

Assemblage Art



Ed and Nancy Reddin Kienholz, *End of the Bucket of Tar and Speaker Trail No. 2* (1974), Orange County Museum of Art

Assemblage artist Paul Darrow (1921-2019) lived in a rambling house in Laguna Beach, California. His fireplace mantle was filled with toy boats, Buddhist artifacts, folk art, ceramic knick-knacks, children's toys, kitsch from souvenir stands and a human skull. He used those objects for his assemblage artworks — non-traditional sculpture, made from re-combining found objects. His assemblage pieces became prized by collectors.

French painter Jean Dubuffet first worked in the genre, later known as assemblage, in the 1950s. He created works from wood, sponge, paper, and glue. Assemblage was officially introduced in New York in 1961 in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, featuring artists Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso, Joseph Cornell, Edward Kienholz and others,

Joseph Cornell (1903-1972) was shy and reclusive, spending most of his life in his home in Queens. He worked at various jobs to support his art, never married, and created prized assemblage pieces, known as "Cornell boxes," made from objects from thrift shops. His boxes are like jewels, each a little private world, containing old photos, discarded Victorian treasures and other similar objects.

West coast assemblage artist Edward Kienholz (1927-1994) haunted flea markets all over the world and retrieved junk from the streets for his work. His *End of the Bucket of Tar*, made from an old bathtub filled old photos and charred material, is owned by the Orange County Museum of Art in California. His *Back Seat Dodge '38*, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, made from cast-off car parts, depicts a couple engaged in sex in the back of an old car. The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors tried to ban the piece from being exhibited, calling it “pornographic.”

In 2012, The Getty Museum in L.A. mounted the exhibition, “Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture.” The show’s assemblage and collage gallery featured lyrical, expressive works, comprised of cast-off materials, influenced by folk and vernacular traditions, poetry, mysticism, jazz and the cold-war political climate. *The Librarian* by L.A. based artist George Herms was composed of a wooden box, numerous pieces of scattered papers, books and a loving cup, all presented on a painted stool. It conveyed a scholar’s inability to part with papers. Kienholz’ *The Future as Afterthought* of broken rubber doll parts, tied together on a pedestal, suggested overpopulation and psychological confinement. Betye Saar’s *The Phrenologist’s Window* and *View from the Palmist’s Window*, combining printmaking skills with assemblage, were powerful statements about mysticism and African American women’s experiences.

Herms mounted the exhibition “Chaos’ Job: Restrain Order” at Grand Central Art Center, Santa Ana in 2011. The show was composed of: an ancient, rusted ironing board, wheel barrow, lawn mower, muffin tin, fan, early cell phone, broken mirrors, torn crumpled posters, a collection of miniature cars, lamp bases, an old pink tea kettle, several broken plastic bowls filled with endless piles of rusted tools, as well as numerous other detritus. The artist attached, arranged and piled up these bits of trash into harmonious assemblage artworks. Accompanied by an Artist’s Statement of black squiggles on white paper with odd titles including *Trifed Nebula* and *Golden Globe of Amber*, Herms took this style to its ultimate, enigmatic stage. When asked if he built these pieces with intention or randomly, he responded, “The inanimate objects tell me what to do.” Indeed, his works were testaments to seeing beyond conventional beauty.