

## Junk is a Dirty Word

Paris Cotz

The assemblage of Jerry Barrish is multifaceted. Observational, emotional, filled with nuance, he has been dubbed a sculptural-novelist amid an art world of poets. He is anti-critique and anti-audience; he has no need to “fill seats.” He eschews labels, neither accepting nor imposing categorization and he staunchly refuses the artworld’s trends or movements. Everything he knows comes from direct observation: “All I do is watch people all the time.”

Barrish started out as a bail bondsman in San Francisco in the 1960s. Looking to learn something he knew nothing about, he enrolled at the storied San Francisco Art Institute and soon became enamored with filmmaking. SFAI was known for its dynamic environment and Barrish credits his creative career and success to the institute, one which fostered experimentation and artistic self-determination. After an award-winning second career as independent filmmaker, Barrish landed upon that for which he is now best known: rich works of assemblage that uniquely embody and distill the bounties of his adventurous life. “Thank God I never had a mentor.”

Jerry Barrish was born in San Francisco in 1939, the son of a mob-connected boxer from Chicago. He joined the Army and was stationed in Germany and France, where he spent his idle time visiting museums. Barrish returned home in 1961, uncertain about his future. Invited by his father to a release party for the infamous Mickey Cohen (the last person to be bailed out of Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary), the young vet found himself seated next to a Los Angeles bail bondsman by the name of Abe Phillips. In hotshot attorney Melvin Belli’s office the very next day, 22-year-old Barrish signed his bond agent’s papers. As a bondsman, Barrish embodied the countercultural ethos of ‘60s, and the radical spirit he displayed in the role would go on to define his entire career. The only bondsman willing to post bail for protesters jailed during many now-iconic social movements including 1964’s Auto Row Protests, Berkeley’s Free Speech Movement of 1964-65, the San Francisco State University Strike of 1968-69, 1969’s Battle for People’s Park, and the Occupation of Alcatraz by Native Americans 1969-71, Barrish quickly cemented his reputation as the sole resource for San Francisco’s unjustly imprisoned, even earning him the slogan, “Don’t perish in jail, Call Barrish for bail!” Barrish’s interest with art started in the 1950s and continued throughout his time as a bondsman, when he began collecting art. In 1968, Barrish started spending time with sculptor C.B. Johnson in his Bernal Heights studio. Upon learning his GI Bill eligibility was due to expire, he applied as a sculptor to the San Francisco Art Institute. Quickly disenchanted with the sculpture department, Barrish switched his focus to film and studied with James Broughton and George Kuchar, collaborating closely with his classmates and learning the ins and outs of filmmaking. He placed a copy of his very first feature-length film, *Dan’s Motel* (1981), on the desk of Tom Luddy, director of the Telluride Film Festival. A few days later, Luddy called Barrish and the movie went on to become an independent success and festival darling, garnering numerous awards. In 1986 he received a DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst) grant, which earned him a six-month artist’s residency in Berlin. “It changed my life.” While there he



Madonna Mermaid, 1998—2015, assemblage found materials, 44" x 11" x 10"

befriended New German Cinema icon Wim Wenders, and was cast in the role of a director in Wenders' award-winning *Wings of Desire* (1987). Back in the United States, he shot his final film *Shuttlecock* (1989), which he'd written during his time in Germany.

By chance, it was in Pacifica, during a routine stroll along the plastic-ridden beach in front of his home, that a solitary new practice catalyzed for Barrish: assemblage. Assemblage is the California medium. Its roots can be traced to the European avant-garde of the early twentieth century, but it is in California—a breeding ground for new ways of being—that the practice reached its ultimate expression. By the 1980s and 90s, Barrish was joining an art practice rich with practitioners identified by their use of materials and a certain sense of humor and irony that defined their work. But Barrish is clear on an important distinction within the art of assemblage. Whereas, say, Edward and Nancy Kienholz, in their tableau *Night Clerk at the Young Hotel* (1982-1983), use an actual phone, gate, door, lamp, Jerry Barrish creates his own phone, gate, door, lamp out of discarded plastic. In this sense Barrish is a sculptor, and as such he is quite distinct within the field of assemblage. Barrish takes the practice one step further by bending, cutting, and painting plastic; this artistic manipulation completely transforms the found refuse into something new, an artful object that is truly sculptural and expressive. Precisely through this intervention, Barrish allows for the nuance and gesture that define and universalize his work and transcend societal signifiers. Imbued within every work are emotions and expressions he has observed over the course of his life, one in which a varied and immediate career overlapped a volatile and meteoric epoch in history.

Barrish maintains a robust, two-story studio in the Mission District of San Francisco. Upstairs, where Barrish continues to work everyday on his sculptures, his oeuvre is carefully displayed and organized, like a library. Downstairs, two galleries regularly host exhibitions. Throughout a working life wholly dedicated to aiding and abetting free human expression in both radical and inventive ways, Barrish's legacy will be a foundation dedicated to showcasing and uplifting artists who work in found materials.



Scrounger, 1996, assemblage found materials, 57-1/2" x 15" x 20"