six hours and wait for the tide to go in and out and then they could walk across the marsh. Times were tough, there was no money and almost every month brought an eviction notice."

Herms organised a series of carnival-flavoured events that he called the Tap City Circus ("tap city" is slang for the condition of being totally without funds of any kind). The Tap City Circus was Herms's way of adjusting his penury, and he would organise raffles in which the grand prize would be a piece of his art.

In this way, a lot of people collected his work quite cheaply, work that has gained hugely in value over the years. Herms is happy about the arrangement. "It's like finding homes for your kids, and to be in a home where you're loved, you know? Almost all the people that collected my work, I'm still friends with from those days. I've been very blessed that way. 'Cause my work has not been everyone's cup of tea and so they have to have a special love for it to take it into their home, and then, you know, the values that I'm interested in are not monetary values.

"People are throwing things away, and I say, 'Wait a minute, that's beautiful, don't throw it away.' And I give it another life in art; it may no longer function, but it can still exist within the confines of a work of art. I feel things are thrown away too soon, and maybe the same thing that happens to objects happens to human beings, that maybe we throw away people too soon. I mean, that's just a little step to be made. The value of things is still hard to define."

In the current show at Susan Inglett, some of the objects are very banal, everyday items – a camera case, for example, but for Herms that only makes the challenge greater to make something beautiful out of it. And when he succeeds in making one thing become another, that's a special kind of a thrill. And, indeed, some beautiful transformations have occurred.

Herms started out beachcombing, making little tableaux of found objects. And then, since he was self-taught, he wanted

to try out everything. So, for many years, he painted, and drew, and did lithography, photographed, and fabricated sculptures. But it always seemed to come back to what he calls his "native gift" as the beachcomber

"I don't set out with a blueprint ahead of time, so these objects tell me what to do. I mean, objects are weird! You know, they talk to me, so I'm literally doing what they want. I used to paint on objects; I stopped doing that because I realised what attracted me to the object was the local colour, that whole rainbow of rust. Like, yellow is the young rust and then purple is old rust." From his home in Laurel Canyon he goes on scavenging trips to junkyards, finding items to match the scale of the works he has planned. There is enough detritus and junk left over from the 20th century to keep Herms working well into the 21st.

And people constantly bring him things. Too many things. "I'm always getting... somebody's, you know, driving along and they see this pile of shit and they think of me! And so they bring it over and I have to say, 'Ah, thank you very much.' But they've missed the point about found objects – there's that word 'found' in there. Fortunately, many times, I've had large, warehouse-type studios, where I could bury these gifts. And then months later, or years later, I rediscover them. Then I have the thrill, the joy of discovery."

Herms himself has been discovered by a whole new generation of young artists, not to mention the museum curators who are now assessing and compiling his work into retrospectives. The designer Adam Kimmel regards Herms and the *Semina* group as muse and inspiration for his work, and Herms has even strolled the catwalk in Kimmel's elegant threads, which he wears on a daily basis these days.

Indefatigable as ever, his next project is an opera, parts of which have already been presented at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. He is working with musicians such as Bobby Bradford and a poet named David Meltzer. The opera is tentatively titled *The Artist's Life*. "It's about my 50 years hanging out in jazz clubs. It started in 1957 in Hermosa Beach at a place called *The Lighthouse*. And it's still continuing today." ◀

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LUSTRE # ONE (LUSTRE) (2008); INK/NOBACHI NACKRE, 30" X 25" X 1 1/2"; COURTESY SUSAN INGLETT GALLERY, NEW YORK, KING (2008); ASSEMBLAGE, 14" X 9 1/2" X 20"; COURTESY SUSAN INGLETT GALLERY, NEW YORK, UNTITLED (1962); ASSEMBLAGE, 11" X 9 1/2" X 11 1/2"; COURTESY SUSAN INGLETT GALLERY, NEW YORK