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Robert Berman's 35-Year Weekend

By Shana Nys Dambrot Tue, Sep 09, 2014

In Fall 2014, Robert Berman kicks off a four-month slate of rotating exhibitions and events, covering his 35 years of gallery exhibition history across seven locations -- including the inception and evolution of Bergamot Station as we know it.



Photograph by: Carole B., France

“It has never been my object to record my dreams, just the determination to realize them.” -- Man Ray

“I’m just basically an art collector. There’s no reason for me to be a dealer, except as an exciting way to be in the game.” -- Robert Berman

Between his seminal omnipresence on the modern LA scene and more than two decades of the legendary Santa Monica Auctions, people might think they already know everything about Robert Berman. But there is always much more to the story. An exhaustive list of the critically and popularly acclaimed artists who have been involved in the gallery since 1979 would blow our whole word count, but it includes Keith Haring, Raymond Pettibon, George Herms, Bill Barminski, William Burroughs, Man Ray, RETNA, Alex Prager, Shepard Fairey, Daniel Joseph Martinez, John Valadez (solo show coming in January 2015), Norton Wisdom, Lauren Bon, Robbie Conal, Marischa Slusarski, and dozens more of LA’s best-loved artists.



“I love the investment aspect, the marketplace, the gallery lifestyle -- these are things I learned to appreciate in Paris as a young man, living by the Gare d’Orsay, watching it turn from a train station to an auction house into a museum... I loved the classic Modernism, the turn of the century aesthetic, those epic mid-century posters. I never thought I’d leave Paris. Then in 1979 I came to America for the weekend, ended up in sunny LA, and found myself taking a storefront in Santa Monica to open a gallery. I was going to sell those avant-garde posters and some French modernism, but then I was immediately inundated by local artists who had no places to show. There were just a few galleries here who were interested in the next thing to come after the 1960s. Peter Frank was just getting here too and he was interested in young German artists. There was some back and forth with NYC, especially the Lower East Side and the auctions



back there at the old Limbo Lounge... Anyway, I ended up with a gallery showing a mix of local, NYC, and European contemporary art. Daniel Joseph Martinez, Basquiat, Haring... Then the recession hit in the early 1990s, and things were unsettled -- I got lucky, I was showing Ray Pettibon a year after Helter Skelter at MOCA. We had my gallery on Broadway, we rehung and sold out a few times in a row. When he left the gallery, I bought everything I had in stock and I still own almost all of it. Did you know we cut a record album together?"

Back in 1984 he had started the Santa Monica Auctions as well, which was a huge education for him in LA art history. "It not only added to my vocabulary, but it allowed me financially to support emerging artists and special projects. In 1985 I gave Haring his first LA show at the B1 Gallery.



In 1995 with Tom Patchett we did the William S. Burroughs shotgun paintings show at Bergamot, and in 1996 we did the Man Ray show together.” Those were big moments in Berman’s career, but Man Ray was the biggest -- and the most personal for him. Duchamp and Picabia have always been his favorite artists, and here was Man Ray, whose life story so echoed Berman’s own Paris-bound ex-patriotism and later pilgrimage to California, and so embodied his love of the French avant-garde and the blossoming of photography. Representing Man Ray’s estate offered Berman a chance to break art historical ground by being the first to show his complete Los Angeles period (1940-1950) focused on surrealist sculptures and paintings as well as the iconic photographs and some treasured paintings once thought lost to the ravages of WWII.

“We scooped the Getty’s version of the Man Ray in Hollywood show by four years, but they ended up buying from us and carrying our book!” It was Man Ray’s biggest commercial show to date, and because of their efforts, the artist’s greatest masterpiece, “Le Beau Temps” was acquired by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where the artist was born, and where all the best Duchamps keep it company. It might just be Robert’s proudest moment, and a powerful kind of full circle, too -- for an American out of Paris who loves a good secondary market gamble as much as he loves 20th century avant-garde surrealism and the place of Los Angeles in contemporary art history. It happens that Sotheby’s Paris has just announced the sale of nearly 400 works by Man Ray on November 15, calling it “the largest and most important sale of works by the ground-breaking artist in nearly 20 years.” Robert’s being inextricable with the previous, of course. His response? “Oh yes, I’m going to be there.”

