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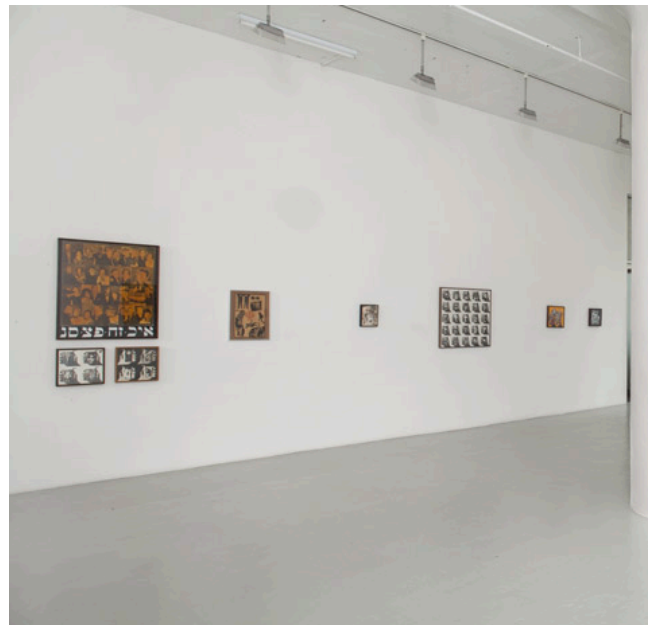
Art review

“Wallace Berman 1927–1976”

Wallace Berman created a Beat poet’s version of Pop Art.

Nicole Klagsbrun, through Sat 9.

By Anne Doran



Artist, poet (under the pseudonym Pantale Xantos) and avatar of cool, Wallace Berman was friend and mentor to a group of artists and writers associated with California’s Beat culture of the 1950s and ’60s. His fame within these circles was in contrast to his near-total public obscurity: His only solo exhibition at a gallery during his lifetime—at L.A.’s legendary Ferus Gallery in 1957—was shut down by the LAPD’s vice squad the day it opened. Recent posthumous exhibitions have emphasized Berman’s activities as a collector and disseminator of ideas, conducted largely through *Semina*, the hand-printed, unbound art and literary journal he distributed to friends. This show focuses on Berman’s art, which was at once hardboiled and ecstatic.

Works range from the youthful jazz-themed surrealist drawing that graces the cover of a bebop LP to rocks painted with nonsensical strings of Hebrew letters, to Berman’s signature Verifax photocollages. Included are rebuslike works that often featured the multiplied image of a hand holding a transistor radio, with found pictures—mandalas, snakes, mushrooms, crosses, fighter jets, film stars and porn—inserted in place of the radio’s speaker. *Aleph* (1956–66), his first and only movie, reprises the motifs of sex, death and transformation found in the rest of the show.

If Berman’s “seeing” radios have a spooky similarity to smart phones, they couldn’t be farther apart—their transmissions proposed, instead of a million subcultures of one, a single counterculture dedicated to love, faith and art. “I send up my rocket to land on whatever planet awaits it/preferably religious sweet planets no money...” wrote Allen Ginsberg in 1958. By the 1960s, Warhol’s more pragmatic arrangement with consumer culture had prevailed. Perhaps though, there are synesthetic life-forms on faraway worlds swaying to the syncopated rhythms of Berman’s transcendentalist Pop.