

Against All Odds



PHOTO BY CAROLE B.

**35 YEARS AT THE
ROBERT BERMAN GALLERY**



WORDS PHIL TARLEY
IMAGES COURTESY ROBERT BERMAN GALLERY

AFTER YEARS OF reselling modern art, with stints in France, England, and San Francisco, California, Robert Berman opened his first Santa Monica gallery off Main Street, in 1979. Although selling contemporary art was not on the dealer's mind, his small gallery was so inundated with working artists that Berman quickly caught the contemporary calling. This fall marks his 35th year in Santa Monica, with Robert Berman Gallery at Bergamot Station since its opening in 1994.

Berman also curates private collections, visiting clients in New York, Paris and Tokyo. His dealings in the secondary market, selling sculptures by Alexander Calder, John Chamberlain and Henry Moore, have earned him a good income and a reputation for fair and honest trading. His show of Man Ray's mixed-media work included the much-publicized oil painting *Le Beau Temps*, which Man Ray hid from the Nazis when he fled Paris in 1939. Years after the war, the work was found in his paint vendor's basement. Berman is proudest of the sale of *Le Beau Temps* to the Philadelphia Museum for a cool \$1.825 million, effectively keeping the painting from leaving the United States.

Interviewing Robert Berman is like trying to ask questions of a force of nature. The gallerist's words come tumbling out faster than I can keep up. I let him take the lead. He organizes our meeting visually, flipping through the photographs in his countless show catalogs and stopping on an image to tell me an artist's story. Then Berman clicks a video link and reincarnates William Burroughs, Allan Ginsberg, and Dennis Hopper all lassoed together in an unholy troika of Arts-and-Letters-all-American all-stars.

Robert had assembled the three men for the opening of the writers 1996 exhibition. Alluring and abhorrent at the same time, Burroughs' sculptural paintings originated from his acquittal of wife-killing, when the writer tried to shoot an apple off his spouse's head and missed. It's a publicist's dream: three beat-culture, anti-heroes who changed the way America wrote, made movies, and created art; videotaped for posterity, in Berman's gallery. As the black and white clip revivifies the trio, a young Robert Berman spins into the camera and lays down a riveting, contextual critique of his show. When the video ends, Robert takes out the *Concrete and Buckshot* exhibition catalog to show me a text by Timothy Leary, that the 60s guru dictated from his sick bed for his good friend William Burroughs. It was the last thing Leary wrote before he passed away, Berman tells me.

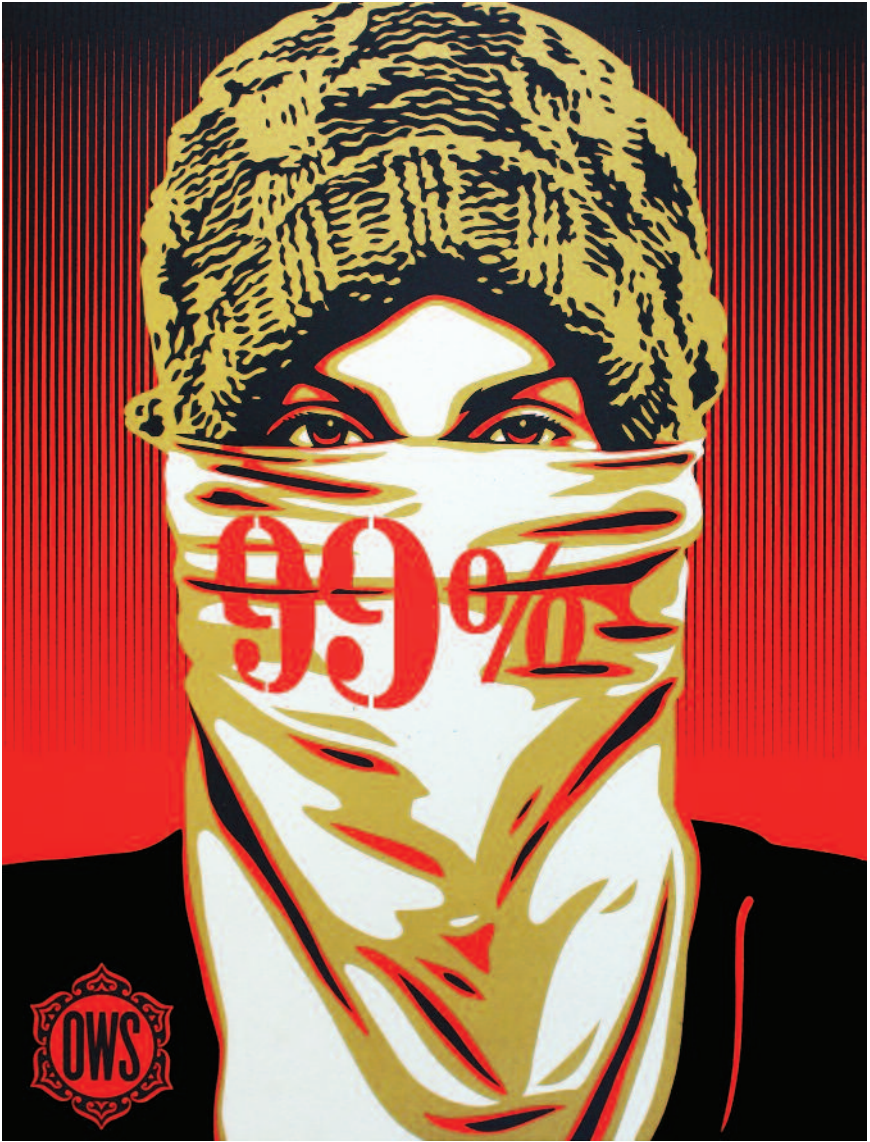
Robert Berman is the consummate art impresario and no stranger to the production of headline-grabbing exhibitions. "I show art that moves me...art

LIFE IS A MISERY AND I DO NOT KNOW WHEN
DEATH MAY COME.

"PLAY BALL!"



RAYMOND PETTIBON, FROM THE DEAREST READER EXHIBITION



SHEPARD FAIREY, JUST OCCUPY



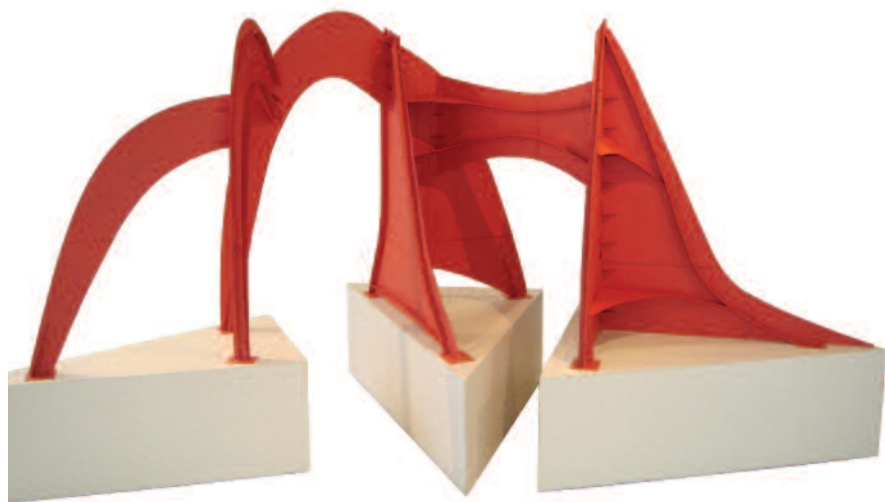
JOHN ALTOON, LOST AND FOUND



LEO LIMON, SPIRIT OF THE EAGLE, 1990



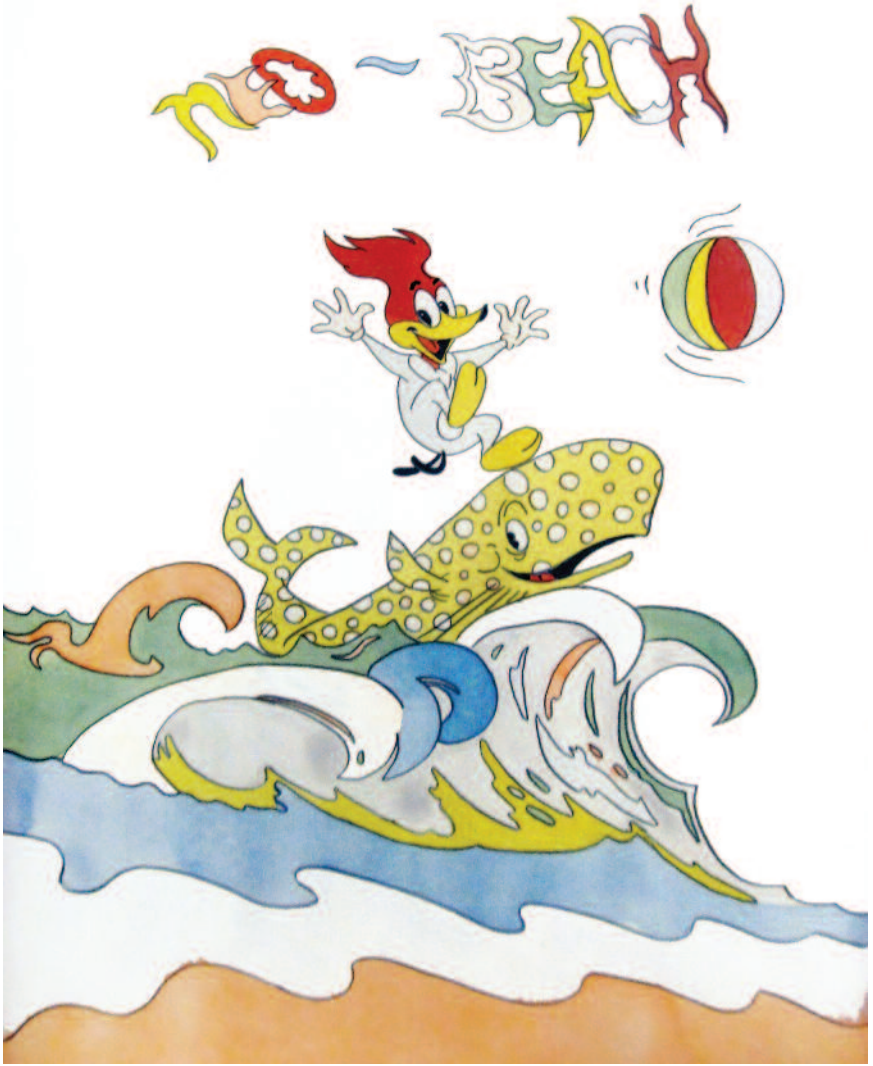
JOHN VALADEZ, FROM THE CHICANO GROUP SHOW



ALEXANDER CALDER



MAN RAY, FROM THE MAN RAY: PARIS-LA EXHIBITION



RONNIE CUTRONE, FROM THE ART OF THE 80s EXHIBITION

that I love...and basically, I show it my way.” Though his modesty is admirable, the gallerist expertly marshals all the power of celebrity, press and promotion to augment his own internal, highly prescient compass; guiding him to stage his most important exhibitions.

In 1983, Berman put up *The Chicano Group Show*. Then in 1986, Keith Haring, Andy (Warhol) Mouse; and in 1987, *The Art of the 80s* show. Four years later, Berman mounted the Raymond Pettibon exhibition, *Dearest Reader*, which ran in tandem with MOCA'S Helter Skelter in 1991. In conjunction with Track 16, Berman produced two shows in 1996; William Burrough's *Concrete and Buckshot*; and his seminal Man Ray presentation, *Man Ray: Paris-LA*. In the new millennium, the gallerist has staged three major art events; *Change America*, in 2008; *Lost & Found Abstracting Los Angeles*, in conjunction with the Getty's, *Pacific Standard Time* in 2011; and *JUST OCCUPY*, a 2012 exhibition which also featured Shepard Fairey.

Art that resounds with an epic thematic quest, modern classicism, sex and sensuality, political protest and pop iconography, all these fuse together in Robert Berman's conceptual world of what art is and what he wants to exhibit.

We sat down for a three-hour interview the day before Berman flew to Basel, Switzerland for the fair and a month-long working holiday in France. It's important to remember that Robert spent his formative art years in the galleries and art auction houses of Paris, a business model he likes to revisit. "It's hard to make money in the primary market. But I can make a living and do well in the secondary." To illustrate his point, he tells me, "Man Ray sold next to nothing when he was alive." To hedge his bets, the dealer uses his Santa Monica Auctions to underwrite the cost of the riskier Robert Berman Gallery exhibitions.

Time spent in Parisian art auctions has left an avant cultural imprint on Berman, who still rides his motorcycle, wears a beret, and sports a goatee to complement the worn leather jacket that casts him out of a French New Wave film.

Replete with a certain, unfathomable visceral quality about him, Robert Berman imbues the art he shows with an informed sense of dignity and importance. The gallerist's foremost exhibitions are intelligent, conceptual, complex and evocative - and command attendance.

The 35 Year Anniversary Show: A Rotating Exhibition of Works from 1979-2014 opens September 13 and will run until December 20, 2014 at The Robert Berman Gallery, Bergamot Station.



KEITH HARING, ANDY (WARHOL) MOUSE