

KOHN GALLERY

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By Michael Slenske
ART & ANTIQUES

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FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS



EUGÈNE DELACROIX | RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE | TONY BERLANT | JAPANESE PAINTING

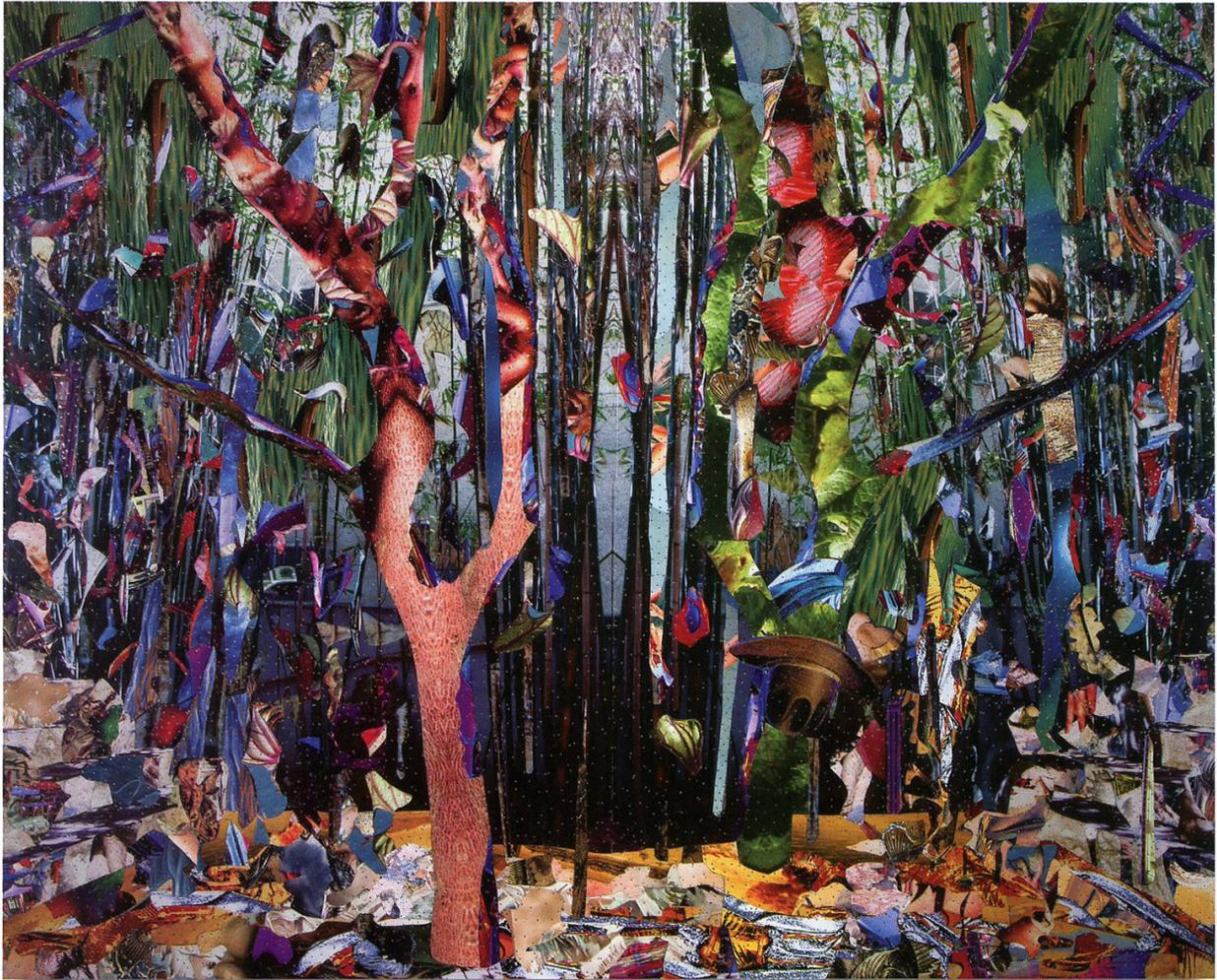


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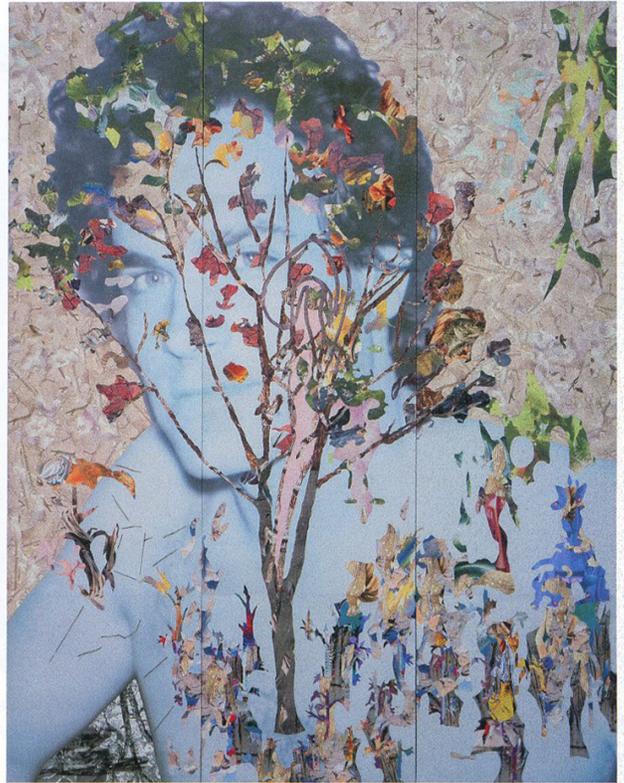
Signs and Wonders

WHETHER IN HIS COLLAGE-BASED ART OR IN HIS ACTIVITIES AS COLLECTOR/SCHOLAR/CURATOR OF ANCIENT ARTIFACTS, TONY BERLANT IS PENETRATING INTO HIDDEN LEVELS OF MEANING. BY MICHAEL SLENSKE



Tony Berlant, *Backyard*, 2018,
tin collage on plywood with
steel brads, 57 x 72 in.

ANYONE UNFAMILIAR with the tin-collaged oeuvre of Tony Berlant could be forgiven if they walked past his sprawling Santa Monica, Calif., studio compound and assumed that this multi-level live-work space was home to some kind of bustling furniture atelier, or simply a never-ending, NIMBY-baiting construction project. But those allowed into Berlant's cacophonous inner sanctum, at least this summer, happened upon the source of the ruckus: a team of assistants feverishly, though precisely, hammering snippets of curated metal signage—some of it salvaged, but most of it produced from tin that has been digitally painted with photographs taken by the artist—onto plywood. Berlant's source



photos, which number in the thousands, are kept in piles and in crates labeled with depictions of everything from “Guns/Animals” and “Sassy Ladies” to “Surf” and “Trains/Tractors/Cars.” Once Berlant selects a photo he wants, he traces the image on mylar, preparatory to it being transferred to the metal surface. The result of all this effort is a body of autobiographical collages that comprise “Fast Forward,” Berlant’s first show at Kohn Gallery in Los Angeles, his new dealer after 33 years with L.A. Louver Gallery.

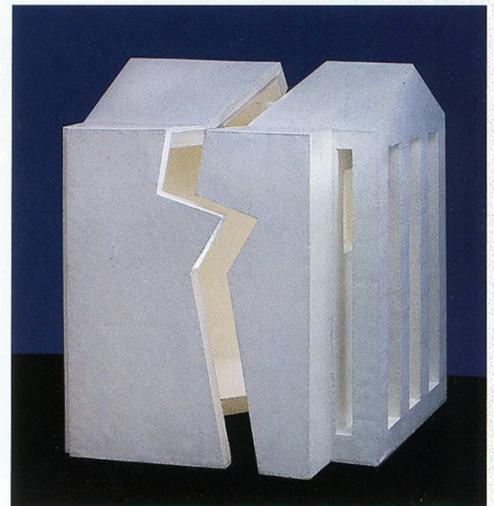
“What makes sense to me now is to make things you’d like to keep,” says Berlant. “That’s the simple way of putting it. If you really want to keep it, then you know it’s good—it’s worth making because it’s satisfying.” Berlant, a towering figure with the gait of a retired football player, strikes a slightly imposing figure that he tempers with a measured baritone, mostly used to deflect conversations away from himself or his practice. “When you’re making collages

or assemblages, things fall apart if you glue them, and I like the noise, I like hammering it,” he says.

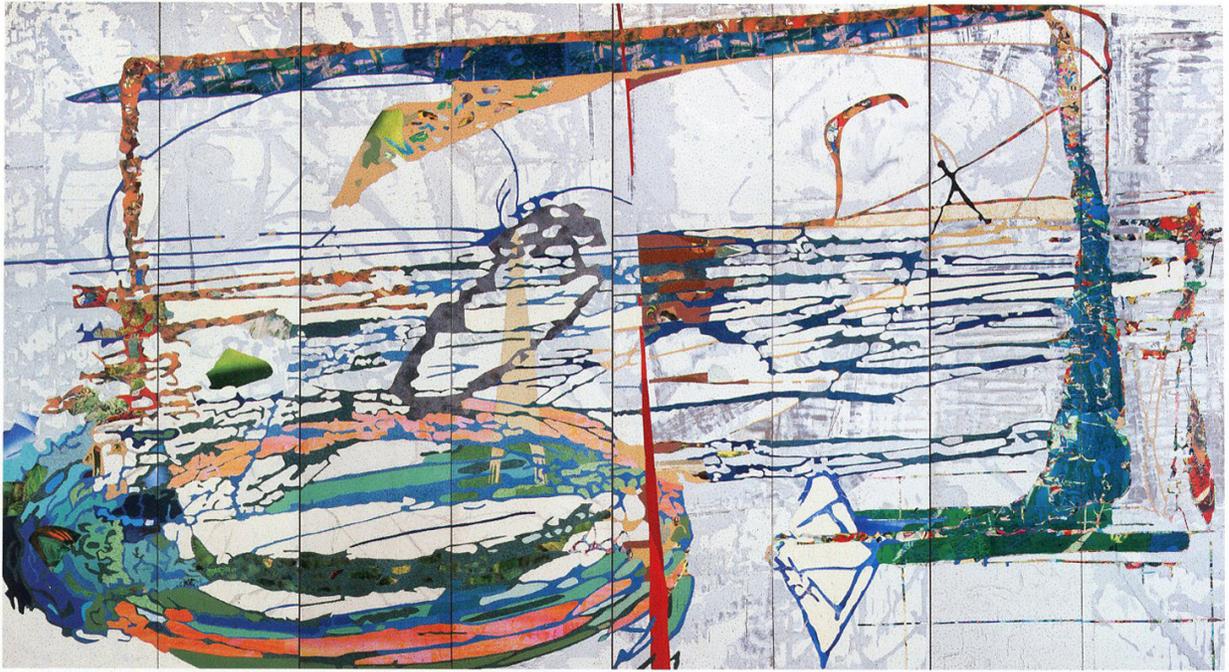
Born in New York in 1941, Berlant came to Los Angeles at the age of five. After graduating from UCLA in 1961, he went on to earn master’s degrees in painting and sculpture at the university in 1962 and ’63. Although Berlant had already used metal as an art medium, a disused store with old signage that was going to be torn down provided him with inspiration to make a new kind of work. On the store’s façade, Berlant discovered a layer cake of signage—a Chesterfield ad on the front of the display and four rusted signs beneath it going back decades. First he photographed them, and then he began snipping and hammering the signs into collage.

These works quickly drew

Clockwise from top left: *Helen*, 2018, tin collage on plywood with steel brads, 117 x 87 in.; *Self*, 2018, tin collage on plywood with steel brads, 117 x 91 in.; *The Cracked White House*, 1967, epoxy paint, steel over plywood, 83 x 70 x 71 in.



ARTIST PROFILE



From top: *Rollover*, 1989, tin collage on plywood with steel brads, 132 x 240 in.; *Within*, tin collage on plywood with steel brads, 2006, 36 x 48 in.



the attention of top collectors and curators, who exhibited them in shows at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, between 1962 and 1966. Berlant's early-established signature technique of collaging metal elements onto flat surfaces and three-dimensional shapes (such as houses, cubes, and Classical temples) has remained at the center of his art, though he has also made architecturally-inspired sculptures.

A trio of these architectural pieces, exhibited in the mid-'60s at the Whitney and at the James Corcoran Gallery in L.A., is finally getting a permanent home at the Château La Coste vineyard near Aix-en-Provence, France, after decades of being kept "in the dark in cheap storage with grass growing over them," as Berlant puts it. "I could have sold the stainless steel one many times, but I wanted to keep all three together, which was kind of impossible," says the artist as we walk through the vaulted office adjoining his collage studio. He shows me a maquette of the three building-sized sculptures, which will be sited on a hillside above the vineyard with some help



Clockwise from top: *Continuously Playing*, 2007, tin collage on plywood with steel brads, 9 x 20 in.; *Touchstone*, 2011, tin collage on plywood with steel brads, 84 x 36 in.; *Clock*, 2017, tin collage on plywood with steel brads, 32.25 x 24 x 8.25 in.

from the architect Frank Gehry, a longtime friend of Berlant's. The hillside also contains ancient archaeological remains, discovered within the last year, from when it was an ancient Roman vineyard.

"When your heroes embrace you, it gives you a green light to go ahead," says Berlant. While the new projects are clearly intended to help cement his legacy, they are both very personal. He uses the word "personal" often as he shows me through his second-floor residence, where his work is displayed alongside rare pieces by idol-friends such as Billy Al Bengston, Ken Price, Ed Moses, and Chris Burden, who is known for his intensely personal and political performance and public sculpture. Among the images on the metal wall works in the Kohn exhibition are photos the artist took of his wife, Helen, the view from his office,

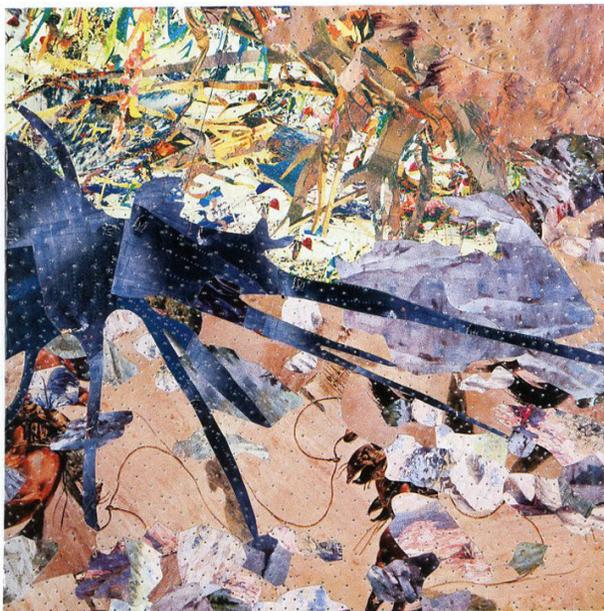
and one of 48 Polaroids of Berlant by Andy Warhol, taken in the early '70s.

Though Berlant considers his practice more in line with that of "manipulative collage workers" like Joseph Cornell, Kurt Schwitters, and Robert Rauschenberg than with Pop artists like Warhol, he acknowledges that when he was starting out as an artist, in his mid-20s, he was significantly influenced by the Pop movement.

In 1963 he was included in "Pop Art USA" at the Oakland Museum of Art, one of the first exhibitions of Pop Art.

In addition to his art practice, Berlant has long been a "fanatical collector" of Native American art and artifacts. In the mid '60s, he left UCLA, and to replace the lost income from teaching, he began dealing in Navajo blankets. Eventually, he





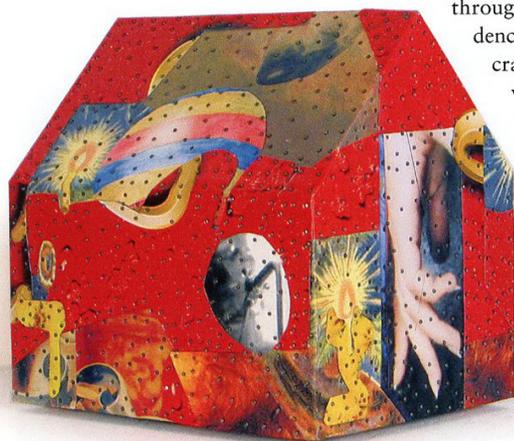
Clockwise from top left: *Forbidden*, 2007, tin collage on plywood with steel brads, 22 x 22 in.; *Some other place*, 2011, tin collage on plywood with steel brads, 22 x 22 in.; *The Taxco Café*, 1988, tin collage on plywood with steel brads, 110.5 x 101.25 in.; *Haven*, 2003, tin collage on plywood with steel brads, 8 x 8.75 x 6.75 in.

counted among his customers many of the top artists in New York, including Warhol, Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Brice Marden.

Berlant's obsessions grew to include Mimbres pottery from southwestern New Mexico—functional bowls dating back to around 850–1150 A.D. that were meticulously decorated with paints made from carbon and hematite and used for culinary and funerary purposes—and the hand tools of early man, prime examples of which are scattered throughout his second-floor residence. He pulls a Neanderthal-crafted hand axe from a velvet-lined drawer. Depending on which scholar you ask, this alluringly sculptural tool dates back 300,000 to 500,000 years. Berlant explains, “People are driven neurologically to make this shape, and these were made for almost two million years.” His interest in ancient artifacts

has grown into a scholarly and curatorial second career, culminating in a book, *First Sculpture: Handaxe to Figure Stone*, co-authored with the anthropologist Thomas Wynn, and a traveling exhibition of the same name, which debuted at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas this past spring and is tentatively scheduled to travel widely.

These “first sculptures” aren’t the only objects to lure Berlant away from the studio





and into the roles of archaeologist/writer/curator. His involvement with Mimbres pottery inspired him to become one of the founding members of the Mimbres Foundation, a conservancy group with which he has conducted copious research. In collaboration with Evan Maurer and Julia Burtenshaw, Berlant came out with another book, *Decoding Mimbres Painting: Ancient Ceramics of the American Southwest* and an accompanying exhibition that is currently on view at LACMA (through December 2).

The scholarship not only singles out blue-chip Mimbrenño artists (such as the so-called “Rabbit Master”) for their styles but also asserts that the imagery on the vessels was a result of days-long hallucinogenic ritual experiences induced by a substance harvested from the seed pods of the psychoactive datura flower. “Many of the depictions on these bowls are abstractions of the datura flower and other psychoactive plants,” says Berlant. Speculating as to why the Mimbrenños punctured the bowls, he says, “When you hallucinate, you see a big, white, glowing tunnel, and when you’re seeing this form it’s turning, so there’s a conflation of the flower and the spirit portal, the opening. I think puncturing the

hole in the portal is a way of your spirit going into the portal and onto the other side.”

One point of intersection between the ancient art that fascinates Berlant and his own work is the idea of shape-shifting. Just as neolithic stone carvers and Mimbrenño potters saw shapes in the mind’s eye that are not literally there—whether due to imagination or pharmaceuticals—Berlant invites the viewer to see new things amid the endlessly complex assortments of images and texts he collages together. Among the pieces on view at Kohn are some that feature photographic collages of contemporary street imagery and prehistoric-hand-tool imagery across one side and galaxies of tin-snipped letters across the opposite side. “They’re really like two paintings that are put together,” says the artist, “so it’s more like a sculptural experience, where you see one half and then the other.” Looking at these works, images and associations seem to cohere and disappear, only to be replaced by others equally valid. The essence of Berlant’s aesthetic quest, he says, is “to make what is invisible and strongly felt, seen.”

From left: *Luck of the Draw*, 2011, tin collage on plywood with steel brads, 30 x 30 in.; *Good to Go*, 2013, tin collage on plywood with steel brads, 23 x 20 in.

**Works by Tony Berlant
are available from:**

Kohn Gallery – Los Angeles

Brian Gross Fine Art – San Francisco