

805 LIVING

Let the
Holidays
Shine



A Winning Hand

ARTIST DAN LEVIN'S WORKS HAVE HEART.



For his *Levin's Lonely Hearts* collection, assemblage artist Dan Levin strategically cuts pieces from individual playing cards within a deck and assembles them to add dimension to the patterns printed on them. The heart on the ace of hearts plays a central role in each design.

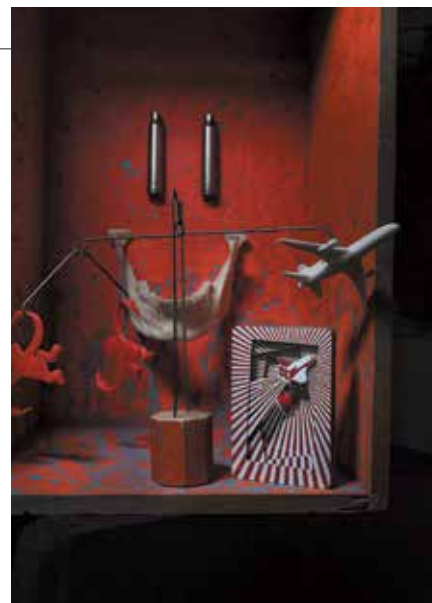
Among the artifacts overfilling the shelves of artist Dan Levin's compact Santa Barbara studio—boxes of wood pieces, bags of poker chips, stacks of photographs, old electronics, scores of playing card decks, and thousands of unidentifiable objects—is an old metal detector. And though most people might be inclined to consign it to the trash heap, it has value to Levin for several reasons. First, it has a history with its previous owner, another Santa Barbara artist who worked with assemblage—which *Webster's* defines as “an artistic composition made from scraps, junk, and odds and

ends.” Second, it reminds Levin of the guys he used to see using detectors to scan beach sands for valuables. “I remember how excited they were when they got a score,” Levin says. “When I go to the thrift store or antique store, that’s how I feel.” Finally, the contraption might come in handy for a sculpture one day.

Influenced by artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Edward Kienholz, Levin has made a career of creating art from unlikely components. He was born in the San Fernando Valley and grew up in New York. After graduating from Cal State University Northridge in the 1980s, he moved to Santa Barbara in 1986 to work as a graphic designer and art director, always >



In works from his *Objects of Curiosity* series, such as *What Does It All Mean* (left) and two others (right, integrated with a *Levin's Lonely Hearts* piece), Levin (above) assembles eclectic miscellany.



painting on the side, he says, and accumulating stuff in a warehouse space in Los Angeles. "I'd find objects in Dumpsters and attach them to paintings," he says. "Then I just concentrated on the objects."

After taking a few years off to travel in Australia and Europe, he met his future wife on a train in Scotland, and by 2009 they were living permanently in Santa Barbara. He was producing what he calls "objects of curiosity," quirky, surrealistic, three-dimensional pieces with an occasional provocative political or environmental edge. "I did an American tools series," he says. "I took a rake or a shovel and cut them up and beaded the pieces with other objects. I did that for a while and then moved on. I don't stay in one place artistically very long."

In 2012 Levin was working on an assemblage when he added a deck of playing cards and thought about cutting into the faces. One thing led to another: First he folded cards and made straight scissor cuts, the way one might cut out valentine hearts or paper snowflakes. These days, with what seems like X-ray vision, he uses an X-Acto knife to isolate various shapes in the patterns on the backs of the cards. Working his way through an entire deck, he stacks and glues the cut cards together to form a delicate three-dimensional diorama that tantalizes the eye with its complexity. At the very back of the jewel box-like creation he places the deck's ace of hearts—a red icon. Hence the name: *Levin's Lonely Hearts*.

Levin has hand-cut 500 to 600 such decks by now, working with a dazzling variety of vintage and contemporary motifs: abstract mandalas, the skeletons and skulls of Día de los Muertos, a bee-and-hive pattern, and an image of *Starry Night* by Vincent van Gogh, among many, many others. "I went on eBay," he says, "and saw all kinds of card designs. There are thousands, and new ones all the time."

Levin has hand-cut 500 to 600 such decks by now, working with a dazzling variety of vintage and contemporary motifs.

And as people have seen examples of *Levin's Lonely Hearts*—which the artist posts on Instagram, Etsy, and Facebook and generally sells for \$150 to \$500 each—card designers have sent him decks to work with and collectors have commissioned him to produce specific pieces.

Even using the same patterns again, Levin rarely repeats his cuts exactly. "I start right around the heart with the smallest cut, then bring it to the top, making adjustments along the way," he says. There's also an element of chance, since there's no set order to the cards. If the deck happens to fly apart as he works with it, it just comes together differently. "I like to let happy accidents take over," he says.

Levin has continued to work with other objects. The effort involved in landing a man on the moon 50 years ago has inspired him to make pieces that combine space and astronaut imagery with pictures of President John F. Kennedy. He collects and cuts up old photographs and 19th-century cartes de visite and reassembles them into mash-ups mounted on pieces of wood. He also creates balancing wire-work sculptures that pay homage to the mobiles and stabiles of late sculptor Alexander Calder.

The *Lonely Hearts* aren't going away anytime soon, however. "I'm going to keep doing the cards," Levin says. "I envision myself being able to do this for many years to come." ♦

An exhibit of Levin's Lonely Hearts is on display at Bella Rosa Galleries (bellarosasb.com) in Santa Barbara through December. Other examples of his work can be found at danlevin.com.