

GREENE NAFTALI

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Allen Ruppertsberg *25 Ways to Start Over*

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8th Floor

“Be aware time runs out” reads a line from a recent work by Allen Ruppertsberg, as if to underscore his longstanding fascination with the shelf life of cultural memory. The artist has spent fifty years delighting in and recasting the ephemera of post-war consumption, and his fourth solo show at Greene Naftali features a new body of work from this trailblazer of West Coast Conceptualism. Originating in the wake of his acclaimed retrospective at the Walker Art Center in 2018, *25 Ways to Start Over* takes up the thorny task of artistic reinvention. Sourced from Ruppertsberg’s vast archive of printed matter—from family photographs to *Mad* magazine to a portrait of Rimbaud—his chosen motifs filter personal identity through mass-market items that have since become scarce. Here his rollicking, cut-and-paste aesthetic unfolds across several equally pliable supports, inviting viewers to reflect on how we piece our world (and ourselves) together.

25 Ways to Start Over centers on a set of wall-mounted puzzles, scaled up and turned on axis to occupy the space of painting. The underlying scenes are dense digital collages of his own past work or select memorabilia; some standalone prints, others transferred to wood panels and then subject to further manipulation. Presenting already fragmented images cut into loose parts to align or disassemble, Ruppertsberg backs each puzzle with a magnetic sheet for ease of interaction, and shows the works with key pieces set off to the side—a tacit bid to complete them. These so-called “whimsy pieces” break from the ridges and furrows found in a standard jigsaw, with striking silhouettes that often echo his oblique self-portraits from decades past. This interlocking format can imply a certain tidiness of thought, when all falls into place—but Ruppertsberg alludes instead to a puzzle’s contingency, its power to remain unfixed.

A similar provisional quality attends a set of works on pegboard, commonly found in hardware stores and tool sheds to keep useful things close at hand. Ruppertsberg is drawn to this come-one-come-all structure for its endless adjustability, and he hangs his with vintage record albums, framed illustrations, and pulp paperbacks. The boards themselves are patterned with covers of midcentury dime novels that were written under pen names (Ruppertsberg himself has used the name Al Reed in his own output from time to time). An artist’s book that accompanies the exhibition reveals the identities of dozens of pseudonymous authors, with entries that detail their backstories and reflect on the freedom that a little artifice can afford.

A final work fills a gallery wall with a swarm of images pulled from the sleeves of video cassettes, salvaged from the Ohio store Ruppertsberg’s sister once operated. The tapes’ decorative packaging was meant to draw the eye in a retail experience that can no longer be had, and Ruppertsberg simultaneously embraces and sends up our nostalgia for what we leave behind. Starting over, for him, is rooted in collective history—finding potential in its remainders. The works weigh where we’ve been and offer a sundry catalog of the key dilemmas in the life of an artist: how to stay at it, circle back, keep it fresh, make something meaningful, and then do it again.

Allen Ruppersberg (b. Cleveland, 1944) lives and works in New York and Santa Monica, California. Recent solo exhibitions have been mounted at institutions including the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2018), which traveled to the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2019); Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art, Winnipeg, Canada (2016); Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles (2015); WIELS, Brussels (2014); and the Art Institute of Chicago (2012). Ruppersberg's work is in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago; Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; Cleveland Art Museum; Denver Art Museum; Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin; Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, among others.