

Silsbee, Kirk. "A Tale of Two Enigmatic Artists," *Glendale News-Press*, September 16, 2011 (online).



A Tale of Two Enigmatic Artists

By Kirk Silsbee

The Wallace Berman renaissance has been inching along in fits and starts, ever since art historian Merrill Greene published the first serious consideration of his work in *Artforum* in 1978. That essay came two years after his untimely death in 1976, on the eve of Berman's 50th birthday. For an artist whose influence has been seemingly more pervasive than his actual work, it couldn't have come too soon. Christine McKenna curated the watershed Semina Culture show at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 2005, tracing Berman's far-reaching aesthetic by placing his work at the center of a constellation of pieces by his contemporaries.

The current exhibition at Pasadena's Armory Center for the Arts is more Pacific Standard Time bounty. It further illuminates Berman's often-enigmatic photo collages, postcards and constructions by joining them with Robert Heinecken's photo and print manipulations. It's a clever bit of juxtaposition by curators Claudia Bohn-Spector and Sam Mellon that illuminates two phantoms of Los Angeles art.

If Berman's artistic image took nearly 30 years to attain sharp focus, Heinecken's is still in the developing tray. Heinecken had a long tenure as a UCLA teacher, but his work largely flew under the radar. Berman seldom spoke of his work and, though creative types flocked to him, he was largely secretive about what he worked on. Berman sold less and less into the 1960s, and Heinecken's offer to him of a UCLA teaching position was declined, further isolating him. Death came at an intersection near Berman's Beverly Glen home. A fleeing driver, wanted on drug-related charges, killed him. Heinecken passed in 2006 from Alzheimer's complications.

Their association, running through the years covered in the show, has little documentation. But the Armory installation serves to point out the similarities and common interests in both men. Each used found images: For Berman, it was the picture of a hand holding a transistor radio in a *Life* magazine ad for Heinecken, the smiling South Vietnamese soldier proudly holding severed Viet Cong heads from *Newsweek*. Where Berman used the picture plane of the radio surface to stuff with multiple images, Heinecken incorporated the soldier with product visuals from magazine pages.

o

Codes, narratives and gestures were just a few of the shared concerns. Berman's Verifax collages ran a series of images in the otherwise fixed hands, touching on the religious, political, sexual, personal and current events. Heinecken's "V.N. Pinup" ('88) solarizes a woman's torso and overlays Vietnam-related headlines.

They had their personal obsessions, and those subjects played out in their respective works many times over the years. For Berman it was the jazz musicians he knew and loved who died in drug-related deaths (Charlie Parker and Wardell Gray), the Kennedy assassination and his friend Lenny Bruce. A '63 piece shows a brooding Bruce head with a collaged policeman about to bring his fist down from above. Berman had been tried for indecency in '59, and he was always sensitive to persecution.

Vietnam pervades Heinecken's personal iconography. He superimposed sunny commercial representations onto those of war. A fresh-faced ingénue under the headline "This is the way love is in 1970" shares the picture plane with the soldier and his grisly trophies. An opened magazine in a showcase shows Elizabeth Taylor on one side and the My Lai Massacre on the other. Elsewhere, the ubiquitous soldier invades a Vogue fashion spread.

A sign warns of nudity at the entrance of the show, and that's too modest a caveat. Berman and Heinecken used pornographic imagery in their respective works, but for slightly different ends. Berman would place a grainy nude woman next to a religious figure in a multiple. Heinecken's giant transparent film photogram celebrates female anatomy as topography. But he also used very explicit images. Negatives and overlays in nine or 16 linked configurations create fascinating if sometimes shocking visual narratives. Both used sexual representations of women not to demean them, but to question their commoditization.

KIRK SILSBEE is veteran writer and critic on jazz and culture and is a frequent contributor to Marquee.

DETAILS

What: "Speaking in Tongues: Wallace Berman and Robert Heinecken, 1961-1976"

Where: Armory Center for the Arts, 145 North Raymond Ave., Pasadena, 91103

When: Through Jan 22. Open 9 a.m.-5 p.m., Mon.-Fri.

Info: (626) 792-5101 and armoryarts.org