



Collage portraits of Tony Berlant, right, and his wife, Helen, are at the far end of the Kohn Gallery show.

Courtesy Kohn Gallery

Tony Berlant Nails It Again

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"The thing about artists," quips Tony Berlant, "is that they say the work speaks for itself, then they can't stop talking about it!" Well, thank goodness for that, because during our tour of his new exhibition, it turned out Berlant had quite a lot to say about his newest work. A legend in the L.A. art world since the 1960s, "Fast Forward" is his first solo exhibition with his new home at Kohn Gallery; and with but two exceptions, all of the dozens of works on display, large and small, landscapes, portraits and texts, have been made since just 2017.

Berlant is renowned for his signature technique, which is essentially identical to collages made from magazine photograph cutouts — except instead of paper it's sheets of printed tin, and instead of tape or glue, it's thousands of itty-bitty, super sharp and shiny steel nails. Increasingly and now predominantly, the images are his own photography, although still augmented by vintage and modern metal signage and graphics. The source materials that aren't metal to begin with are printed on tin, then cut into shards, irregular shapes and geometrical pieces of various sizes, which are then assembled in a labor-intensive process that causes words like "obsessive" to get thrown around a lot. As both ideas and objects, the work speaks to both painting and sculpture,

as well as photography, of course, but remains itself and stubbornly none of the above.

Much of the new work — especially a suite of absolutely psychedelic near-abstractions — is as dense with small-bore detail as can be. But upon entering the gallery, the first thing you see is an absorbing pair of 8-foot-tall portraits that glow and shimmer from the far end of the expansive space, like stained glass windows at a couture cathedral. These are portraits of Berlant himself and his wife, Helen, based on photographs from the 1970s. But the glowing dusty-rose pink of her face and robin's egg blue of his torso remain mostly unobstructed, free to gather and refract diffuse light that casts a soft glow of romance in both light and energy.



Installation view

Courtesy Kohn Gallery

Their faces are more or less fully visible single images, which is just one of the many new visual strategies on offer in the show. These are augmented with the kind of proliferate motifs familiar to fans of his brand of cut-metal collage — his with elements from his own work, like cacti and stones and a jaunty, silhouetted tree, and hers with a floral mantilla-based motif and an ornate folding fan, which both reference the Spanish culture in her family background. This central image composition is new for Berlant — just one of many new ideas, structures, formats, techniques and narratives proposed by the artist in his recent work.

Berlant, a pillar of Los Angeles art for going on six decades, is more than active — he's doing some of the best, freshest work of his career.

And that's not all he's doing that's new. In the past few years, he also made time to co-curate two museum exhibitions; one recently closed at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, while the other is currently on view at LACMA. These were not of his own work but rather based on his personal collection of, and scholarship surrounding academic thought about, the ceramics, tools and stone carvings of "primitive" or "early" man. Like, Neanderthal early. More on that later. For the Kohn Gallery show, the past is a bit more recent and still very much alive.



This 2018 self-portrait collage of Berlant is based on a Polaroid taken of the artist by Andy Warhol in the 1970s.

Tony Berlant/Courtesy Kohn Gallery

That self-portrait collage is based on a Polaroid of Berlant actually taken by Andy Warhol in the early '70s, and in both its own quality and Berlant's subsequent treatment of it, it quite brilliantly reflects Warhol's artistry along with Berlant's. "It's very funny, this Warhol," he tells me. "It's the only picture of me ever taken with my shirt off!" So how did that happen? "The [Warhol] Foundation sent me like 48 Polaroids one day. They were aligning Polaroids in his files with any of his finished paintings. He was going to do a painting of me, and even though he never did, I just knew he kept everything.

"Being 77," says Berlant about what moved him to work with the image now, "it's fascinating to see a picture of yourself at this other age." He had been in contact with that world for a while, with his own loft in SoHo, and a lot of dialogue through the world of 1960s pop art. "Andy was fascinated by L.A. and Tab Hunter and Dennis Hopper and actual movie stars. He would say, 'Is your name really Tony Berlant? Billy Al Bengston, Joe Goode? These are your real names?' He just thought it was all so fantastic."

So when it came time to think about working with the image, and appropriating a Warhol photograph, "Well, if you're going to appropriate anything, that's the thing to use! A picture he took of you in the first place. It's kind of perfect, how it ties up the circle." As for the accompanying (companion) portrait of Helen, it's a pair but not a diptych, and they're different sizes, too. However, its depths of feminine strength and beauty make it the ideal companion, much like the pair in real life. When Helen walks in right after I ask Tony if she likes hers, she teasingly offers, "Well, it is a bit daunting — there I am, 8 feet tall and 40 years younger!"



Voice, side B (2015), found and fabricated printed tin collaged on plywood with steel brads; 10 x 14 x 15 inches

Tony Berlant/Courtesy Kohn Gallery

Time passing is, of course, on Berlant's mind. Dear friends including Ed Moses, Chris Burden and Charles Garabedian have died in recent years, and the old Cool School kids from the Ferus Gallery world of 1965 aren't anything like kids anymore. "I realized recently that I was really proud to have been making and showing art for like 60 years," Berlant says, "but then I realized even the bad artists never retire. It's true! The art world is so superficial and weird, and people's motives are so suspect. ... But no one ever retires. It's this powerful basic human thing, to create, to express — it's just too satisfying to quit, no matter what does, or doesn't, happen."

Actually, ideas about the "basic human thing" in terms of the impulse to create have occupied Berlant's mind for as long as he's been an artist. One of the two major institutional exhibitions he participated in this year was the unique, and rather game-changing (at least in academic circles) exhibition "First Sculpture: Handaxe to Figure Stone" at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. This wide-ranging (as in, 2 million years of human history and culture) show represented a deep reimagining of two fundamental genres in the art-archeology-anthropology continuum, hand tools and talismanic stones, positing a creative, aesthetic intentionality that went far beyond mere function, millennia earlier than consensus had previously suggested.



One Way or Another, side A (2017), found and fabricated printed tin collaged on plywood with steel brads; 23 x 27 x 7 inches

Tony Berlant/Courtesy Kohn Gallery

Aside from the decorative aspects of hand-axes, the exhibition also looks at "figure stones," such as the very many in Berlant's personal collection, which he has always believed indicated a sort of animistic pareidolia (the phenomenon of seeing faces in inanimate objects). In close collaboration with historians, neurologists, artists, archeologists, scientists and other superstar minds, Berlant spearheaded a genuinely new phase of paradigm-shifting research into this perennial personal passion. One such piece features prominently in a sculptural boxlike work in the show titled *One Way or Another*, in which one side shows a feline masklike head outlined against a field of cutout letters, densely tiled to form a nearly abstract, brightly crisp and nonlinguistic pattern.

"I was going to change the title of this one back to *A Stone Speaks*," Berlant says of the piece, which though not overly large has the character of a pivotal work within the exhibition. The stone is a Neanderthal piece, and the features of the "face" are naturally occurring. "Really nothing has been done to this stone," he explains. "There were these two large holes in the rock and they saw the same grinning catlike creature we do. At most they took these fine tiny chisels and trimmed its edges down into a proper sculpture. When I started collecting these things, no one thought they were really representational, they dismissed all that as just my projection. ... But the archeologists on the Nasher project, who were some of the greatest specialists in the world — by the end, they believed me."

Hearing Berlant speak about the delicate flicks and taps of those early artisans at work, it's clear that he feels an affinity, and the image of him, there in the studio, with sheets of raw metal, teasing out pictures and wielding that tiny hammer — of course he would recognize them as his spiritual ancestors. "The best thing about this fascination with *Homo erectus* and Neanderthals and early *Homo sapiens* has been this," he explains. "Art was always shown to me in a cultural context; they were luxury, specially made prestige objects. But what I came to feel was that this instinct to make things, to aestheticize things, was really biological, in fact neurological, and represents a deep manifestation of self. From within their own bodies, the 'Me' emerged as an externalization of the psyche. It's a human instinct, and while one could say that 'art' only starts with *Homo sapiens*, I take it back 2 million years to *Homo erectus*."



Fly Around, side A (2017), found and fabricated printed tin collaged on plywood with steel brads; 27 x 20 x 8 inches

Tony Berlant/Courtesy Kohn Gallery

And then the wall pieces! This is new. "These are something I'm really excited about, because over the years I've made about 20 doors. I always liked the thing where you go through a door, and one side is seen and the other is still just an idea. You have the memory of one side, then you see the other side. It's a 'double-sided memory,' dissolving the edge of the form, by wrapping the imagery around." Berlant likes the idea that when you get to the edge, there can be the suggestion that it continues past where you can see it. In these new works, he makes that explicit.

Again, these are the kinds of ideas that have inspired Berlant from the start. Back in 1974, he co-founded the Mimbres Foundation to study and preserve pottery produced by the Native Americans who inhabited southwestern New Mexico roughly 1,000 years

ago. He has been an avid collector of this ancient pottery in addition to his aforementioned collection of Paleolithic tools, which had formed the basis of the Nasher show. This particular ceramics collection is now in the spotlight, on view through Dec. 2 at LACMA, in an exhibition he co-curated with scholar Evan Maurer. "Decoding Mimbres Painting: Ancient Ceramics of the American Southwest" features more than 50 examples of painted ceramics made between 850 and 1150 C.E.

Mimbres ceramics use black-and-white motifs and are lauded for their sophistication, precision and complexity. While motifs of animals and plants are common, humans also make appearances in narrative tableaux. But a more mysterious genre of Mimbres art features geometric patterns such as zigzags, spirals and checkerboards; they seem abstract and even proto-modern. Berlant and Maurer once again offer an eccentric and well-structured argument in favor of interpreting these "abstract" works, not as invented designs detached from observations of the world but rather as "depictions of various hallucinogenic plants, and the brain-generated shapes [that] manifested in the eye as a result of ingesting them."

Aside from the thrill of reinventing seemingly settled matters of cultural anthropology, once again we see how lessons learned from the study of ages-old artistry speaks directly and eloquently to yet another vector of Berlant's own art. In this case, it's his way of deriving abstraction from the natural world and its universe of pictures, done in full awareness of how images can seem to shape-shift before our eyes.



Topanga (2017), found and fabricated printed tin collaged on plywood with steel brads; 74 x 111½ inches

Tony Berlant/Courtesy Kohn Gallery

The brain's own physiological capacity for imagination forms the basis not only for his text-jumble collages but also for more pictorial, chromatically saturated landscapes such as those in *Song* and *Hat in the Ring* — the ones everyone can't help but call "psychedelic." Berlant tried but he couldn't think of a better word for them, either. Their kaleidoscopic color riots are rather like an acid trip, when the world is still the world but it's gone a bit wobbly, or even pixelated. These are festooned with a host of hexagonal cutout shapes, like digital lens flares — his latest favorite shape. "For a collage maker, it's a great pattern to use," he says. "And then when you get up close, you can't help starting to interpret things as being related."

"The brain finds patterns and metaphors pleasing," he observes. This is regarding image-making strategies that encourage the viewer's participation in meaning. What's so interesting is that unlike straightforward collage, in which disparate elements are brought into proximity and new meanings suggested — although Berlant's work is absolutely that as well — are the ways in

which the nails themselves, his signature material, not only activate the physical surface but also inform the image itself. For example, how their speckles make the rocky grained texture of the ground resemble sand even more in *Yin Meets Yang*; create the starry-night pattern of the sky in *Gift of the Gods*; and lend further vibrato to the pixelation of the long moonlight exposure in the woodlands of *Topanga*.

With the force of fine art, cultural anthropology, engaging materials, eccentric craftsmanship and autobiography, it's easy to see why Berlant has remained such a vital figure in Los Angeles art history all this time. "But in the end," he says, "just making things you would be happy to keep for yourself, that's a good criteria."

"Fast Forward," Kohn Gallery, 1227 N. Highland Ave., Hollywood; (323) 461-3311, kohngallery.com. Tue.-Fri., 10 a.m.-6 p.m.; Sat., 11 a.m.-6 p.m.; Mon. by appointment; thru Nov. 3.

"Decoding Mimbres Painting: Ancient Ceramics of the American Southwest," Resnick Gallery, LACMA, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., Mid-Wilshire; lacma.org. Mon.-Tue. & Thu., 11 a.m.-5 p.m.; Fri., 11 a.m.-8 p.m.; Sat.-Sun., 10 a.m.-7 p.m.; thru Dec. 2.