

TOTAH

WALLACE BERMAN

Off the Grid

September 8th - October 30th, 2021

TOTAH presents *Off the Grid*, featuring 45 works by California art legend Wallace Berman (1926-1976), on view from September 8th through October 30th, 2021. Rarely shown on the East Coast, this exhibition is Berman's long overdue return to New York since his last major solo retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1978.

Wallace Berman is a notorious guru of the 1960s art pantheon. He emerged out of Los Angeles' historic Ferus Gallery, driven by Walter Hopps, Robert Alexander and Ed Kienholz. Often cited as a West Coast Beat Generation artist who appeared on the cover of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and rubbed elbows with the likes of Allen Ginsberg, Dennis Hopper and the Rolling Stones, his contributions transcended the multiple comparisons of his aesthetic and the associations that he kept.

Berman was a self-taught artist who incorporated the essence of the syncopated rhythms of jazz music and its culture, the mystique of re-appropriated objects, and his sharp wit expressed through mystical symbols and the popular imagery of his time. Surrealism, Dadaism and the Kabbalah all influenced his aesthetic. After discovering the possibilities of the Kodak Verifax photo copying system, Berman landed on his now famous motif in 1964. The image of a hand holding a transistor radio found in an advertisement for Sony, which appeared in *Life Magazine* became his delivery system. By removing the speaker grill and inserting random appropriated images the hand shuffles up messages that appear to spring out of the ether. His early use of the gridding technique creates a visual cacophony that barrages the senses. In *Off the Grid*, we see many early examples of Berman searching for this now infamous motif. For example, in *Untitled (Business Man at a Desk)*, we see Berman beginning to play with the idea of substituting content to shift the contextual interpretation of a common advertisement image.

Berman worked from 1958 until his death, on an 8mm silent film (later entitled by his son Tosh as, *Aleph*) that incorporated unconventional film techniques carried over from collage and painting. The film includes hand coloring, Letraset symbols, and collage portraits of pop-culture icons spun into a rapid-moving version of his gridded works.

Off the Grid welcomes Wallace Berman back to New York after a long absence. Berman's presence in New York dates as far back as 1968 when legendary curator Kynaston McShine featured him in a one-man show at the Jewish Museum on the Upper East Side. This is a rare opportunity to see selections from the artist's oeuvre including the film, *Aleph*, which will be screened at the gallery during the exhibition.

This exhibition is realized in collaboration with Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, Sam Mellon, and the Wallace Berman Estate. The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue.

Wallace Berman (born 1926, Staten Island, NY) refined his artistic vision in California from the 1950s-70s, living in San Francisco then Los Angeles, cultivating a like-minded community and eschewing academic constraints. His critical involvement with the Beat generation and contribution to the art and culture of that region was both influential and also largely forgotten by the mainstream art-consuming public. His mail art folio Semina was self-published from 1955-64, and has become an iconic chronicle of emerging thinkers and writers from this era. A complete catalogue of Semina editions are now included in the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. In 2016, Kohn Gallery, in Los Angeles, staged "Wallace Berman: American Aleph," the first comprehensive retrospective of the artist in nearly 40 years. Solo exhibitions have also taken place at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1978), and the Santa Monica Museum of Art in Los Angeles (2007). Today, his works are held in collections of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the Tate Gallery in London, The Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, among many others. Berman died in a car accident on his 50th birthday on February 18, 1976 in Topanga Canyon, CA.

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