

IN THE STUDIO

Harriete Estel Berman

A colorful visit with the reigning empress of tin

BY JENNIFER CROSS GANS

FOR A PERFECT study in contrasts, consider the home and studio of Harriete Estel Berman. Picture an attractive house on a tidy hillside cul-de sac in San Mateo, California. It differs from its neighbors with its manicured miniature Japanese garden in the front, and a second in back, cultivated by Berman when she needs relaxation and contemplation. Propped at the front door is a mammoth color pencil, a trailer for her latest artistic project.

Her studio, which occupies the garage, is something else entirely. At first sight it is the most cluttered, colorful, delightful, and potentially hazardous place I have ever encountered. Berman, an artist of many talents, is currently empress of tin. Several benches are festooned with bits and pieces of work in progress, and swathes of bright tin tops await sorting. Hanging from the rafters are upside-down vintage tin doll houses. Packed in between are the usual tools of the jeweler's trade, including a soldering station; a long rack of pliers, snips, and pinking shears; and a rolling mill, shear, and bending brake.

Berman has rarely met a piece of decorated tin she doesn't like, and never one she can't find a use for.

"I've been working with tin for more than 20 years," she says. "I may not like it, but I keep everything because I may need it later." She doesn't buy sheets of preprinted material, but is not above scrounging for it, like the time she wangled more than 100 free boxes of Penguin Caffeinated Mints. She also has some 50 family members and friends making donations of empty cookie, candy, and other tins.

Despite what looks like clutter, Berman's studio is extremely well organized. The larger flat sheets are carefully stored in vertical racks. Later these are cut, sorted, and filed by color or subject, including men,

women, children, toys, fruit, company brands, and UPC codes. During my visit, Berman and her part-time assistant, jeweler Emiko Oye, were sorting through hundreds of them in search of some artistic matches. It was hard to keep away, despite Berman's warning to avoid the razor-sharp edges.

Individual tins of course must be disassembled, which is harder than it looks, requiring considerable hand strength, sharp cutters, and heavy-duty pinking shears. Cutting circles is particularly tricky. Die-forming and bending tin is also difficult, and as many as 50 percent of pieces split or crack in the process. Handling the material is punishing, and usually requires gloves. Fortunately, Berman is extremely well trained, with a BFA at Syracuse University, an MFA in metalworking from the Tyler School of Art, and more than seven years as a bench jeweler, doing design and repair work. She knows from the inside out both how jewelry is made and how it can be deconstructed, and has both confidence in her abilities, and the courage to "wing it."

Tin is a ready-made medium for Berman, who combines technical skills and an artist's eye with a well developed social conscience. As a young woman she became—and still is—an outspoken feminist, expressing her anger at women's traditional roles in an outstanding series of handmade miniature, multi-media domestic appliances. Today she is more sophisticated and cynical, but also more fun-loving.

One delicately critical masterpiece is a leaning stack of teacups, the kind your great-grandmother might have used for afternoon tea, maybe cocking her little finger. Overall, Berman has made more than 200 individual cups, not to mention teapots and other domestic items. This pile looks wonkier than the leaning tower of Pisa, but is firmly attached with rods or magnets. Is it a riff on older traditions of femininity? An outtake from *Alice in Wonderland*? Or a reflection of the fragile and outrageous balance of our consumerist society, head over heels in love with "lifestyle"? Next to it are two oversize mugs filled with what appears to be foaming hot chocolate, both

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Harriete Estel Berman (left) and assistant Emiko Oye sorting tin pieces in her San Mateo, California studio.

exuding “drink me!” but in fact filled with an experimental plaster and plastic mix concocted by Berman and Oye.

Poking fun at national brands is a favorite pastime. Some of the more colorful ads show up in mini-sculptures, wall plaques, and picture frames, in the kids’ lunchboxes that Berman uses as purses, oversize beads, and her liberal use of manufacturers’ UPC codes. A series she is currently designing shows California brands, transformed into huge, often juicy bracelets. These will be marketed in miniature wooden crates, labeled with her personal brand, *Bermaid*.

Another longtime passion of Berman’s is recycling. Early projects included tin bird houses, which she gave to friends and family. When she became dismayed at the amount of water her neighbors splashed on their lawns, she made table-sized lawn sculptures out of tin. These led to her recruiting three assistants (plus volunteers) to make a nine-foot-square “lawn” from 18-inch-square panels. The whole project comprised 32,000 tin grass blades, each mounted on an individual slit in the base, and took a year to finish.

“A part of me can’t dispense with social accountability,” Berman admitted. When her son, now in college, had troubles in school, rebelling against standardized teaching and testing, she turned her laser beam eyes on the educational system. Her first shot was an installation called *Measuring Compliance*. Facing the corner was a small desk and a third-grade chair covered with a child-sized straitjacket. The floor was composed of used rulers, yardsticks, and recycled wood labeled with such dictatorial messages as “sit in your seat and be quiet,” and a tin spelling list saying “Compete,” “Comprehend,” and “Compulsory.”

Berman’s current project is even more ambitious. She’s trying to collect 100,000 pencils, each of which will be hand drilled to make a 12-foot-wide x 25- to 30-foot-long woven bell curve. “Testing is only one measure of performance,” said Berman. “It affects all aspects of teaching, and it’s so myopic. Why not see what kind of learners the students are?”

Berman is a relentless organizer. Though assertive and on occasions sharp-tongued, she’s also a good role model, encouraging to younger artists who admire her skill, persistence, and marketing ability. Her



work is amply documented on the web, in handsome brochures, and the occasional video. She’s also hoping to recruit other jewelers interested in using the online craft boutique etsy.com and is measuring its effectiveness as a sales tool. She’s making a new, lower cost line for sale there, starting with recycled tin earrings.

To help her achieve mental and physical balance, Berman teaches an exercise class six times a week, tends her Japanese gardens, and cooks gourmet meals. She is also reveling in the freedom that comes from sending two children off to college. For all her feminist attitudes, she played the major part in raising her son and daughter. She also worked in her studio throughout their childhood. “When my son was only three months old I announced I needed a bending brake,” she recalled, forecasting her future career merging motherhood, metal, and message.

An assortment of tin boxes awaiting dissection, along one wall of Berman’s studio.



HARRIETE ESTEL BERMAN
“Williams Sonoma” bracelet, 2007
recycled tin cans, 10k gold rivets,
Plexiglas
5 ½ x 4 ½ x 1”