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ART with Alison Oldham 

Bohemian artist inspired by poets

First UK show of a colourful pioneer of the beat generation who inspired new talent

I SPENT much of my early teens in a Cornish cul-de-sac – but only in body. In spirit I was with the Beats in Los Angeles. My bible was Lawrence Lipton's book *The Holy Barbarians*, about the creative and louche goings-on of the bohemian community that flourished in the mid-50s in the then seedy Venice area of the city.

The Beat poetry renaissance in California centred on San Francisco where Lawrence Ferlinghetti co-founded *City Lights Books* in 1953 and luminaries Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac gave readings in 1955.

When Bohemian writers and artists went to L.A., they gravitated to Lipton's home, which acted as an informal centre for the arts.

For him, poetry readings were at the heart of the Beat experience in Venice, helping to explain "the alienation of the hipsters from the squares".

Likewise for Wallace Berman, an artist who is credited with being the father of Californian assemblage. The poster for his 1957 exhibition in L.A.'s *Ferus Gallery* is inscribed "Look towards the poets – they are the important ones."

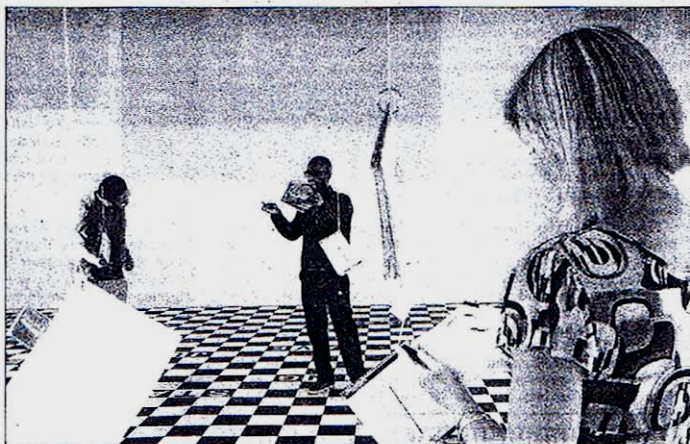
The exhibition was short-lived, as LAPD officers closed the gallery and charged Berman with obscenity.

Now he has his first retrospective exhibition in Britain at Camden Arts Centre.

It includes early drawings for jazz record covers, his mail-art publication *Semina* with poetry and images by Berman and friends, and paintings including a portrait of film-maker Kenneth Anger.

Berman's only surviving sculpture, *Homage to Herman Hesse*, made for the *Ferus* exhibition, is on display alongside his fragile rock boxes and a selection of the many photographs he took throughout his life.

His 16mm film *Aleph*, collated over a 10-year period, is screened and complemented by posters, book



The work of Allen Ruppersberg is displayed (above and right) and a self portrait of Wallace Berman.

Damian Griffiths



the cover of *The Beatles' Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

Berman appeared, with a punning reference to his publication *Semina*, as a seed-



profound influence on American artist Allen Ruppersberg whose first solo show in a public gallery in London is also at CAC.

He owns a vast collection of books, postcards, posters, films and slides mostly relating to American popular culture from 1931 to 1967.

These two interventions hark back to the arts centre's past life as a library.

Until November 23 at *Arkwright Road, NW3*, Tuesday to Sunday 10am to 6pm, and until 9pm on Wednesday. An afternoon of talks, presentations and performance