

## An ode to a lost time

BY LYNELL GEORGE

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It was a moment that seems as brief as the blink of a camera's shutter: a California much more bucolic, spacious and slow. This was, at heart, artist Wallace Berman's midcentury bohemian California -- an instant quickly eclipsed by the vividly hued social revolution soon to follow.

A just-released collection of black-and-white images, "Wallace Berman Photographs," assembled by writer Kristine McKenna and designer Lorraine Wild, reveals another dimension of an artist who was best known for his intricate assemblage and collage work and a handmade, self-published magazine, Semina.

In nine issues that appeared between 1955 and 1964, Semina showcased the work of friends -- writers and visual artists in inventively constructed formats. Although he quite often used photographs in his collage work, he didn't incorporate images of his own. In fact, the remarkable number of images he left behind -- mostly negatives -- brought up a lot of questions.

"I was stunned at how good the work was. And the breadth of the people he knew," says McKenna, who got her first glimpse of the photographs nearly 10 years ago when she approached Berman's son, Tosh, and his widow, Shirley, about working on a biography (Berman was killed in a car crash in 1976).

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The images reflect both a now-vanished simplicity and a dedicated artistic spirit that feels at once loose yet deeply engaged. Sprinkled amid the famous (youthful) faces -- actors Dean Stockwell and Teri Garr, Beat poet Stuart Perkoff and artist George Herms -- are glimpses of L.A.'s shaggy bohemia -- Topanga, Venice Beach and Beverly Glen, where Berman kept a studio.

“It’s people living not quite off the grid, but somehow the big hand of consumer culture is not as evident,” says Wild. “We wanted it to be a very intimate portrait of what life and work was like then. How children were integrated. How comfortable people were with themselves and the surroundings.”

It was a big canvas, the city, full of possibility: “In those days they could get into their huge car and sail everywhere from Highland Park to Topanga all in one day,” says McKenna. “I guess it is a love letter to a lost city -- a lost time and lost place.”

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