



SILVER

DOESN'T GO FOR THE GOLD

By Tom Stern

Mill Valley artist Tom Silver creates his works out of things you might find in a forgotten corner of the collective American mind.

Silver describes his art variously as “assemblages” and “altars.” “It has to do with ritual, the things in our society that drive us to do what we do.” Silver takes mostly found objects and joins and juxtaposes them with an ardent spontaneity reminiscent of Jackson Pollock. The result is riveting compositions that have been displayed nationwide to critical acclaim, even as some have labeled them un-American and anti-Christian.

Silver gets the raw material for his creations from anywhere and everywhere. “I find all kinds of stuff on beaches, all this garbage from society: flip-flops, great pieces of wood from piers, boats, housing. I found someone’s green card once...

“I have a different outlook on what art’s about. I’m not interested in the kind of scene around galleries and fame. There’s a huge exclusionary factor in the whole gallery scene — the politics of who sees you, picks you and places you. Those decisions

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are being made on some level beyond my understanding.”

Tom Silver was born in Salem, Oregon, and moved with his family to Palo Alto when he was 6. As early as junior high, he was creating assemblages with found objects and other detritus from nature and civilization. One of his earliest works involved an old crate that he chanced upon. He painted it and then filled it with “weird stuff I’d found.” Many years later the curator of the Folk Art Museum of Williamsburg, Va., saw this piece and put it on display.

While in high school, Silver would commute a couple of days a week to the San Francisco Art Institute, where he took painting and sculpture classes. He went on to college, and in 1966 earned a bachelor’s degree at Cal State Long Beach. “I started as an art-ed major but that didn’t take. I felt it was about making kids conform — stripping away creativity. I felt it was immoral.

“So I went into crafts as a major: carving wood, metalsmithing and casting metal. Curators would see my pieces and want them in a show. They were shown all over: Oakland, San Francisco, New York. Then I shifted to sculpture and got interested in bronze casting.”

Silver went to graduate school at the University of Kansas “because they had a really great metal-casting program. I got my MFA there. For my bronze structures I was casting dolls, model airplanes,

found objects, parts of bodies. They caught on big-time — for a grad student.” During this time Silver also spent his summers working in Alaska as a geological assistant, studying river deposits from glacier runoffs.

Upon graduation in 1968 he moved to Virginia to teach sculpture at Virginia Commonwealth University, a job he held for four years. While he was there his art started receiving attention from collectors, museums and galleries.

“I got into a show at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., one of the better museums in the area.

“When I started being asked to show my stuff I’d take it in and at first they’d put it in a group show, then a four-person show, then a two-person — finally you get your own show.

“But I saw that others were getting dumped as I moved up, and they were just as good, as talented as I was. I didn’t like that. The arts have got to separate from the commercial realm. If I were running things I’d have an open gallery where everyone can be shown. Sure, most of it isn’t very good, but that’s true with most things in life, and I don’t need a curator deciding for me what’s worthy.”

From Virginia, Silver moved to Cleveland, where he spent the next nine years on the faculty of

Cleveland State University. “At the time, the ’70s, the city was in bad shape. People get pretty weird in those situations. I had dealt with Confederate flags and the Old South in Virginia, but Cleveland

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was much worse: rampantly racist. The school itself wasn’t much better. Only 2 percent of the students were black. It was supposed to be serving the urban community, so 2 percent is pretty bad. I only had two black students the whole time I was there.

“I was trying to recruit more black students. I’d go to churches, community centers, and ask them to come.” Silvers devised a program in which he handed out cameras and film to black kids. After three weeks the kids brought the cameras back and developed their pictures in a darkroom themselves, to be involved in the whole photographic process.

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This was some 30 years before the acclaimed new film “Born into Brothels,” in which the filmmaker teaches India’s slum children, ages 10-12, photography by giving them each a camera.)

“The kids *loved* it, says Silver. “They fought to get into the program. The shows got good coverage in the press. The black community really liked it, that the school trusted kids with equipment and displayed the work. But eventually the administration began coming down on me to stop the program — I refused until the negativity made me quit; it was a big drain.”

Also while at Cleveland State, Silver was involved with a community art collective that did performance art around the city, and once brought in Laurie Anderson, who has achieved world renown in this field. “She was good with an audience. She was doing interesting stuff, mostly stories about her life. We would discuss our different philosophies. I didn’t want to go in the commercial direction she wanted to go. You get a niche and you can’t get out of it. I didn’t think she was pushing it the way she should. I thought she should expand. She was getting smooth; I like edgier things.”

Silver’s edginess got him into a dispute over an exhibit he installed in a southern Ohio gallery. A prominent citizen felt the show mocked Christianity and America, and exerted pressure to close it. Despite some serious ugliness that included death threats, Silver refused to take it down till its run was over.

Silver left Cleveland State in 1981, “disillusioned and fried with teaching,” and returned to the Bay Area. He moved to Oakland, did odd jobs for a while and got married. In the ‘90s he became involved with Pro Arts, an artist-based organization that describes itself as “seeking to reflect, challenge, and nurture the culturally rich and diverse communities of the East Bay and beyond with a dialog expressed through the visual arts.” Silver, who started there as a volunteer, eventually became president of the board. Controversy struck again over a planned event at Pro Arts’ Oakland gallery that would feature murals by graffiti artists from around the bay. Though the police chief, fire chief, and even the mayor, voiced grave concerns, no one caused any trouble and the show was a success.

Silver moved to a house in Mill Valley about six years ago with his wife of 20 years, a physician who also helps run a family-owned tax-consulting business. “We just love it,” says Silver. “I’ve never seen light the way it is here; it has an intense but soft glow. And there’s a clarity to the air. I wish Mill Valley still had a real art community — the young artists can’t afford it. But there are still enough that it’s really great. We have a rapport here we didn’t find in other communities.”

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