

# REGEN PROJECTS

West, Kevin, "Assemblage Required," *W Magazine*, June 2007, p. 108, ills

# W

## Assemblage Required

Elliott Hundley's sculptures take collage to the next dimension.

Portrait by AMANDA MARSALIS



To cross the threshold of artist Elliott Hundley's studio in a former factory building in downtown Los Angeles is to enter a distinctive and seemingly complete ecosystem of the artist's imagination. A taxonomy of all that exists there would fill pages, but it is an environment of exuberant fecundity, densely layered like a rainforest, and it includes such varied objects as silk flowers, marble obelisks, peacock feathers, yard-sale art, reproductions of Old Master paintings, strings of beads, a shopping bag decorated by Jack Pierson (YOU ARE ALLOWED 2 TOUCH THINGS, it reads) and tiny cutout pictures of Hundley and his friends, often naked. Delicate bamboo armatures that may someday become one of Hundley's critically acclaimed sculptures hang from the 30-foot ceiling, while underfoot lies a thick layer of paper scraps, pictures cut from magazines and shards of this or that. Hundley, who is a quiet presence amid the creative chaos, refers to the studio as "a mulch pit."

It's an apt metaphor, because the 32-year-old's work—already the subject of solo shows at the Hammer Museum at UCLA and the Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York—feels, to a rare degree, like something dislodged from where it grew, as if a tropical orchid had been plucked from a moss-encrusted branch and hung on a collector's wall.

"Hopefully when a work is taken to the gallery, some residue of the studio is taken with it," says Hundley. "It's like a net that caught something on its way out the door. You look at the autonomous object and you know it's extracted from a much larger visual narrative."

Hundley—whose work is on view at the Hammer again in May as part of the "Eden's Edge" show—is something of an L.A. sensation. Top local gallerists vied futilely to sign him even before he received his M.F.A. from UCLA in 2005, and both the Museum of Contemporary Art and super-collector Dakis Joannou bought early pieces. "He was already a very mature artist," says Gary Garrels, chief curator and deputy director of exhibitions and public programs at the Hammer. "You sense the preciseness of the decision making and the very considered formal control, yet there's also a sense of intuition, of freedom and spontaneity."

Hundley's work is sculptural but not bound to the traditional plinth. His technique includes assemblage and collage, and he works with a limitless palette of images and objects, often lightly affixing them to an armature with straight pins.

"In my work, I don't believe there is an inevitability to the final form," says Hundley, who sits very still and speaks with steady deliberation. "I think that there are simply compelling resolutions, but any piece could be reconfigured into another composition that could be equally as compelling."

Hundley left his native North Carolina to study at the Rhode Island School of Design and went to Rome as part of a RISD study-abroad program. "It was sort of stunning, but in a literal sense, like I was stunned," he recalls of his first visit to the Eternal City. After graduation, he returned for a four-year sojourn and found inspiration in the frescoes of Pompeii's Villa of the Mysteries and in Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Theresa* at the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria. "That's like the precursor to installation art," he says.

Back in the States, Hundley found his "voice" by collaging the walls of his mother's house and enrolled at UCLA. Today his work includes portraits and images of family and friends, but it's not quite autobiographical. Like Robert Rauschenberg's Combines, notes Garrels, Hundley's art embraces the continuum of Western culture and confidently proposes a place for the artist amid that dusty pantheon.

"He retains a sense of hope against the abyss of history and a freedom of invention against all that has come before," explains the curator. While that may sound heady and suggest that Hundley is overly earnest—especially alongside ironic jokesters such as Damien Hirst or Tom Sachs—the artist himself doesn't indulge in academic pretensions. He notes that his technique is familiar to any bored teenager who ever stuck a picture to his bedroom wall. "Anybody can cut out something and pin paper onto foam," he says. "Philosophically I think it's nice. There's no mystique about a secret technique I have."

—KEVIN WEST

"He was already a very mature artist," says Gary Garrels of Hundley in his grad-school days.

