

# Ed Bereal Speaks

Ed Bereal is a crucial figure in the history of Los Angeles art and activism. Known for his early assemblage sculptures of the 1960s, he took a long hiatus from the art world to focus on politics: education, video production, and guerrilla theater. I sat down to talk with him about his return to art on the occasion of his recent survey show *Disturbing the Peace: Assemblage, Sculpture, and Painting 1963-2011* at Harmony Murphy Gallery. What follows are Bereal's words, excerpted from an edited transcript of the conversation. Numerous additional photographs from the course of Bereal's life and career are available online at [contemporaryartreview.la/ed-bereal-speaks](http://contemporaryartreview.la/ed-bereal-speaks).

I grew up in Riverside, California. Riverside's divided down the middle, geographically. The population is divided probably into thirds. A third white, a third black, a third Mexican-American. I don't remember any kind of problem or disagreement between Mexicans and blacks, because, you know, your next door neighbor was Mexican. We swapped lunches all the time. "Hey, you want a ham sandwich? 'Cause I want that taco." It was a small town. So junior high school, grade school, all of that was pretty much segregated. And I could remember some swimming pools and bowling alleys and so forth that were segregated. You couldn't go in there. It wasn't a violent thing, or anything, it was just like that.

My first exposure to the art world was illustration. Norman Rockwell was being pushed at everybody. Coming through high school, this was the mid-'50s, and it was commercial stuff... I never saw, really, fine art. I still love that aesthetic. It was illustrations, comic books. And I love

jamming it right into the face of really fine art painting, too. So naturally, I wanted to go to Art Center School, and be an illustrator. I finished high school and I decided to take a year, maybe two, to put a portfolio together to send to Art Center.

I was with two other guys, and we'd gone to high school together, and they were the art guys. I hung with the football guys, but I also hung with the art guys. And I noticed their work wasn't looking that cool. It was a little wanting. So I took some of my drawings and I put them in their portfolio. I was naïve, and also I was pretty arrogant, too. "Hey man, that ain't that cool. Here!" So they took 'em and we all submitted. They both got accepted and I didn't. It fucked me up, "What was that?" I was very naïve. "Am I so egocentric, and I think I'm so cool, that I can't see, I can't tell what people think is good or not good?" I went with that for a while until I realized, "wait a minute, you've got to send them a photograph of yourself with your portfolio!" And they were both white.

I ended up having to choose Chouinard Art Institute, not knowing it was the hottest, most incredible place to be at in this country at that time. I walked into Chouinard and I very quickly started to see the whole art world, and also started to see where Art Center School was at—that whole commercial corporate place. Chouinard is like where the artists are. My first experience was taking the illustration course. The illustration teacher said "You know,

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it takes two days to do a good drawing.” And I’m going “Oh, bullshit.” So I do one of those drawings. A great drawing done in a matter of a couple hours, I get up and leave, but I leave the drawing on my board so everybody else can look at it and go, “Oh, shit, this fucker’s good,” you know? I mean, it’s just all kind of bullshit, but that’s where I was at, at that time.

So I’m playing it pretty loosey goosey and learning a lot when I happen to walk by a painting class that Bob Irwin was teaching. What the fuck did I do that for? I’m walking by, and Bob’s in there rapping, which he does. And I’m looking at what they’re painting, and I’m going “whoa, man, this is a lot more interesting than making illustrations.” It was mostly abstract painting, and for the students, really bad abstract painting. But the nature of it, the freedom of it, I guess was what was pulling at me.

Our teachers were all the young guys who New York had just “Bam!” dropped the spirit on. And they’re dropping it on us. So I do get involved, get introduced to Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman, Kline, and Rothko, and I had a real feeling that I liked it. My first introduction to Abstract Expressionism was a *LIFE* magazine article on Pollock. Shown next to a Pollock painting was a painting, which they had gotten a monkey to do. They were tearing away at Pollock’s painting. It was scaring a lot of people. Abstract Expressionism was kicking a hole in everything.

With Irwin, we were having these conversations, and he had always talked about certain things that were arbitrary. So I’m painting on this surface, and I’m going “That’s kind of arbitrary. Painting the front, that’s kind of arbitrary, I could be painting the back.” Well, as I’m painting, I start painting around the side, big move for

me. And I go around, and I go “well, that’s... legal.”

There was a place called Standard Brands where you could get a lot of oil paint, cheap. And so I start gobbing it on. Putting a little cornstarch in there, giving it some body. And the paintings start to become somewhat sculptural. Paint started wrapping around, and I loved the shape. They started getting to be bags over stretcher bars, which had to be shaped, with canvas stretched over them. And that’s when they started to get really interesting.

In Riverside I used to work as a mechanic. I loved gears and bolts and brackets and things. California car culture, man. I was deep off into that, but I really questioned the philosophy behind Finish Fetish. I mean, everything can’t be a car fender, right? When John Chamberlin came out from New York I was trying to help him learn how to spray paint and shit. We’d started hanging together, and talked a lot together. I think I modestly had a certain amount of influence on him because I knew how to use my hands.

Anyway, I felt that for me, it all goes back to music, back to rhythm and blues, and that kind of thing—that’s funk—down and dirty and raw. And raw and truth seemed for me to kind of come together really well. I was always into jazz and blues and I wanted that feeling, that rawness to be in there, in the art.

When it gets to the German thing, I’d had a lot of Jewish people go “How can you do that Nazi shit?” I say, “Whoa, stop. Number one: look at my swastika, it’s going the other way. That’s an old religious symbol, and you ought to work that out before you accuse me of a lot of shit.” First, of all, I was raised during the second World War and I thought the Nazi imagery was fucking cooler





than shit, man. They were more tuned into weaponry, costuming, ceremony, presentation, that whole thing. The Luger pistol was a piece of magnificent art to me. My father had one. He would let me just look at it. Designed in the 1800s, man. Incredible shit. I understand how my stuff is perceived. There is a beauty, and an accuracy in what the German psyche produced during the second world war, and I'm certainly a product of that. You can not stand in a crowd, facing 50 feet of curtains, that are 350 feet wide, with a swastika on top, carved out, three dimensional, and an eagle above it, and not take notice. Visually, that is some powerful shit. I think people read me as aggressive because I really like visual power. Not ideologically, but visually.

I stayed at Walter Hopps' place, in the early days. I saw the show he curated, on the carousel on the Santa Monica Pier. The art was on the carousel and you could stand in one place and the shit would go around. Chouinard was where most of the people from Ferus Gallery were teaching. So there was a natural affinity. Walter was a very unique guy, in a lot of ways—and in many ways that maybe haven't even been discussed. But he just immediately flashed to me. So I ended up working at Ferus and was one of the first people to handle Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*... looking at them, I thought, "Oh, bullshit. Are you fucking kidding?" My job was doing everything. Painting walls. I was hauling the paint rollers and brushes out the back door, as people were

coming in the front door to see the show. It was a great graduate school.

In 1965 I had a little studio near the corner of Crenshaw and Venice. I was in Dwan Gallery at the time. They were paying me to stay home and make art. It was my habit to come out each morning, stretch, look at the sun, check it out, take a deep breath, go in, slam down a little food, and start working. I worked for 10 or 12 hours. And then I'd come out, grab a quick snack, and then go to Barney's Beanery and meet all the guys, who were pretty much doing the same thing I was doing. So we'd sit around, talk about art, talk about racing cars, anything. Just blowing off steam 'til one or two o'clock in the morning, I'd head back to the studio. Go to sleep. Wake up at 10 or 11 o'clock, and do it all over again.

I'm coming home from Barney's one night, and smelling a lot of smoke... I'm also higher than shit, so I'm driving really, really slow. I get to my intersection at Crenshaw and Venice, and fuck man, everything is going crazy. People are running. Police cars are screaming. I'm kind of wasted and I'm not paying much attention to it, and so I go to bed. Well, I didn't realize that the Watts Riots had started and I'm going "Wow, man, I'm supposed to know about stuff like that." Because of my background and the way I was raised, you never let the street get too far away. I had gotten sucked up in the art community, and I'd lost some of the context of where I'd come from.

So I'm kind of thinking about all this stuff, and I'm listening to the radio, and watching TV. A couple days later I got up, and the National Guard had been called in and I didn't know it. When I walked to my door and opened it, there was a Jeep parked across Venice Boulevard, so it looked more like a checkpoint. It was right

in front of my place, and the Jeep had a 50-caliber machine gun on it. It was pointed right at my door, which is to say, it was pointed right at me. When I opened my door, the National Guardsman who was sitting behind the gun got startled but he snapped to. I'm standing there, and we're doing this, kind of like you and me, and I'm going oh, fuck man. This ain't cool at all, 'cause he's got license and he can do whatever.

I was doing pretty well in the art world at the time. And I'm thinking, all those articles and things that were written about me, they wouldn't stop that bullet. If I put Irving Blum and Walter Hopps in front of me, that wouldn't stop that bullet. And certainly if I put Virginia Dwan of Dwan Gallery in front of me—that's a 50-caliber machine gun. And when it hits something, it blows it up. I'm standing there going, "I should not have been so removed from certain issues, my culture and facts of life, that I could find myself in this situation. If I get out of this, I'm going to have to recheck my whole thing."

So, I got out of Dwan Gallery. I closed my studio. I went back to Riverside. I started writing. The writing turned into a theater piece called *America: A Mercy Killing*. I didn't know how to write a play. But happily, I was teaching at two places: University of California, Irvine, and University of California, Riverside, and that was the time when black student unions were going and I was kind of a faculty advisor to them. The students wanted to talk about their reality and issues. I suggested that they do a play. To make a long story short, they started doing these short form interactions, and acting them out. And they got pretty good at it. Maybe too good, because I got fired.

Out of that experience came the Bodacious Buggerrilla, the guerilla

theater group. Some students followed me to L.A., together with picking up a couple of relatives, some neighborhood people, we put together this group that we tried to make socially and politically solid. The group included a husband and wife, my cousin, and the woman that I was living with at the time. I'll tell you what: roughly '68 to '75, '76 was the most creative period of my life. Unfortunately, there's very little film or video documentation of that work today. *Pull Your Coat*, the TV pilot, from 1986, is the last thing we did, but we did a lot of other stuff before that.

We did these social/ political vignettes in laundromat parking lots or on church steps. After a while, we got into nightclubs. There was a nightclub on Crenshaw called Maverick's Flat. Richard Pryor used to do his stuff there, the Funkadelics performed there also. We kept everything in the ghetto. We didn't want to make a big living out of this. We just wanted to talk about the truth of our experiences. So we kept it in the ghetto until we were invited to this left-wing coffeehouse by the name of The Ash Grove, on Melrose near Fairfax. This is when we first came out of the ghetto. We then started doing places like UCLA, USC, UC San Diego and several California prisons. Our reputation started spreading a lot. We liked seeing ourselves as a kind of Zorro. You know, we'd zip in, we'd do our number, put a "Z" on somebody's chest, and split. It was getting out there. People would say, "Man, you gotta see these guys, 'the Buggerrillas,' man, they're outrageous."

Different audiences who found us would respond to us very differently. Because of the nature of what we did, in Hollywood, with a predominantly white audience, maybe a vignette would go on for half hour. If we did the same piece in the ghetto at a

festival, it would go on for maybe an hour, maybe longer. Because what would happen is, our characters would interact with audiences in the ghetto and it would become an improvisational political education class, on the spot.

We were very close to the Black Panther Party, and close to couple of other paramilitary groups who would critique our performances. At the same time, there were other black cultural groups from a different political perspective, that were also close. So we became kind of the mouthpiece, able to talk about, and maybe even in some ways, unify certain ideological points of view. And it worked out really cool. We were very successful at what we did, so successful that the FBI took notice. They had some theory about a united front of black groups, brown groups. People who are not on board with the official truth. It was called COINTEL-PRO [Counter Intelligence Program]. This was aimed at groups like the Bodacious Buggerrilla, Cesar Chavez, El Teatro Campesino, the New Sudan group out of Texas, probably the San Francisco Mime Troup, and possibly the New Amsterdam Theater in New York. I've never gotten around to filing a Freedom of Information Act request on myself. Oh, I know something's there.

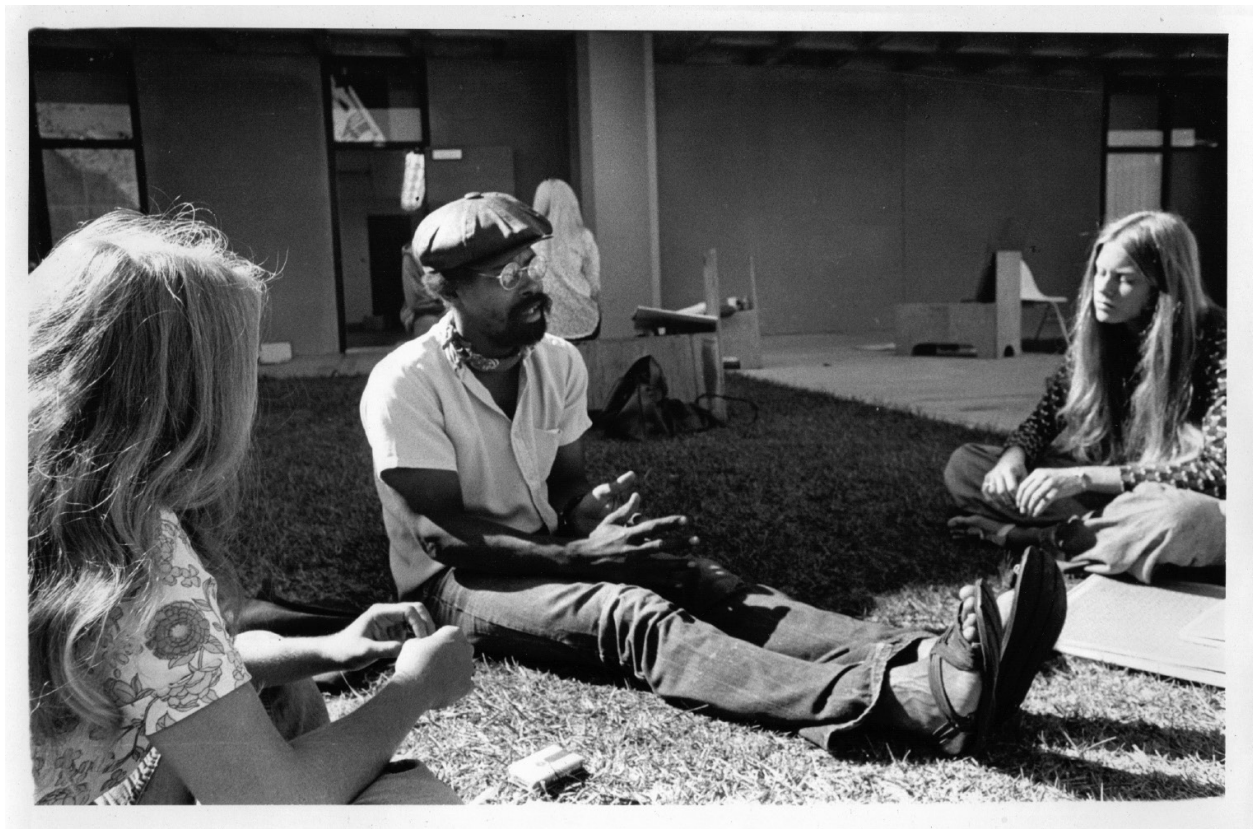
Bodacious was more than just a theater group. We had a farm out in San Bernardino, where we would raise our food. We thought the revolution was about ten minutes away. We were very naïve. So we were raising food, and animals, to sustain ourselves, if we had to. We also had an extensive program for self-defense, which included not only the members of Bodacious but also our family members. We were doing all that self-defense shit. So the FBI started looking at who and where we were coming from. Eventually, because of











COINTELPRO and their dirty tricks, Bodacious was starting to be pulled apart. It was becoming very difficult to do our performances anymore.

When I got back into making art in the late '80s I was kind of floundering around cause y'know, I left it doing one thing with one mentality, now I'm coming back to it and I'm not even the same guy. So I'm trying to figure it out. What do I want to do? I'm a much more political animal than I was before.

First I thought about Norman Rockwell. Norman Rockwell is one of the most political artists I know. And I bought a bunch of his books. I wanted to look at them. And I'm looking at this world, that he has fucking created out of space. I understand so you would like things to look like that and be like that, but they aren't. The only place I ever saw it get close was Ireland. Cause there's old guys working the train stations that look like Norman Rockwells. He loved turned up shoes, and puppies, and popsicles, and red-noses with freckles on them. He loves all that shit. You can actually find that in Ireland.

But I'm going: "I have lived in this world for a long time, and my neighborhood was never like that. It didn't look like that. And if that's America, then America's got several sides to it." Then I began to ask myself: "Well what does Miss America look like, from my side?" And then I'm thinking in terms of all the places I've been, and all the killing I've seen, and how much American armament is responsible for all of that. And that don't look like Norman Rockwell. And I kept getting hung up with the Miss America thing. The symbol for this country. We've got symbols: Uncle Sam, and Miss America, a lovely thing with a flag draped over it. And I went "what's she look like, really, from my point of view?" and that's when she

started to develop in those drawings and so forth. The spires like the Statue of Liberty coming out of her head, I have them as screws. Y'know, sort of things that certainly could talk a little bit about the mentality, because none of my Miss Americas have a cranium, you know? In the case of the big one, she's absolutely hollow.

Right now I'm working on a large piece, called *The Five Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. The fifth horseman is corporate capitalism, I think properly so. So I have these great big, five-foot steel letters, which I use as frames/ stretcher bars. The letters spell E-X-X-O-N. And I'm doing a horseman in each one. I started buying gas pumps, physical gas nozzles with the head that you turn on. And if you take a gas nozzle, and you mount it like this, and if you take two hand grenades, and you wire it to the gas nozzle, it's a dick and balls. So each one of those letters has a dick and balls, only they're also about petroleum. Inside each letter will be apocalyptic imagery, formed by perforated metals and plastics with halftones to see if I can get that whole visual vibration thing happening. Roughly, that's it. That's the immediate project. The medium itself is being born in that piece.

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Ed Bereal in his studio in Los Angeles (1964). Image courtesy of Ed Bereal. Photo: Jerry McMillan.

2

Chouinard students on roof, Los Angeles (1962). Image courtesy of Ed Bereal. Photo: Mel Edwards.

3

Ed Bereal, *Homage to LA: Just a lil Sumpthin for the Kids* (1963–1994). Mixed media, 84 × 63 × 32.5 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Harmony Murphy Gallery. Photo: Marten Elder.

4

Ed Bereal, *Location, Location, Location (Iraq/Afghanistan)* (2002). Oil on composite material, 74.75 × 43.75 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Harmony Murphy Gallery. Photo: Marten Elder.

5

Ed Bereal teaching at UCI (1975). Image courtesy of Ed Bereal.

6

Bodacious Buggerrilla Performance, Los Angeles (1970). Performers: Ed Bereal (right), Cliff Porter, Nathan Ali. Image courtesy of Ed Bereal.