

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.

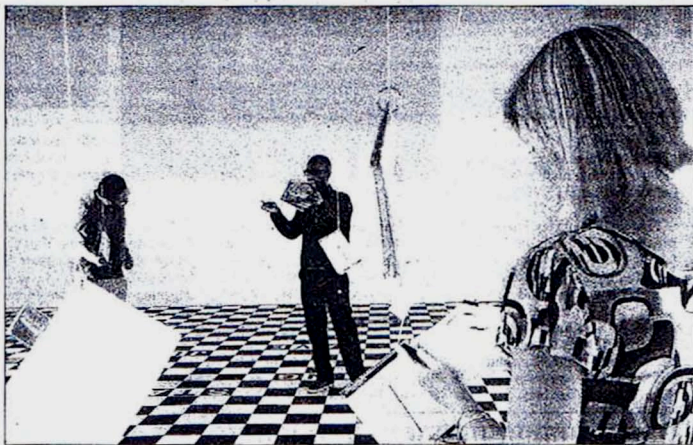
It includes early drawings for jazz record covers, his mail-art publication *Semina* with poetry and images by Berman and friends, and paintings including a portrait of film-maker Kenneth Anger.

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 covers and postcards.

Of special interest is his signature Verifax collage work, using a predecessor to the photocopier to reproduce images from newspapers and magazines.

Berman's influence was far reaching and, through his contact with gallerist Robert Fraser during his only visit to London in 1967, Peter Blake included his portrait on



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-sower in the film *Easy Rider*. He was killed by a drunk driver on the eve of his 50th birthday in 1976.

Though his work has since been exhibited in group exhibitions, mainly in America, he has, as curator and writer Kristine McKenna puts it, "been cruising below the radar of art history". However, he had a



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.

Images from this are combined with text in pamphlets suspended on strings – versions of the "cordels" with folk stories, poems, songs and wood-cut illustrations produced by travelling poets and writers in Brazil.

These are hung above his 2004 red, black and white floor piece *Reading Standing Up*.

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 introduces the work of Wallace Berman and the legacy of the west coast art scene in America in the 1950s and 60s on Tuesday, 2pm to 5.30pm at Central St Martin's Viewing Gallery, 107-109 Charing Cross Road WC2. £5, free for CAC Friends and concessions. Book: 020-7472 5500. Visit www.camdenartscentre.org for information on other events.