

L.A. LOUVER, Inc.

55 N. Venice Blvd.  
Venice, CA 90291  
(310) 822-4955  
FAX (310) 821-7529

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ENTERTAINMENT / THE ARTS / TV LISTINGS

SECTION

F

FRIDAY

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# CALENDAR

## HIGHLIGHTS

**POET MAKER:** Wallace Berman introduced important Beat generation poets and artists and led a life in intimate touch with the seeds of the counterculture. His *Semina* magazine, a classic of underground art, has been re-created in a limited-edition facsimile. **F1**



LARRY BESSEL. Los Angeles Times

A limited edition of 300 facsimiles of all nine editions of *Semina* magazine is in L.A. Louver exhibition "Poem Makers." The hands belong to art director George Herms.

## Wally Berman, *Semina* Figure

■ **Arts:** Reclusive artist's underground magazine was a looking glass into avant-garde L.A. and San Francisco culture in the '50s and '60s.

By WILLIAM WILSON  
TIMES ART CRITIC

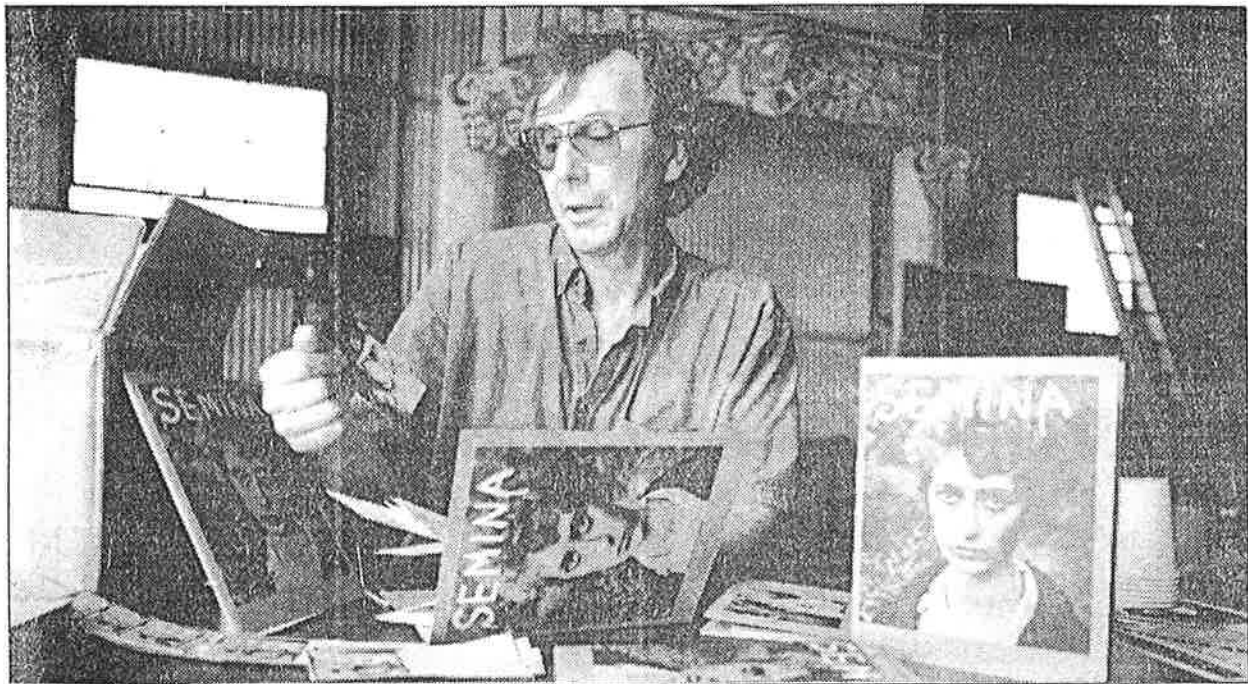
Wallace Berman's first solo exhibition was held at La Cienega Boulevard's fabled Ferus Gallery in June, 1957. It didn't last long.

The Hollywood vice squad descended on the gallery shortly after the opening and arrested the 31-year-old artist on charges of displaying lewd and pornographic material. He was found guilty. Berman turned to the courtroom blackboard and scrawled: "There is no justice, only revenge." A friend, actor Dean Stockwell, paid the \$150

fine.

From that point Berman became a reclusive artist. He moved to the Bay Area, continuing to print *Semina*, a diminutive art and poetry magazine. He'd cranked it out on a small hand press since 1954. He printed the works of so many Beat generation artists and bards that Michael McClure dubbed him "The Poet Maker." William Burroughs, Robert Duncan and Allen Ginsberg all appeared in *Semina*, along with Charles Bukowski, David Meltzer and Philip Lamantia. Berman included his own images and poems plus work by such California artists as Llyn Foulkes, Jess,

Please see **BERMAN, F18**



LARRY BESSEL / Los Angeles Times

George Herms spent four years working on the facsimile restoration of his friend's magazine: "Before meeting Berman my spiritual development was all from books. Wally opened the book of life for me."

## BERMAN

Continued from F1

John Altoon, and photos by Charles Brittin and Walter Hopps.

The underground publication was not for sale. It rarely reached more than 300 people, just friends and fellow artists who happened to be in Berman's address book. It was more like a private sharing of musings, insights and epiphanies than anybody's idea of a magazine. Only nine editions appeared. The last, in 1964, included the notorious news photo of Jack Ruby shooting Lee Harvey Oswald.

Today, *Semina* is considered an important early example of mail art, a direct forerunner of Conceptualism and a wonderful looking glass into avant-garde L.A. and San Francisco culture in the '50s and '60s. A limited edition of 300 facsimiles of all nine magazines has been made and introduced with considerable bunting by Peter Gould's L.A. Louver Gallery in a just-opened exhibition called "Poem Makers." On June 26, Beyond Baroque will hold a reading by McClure and Meltzer, with screenings of films by Berman, Stan Brakhage and Larry Jordan.

The exhibition displays the facsimile *Seminas* in vitrines. Walls and pedestals bear examples of Berman's free-standing works—Verifax collages, rocks painted with letters from the Hebrew alphabet—plus assemblage works by the San Francisco collagist Jess and Berman's old mate George

Herms, the most distinguished visual poet left in Los Angeles from the original California Assemblage movement.

"Before meeting Berman my spiritual development was all from books. Wally opened the book of life for me," Herms said.

Herms was art director for the facsimile, a painstaking four-year labor of love. Berman's old chum Hal Glicksman, who owns one of the remaining half-dozen full sets, provided the prototype. Supporting documents and photos were loaned by the Smithsonian Institution's West Coast branch of the Archives of American Art. Archive director Paul Karlstrom called the acquisition of the Berman papers the "high point" of his career.

All of which goes to prove that, on evidence, such pack-rat collecting, scholarly sleuthing and compulsive attention to detail are not the things that mummify history, but rather revivify it.

Something in the alchemy of translating *Semina* into facsimile makes it feel like an art object. It now resonates an aura that combines the magical delicacy of Joseph Cornell with the moral fervor of Ed Kienholz.

It is downright astonishing the way Berman's life and art reverberate through the culture—from the dawning American bohemian movement of the '40s through '50s Beats, '60s hippies and present-day hip-hop kids. All forged variations on youthful countercultures to sluice open canals of creativity.

For a reputed recluse, Berman

was amazingly well-wired to his times. Raised in a somewhat threadbare middle-class Jewish household in the Fairfax District, his family once took in a struggling young entertainer named Sammy Davis Jr.

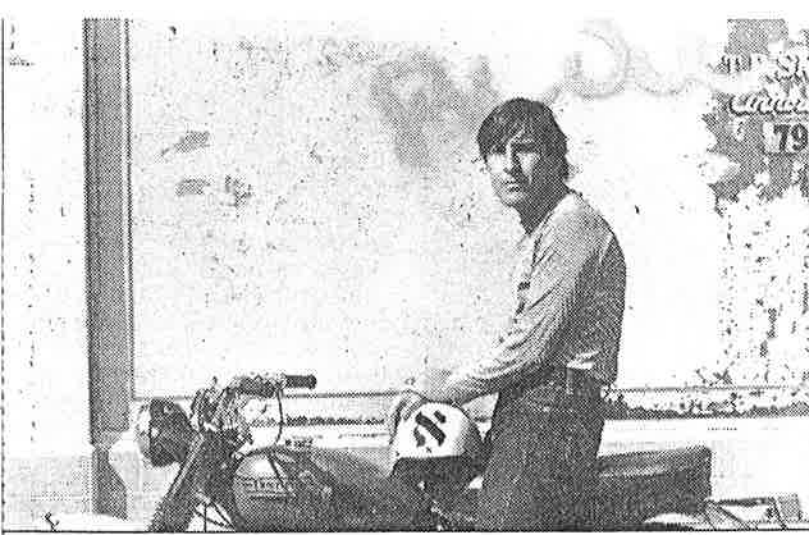
Too smart even for Fairfax High, Berman quit early and began to hang out with Robert Alexander—a fellow poet, artist and printer who was, unlike Berman, a heroin addict. Avid young intellectuals, they haunted the jazz clubs along Central Avenue. The emotional vectors broadcast by black musicians and "sporting life" people felt authentic to them. They thought of themselves as "outlaw artists."

Berman once wrote a song with Jimmy Witherspoon and illustrated jazz record album sleeves. Years later he was included in the crowd of celebrities on the cover of the Beatles' classic "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" album. Somewhere along the line he became a shrewd gambler. Herms remembers a late night in San Francisco when Berman was accosted by a guy who thought he'd cheated in a card game.

"It was the only time I ever saw Wally go completely pale," Herms said. "Then he said, 'I didn't mark the deck. I just noticed the marks and read them.' What impressed me was how fast Wally recovered. He had this pool-hall hustler's approach to life and a dancer's grace. He knew how to bob and weave."

In 1952, the artist married Shir-

Please see **BERMAN, F19**



DENNIS HOPPER

Wallace Berman, circa 1964. "If there was a guru, he was it—the high priest, the holy man, the rabbi," Dennis Hopper recalls.

## BERMAN

Continued from F18

ley Morand. Her soulful picture on the cover of *Semina 4* sets a tone of bohemian romanticism for a generation fascinated by Hermann Hesse and Antonin Artaud. They met waiting in line to see a Cocteau film at the old Coronet Theater. "I fell in love immediately," she recalled later. "He was a vacuum cleaner when it came to poetry."

Berman's acquaintances came to bracket the underground. He knew nature-cultist Jim Baker, who opened successful health-food restaurants like the Aware Inn and wound up as a '60s guru named Yod. He knew James Dean and Dennis Hopper, setting a long-standing mutual attraction between Hollywood and L.A. art. He played a bit part as a sower of seeds in Hopper's film "Easy Rider." Very apt.

Hopper, reached by phone, said: "He affected and influenced everybody seriously involved in the arts in L.A. in the '50s. If there was a guru, he was it—the high priest, the holy man, the rabbi."

Berman's charismatic personality and artistic use of the Hebrew Cabala lent him a mystical aura. His image comes across like Allen Ginsberg's "angel-headed hipster" or young Bob Dylan's blend of hostile dodger and Old Testament prophet. But he was also into the occult, which he found through the truly reclusive Pasadena artist Cameron, a votary of the diabolist Aleister Crowley. Cameron was actually the maker of the drawing that got Berman arrested—an Aubrey Beardsley-like psychedelic image of a copulating couple she'd done on a peyote trip. Aldous Huxley's book "The Doors of Perception" was influential at the time.

Berman and Alexander played catalytic roles in the establishment of the Ferus Gallery launched by

Kienholz and Hopps. After Berman's humiliating arrest, his next *Semina* announced: "I will continue to print *Semina* from locations other than this city of degenerate angels."

He moved first to San Francisco, then to a houseboat in nearby Larkspur. He was thick with the Bay Area art crowd. Hallucinogenic drugs seemed to play a key role in these relationships. According to John Maynard in his book "Venice West," Berman gave hashish to visiting L.A. poet Stuart Perkoff and introduced McClure to peyote, inspiring his "Peyote Poem." An excerpt made up the whole of *Semina 3*.

Cynics have suspected Berman of supporting his artistic habit by dealing drugs. Herms says: "I never saw him sell to anyone. His magic had little to do with drugs. He was a dealer in art and poetry."

"This is not the time to glorify drugs. But 30 years ago drugs and madness were considered doorways to experience. The church had stopped satisfying spiritual hunger. Narcotics were a way of altering consciousness. Wally thought it would be a better world if all students at the police academy took peyote on graduation day."

Berman's mental landscape included both magical perception and flinty realism. Both are evident in *Semina* and in Berman's life. His motto was "Art Is Love Is God." Since childhood he'd believed he would die at 50. Before returning to Los Angeles in 1961 he wrote in *Semina*:

*Spurred by what reason  
Do I leave this ark  
for the city of degenerate  
angels 500 miles south other than  
to die.*

He did, exactly on cue.

The artist was killed Feb. 18, 1976, near his home in Topanga Canyon, on his 50th birthday. He was struck down by a driver sodden on substances Berman had held in reverence.