

In Celebration of Seymour

It was a day I could not envision — that I would live to speak of Seymour Rosen in the past tense. He came to the design office and studio in Los Angeles that I shared with the photographer, Marvin Rand, at the behest of his family who wanted some assurance that he had the talent to pursue a photographic career from someone in the design/photography profession. He was barely out of high school, but the portfolio he showed us was one of mature sensibility and visual acuteness far beyond the norm for his years.

He was encouraged to continue, and Marvin, who had been shooting Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts suggested that he spend some time photographing it. It was a beginning. He was drafted shortly thereafter and assigned to a photographic unit. When he returned to Los Angeles he continued photographing the Towers, but broadened his subject matter, wandering into east Los Angeles photographing gang symbols that pocked the walls of the neighborhood, melted into the crowds at the public market, explored the shops that reflected the Hispanic culture of the area.

He found a bakery that decorated cakes with local culture themes and figures, had them decorate some cakes over cardboard forms that he included in a government exhibition of American culture touring Europe. He worked at the LA County Museum of Art photographing their collection and continued his exploration of the lesser known, by west LA citizens at least, the more obscure areas of the city, meeting people of all races, economic levels, occupations. He was, in an unknowing manner, one of the first modern urban archaeologists. He was also part of the art scene of that vibrant period in Los Angeles and his photographs of the avant garde Ferus Gallery, its artists and activities, constitute a valuable insight into the spirit of the time.

It was the threat by the city of Los Angeles to demolish the Watts Towers that propelled a group of dedicated people from all walks of life to form the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts. This diverse collection of architects, designers, lawyers, engineers, musicians, scholars, film editors, photographers fought the city, and won. A year or so later, the LA County Museum of Art installed an exhibit of the Watts Towers using Seymour's photographs, possibly the first exhibition of a folk art environment by a major museum. It was this in-depth involvement that may have provided the spark that led him to devote the rest of his life to documenting, photographing, interviewing, saving, the work of these eccentric visionaries in this very arcane niche of this yet to be named segment of expression.

Almost single handedly, he gave a legitimacy to this form that had not existed before. He was instrumental in helping local groups preserve the heritage of one of their own. He acquired the knowledge of legal and governmental processes that led to the landmark status at state and federal level of many of these sites.

Seymour's passion and dedication was not only to the physical objects of the obscure world of self-taught artists, sculptors, but with equal fervor to the eccentric visionaries who built them.

He had that rarest of qualities: a gentle, determined ability to communicate with

all manner of people — at ease discussing life with a stranger on the street, and equally before a room full of art historians and academics. He curated exhibits that always featured the involvement of the visitors or the spontaneous participation of outsiders. It might be a open crate in the exhibit filled with paper cups and assorted trash to which visitors added their own, creating an artistic chaos of the junk he so admired or, an invitation to a group of tattooed people displaying the intricate patterns that flowed around their bodies — a living, moveable art exhibit. He gathered many of these experiences and impressions from over the years into an exuberant book titled, "In Celebration of Ourselves" — and what a celebration it still is.

As his involvement and accumulation of documentation, photographs, data, and interviews grew, in 1978 he formed SPACES, the acronym for Saving and Preserving Art and Cultural Environments, a non-profit foundation, in the hope of creating a more formal structure and secure an endowment. His grant applications to agencies and foundations, as a basically one person institution, were invariably turned down, often in favor of what we both considered trivial pursuits. It was rumored that he was on a MacArthur Grant list — this could never be verified and it never happened. A few people, admirers of his efforts, contributed to SPACES, but in dribs and drabs — never enough to sustain and support the permanent help he needed to accomplish his goals. Dedicated persons worked until they returned to school, moved, or took more permanent, stable positions.

The character that embodies this pervasive dedication carries with it a darker side: an obsessive focus and work ethic, often at the expense of its own health and welfare. It can be stubborn, possessive, secretive, and just plain prickly. It is prone to compartmentalize information and people and carries a strict definition of how things should be done and how the legacy of a life's work was to be carried out.

Seymour was suspicious of the motives of people, even when they came with the best of intentions. He was called upon to help groups through the process of saving a site or, requests for pictures and information for which there was no remuneration. He gave, but complained. He lived simply, not tidily.

He was basically a rather shy, but determined person, more sensitive to the feelings and aspirations of those visionary builders than to those who came from the institutional mainstream of the art world, whatever the sincerity of their purpose. He felt an acute lack of appreciation and support for his efforts from institutions that should have been of greater help to him.

Despite the obsessive focus on the folk art world, his interests went beyond it and he proposed many projects from an untourist, tourist guide to Hollywood, to medical/emergency identity cards for tourists and senior citizens. He knew how many languages were spoken in the LA school system, pondered a way to use that to promote better relations in the community. Some of these were pursued to a point, but we were both detoured by the sheer weight of other responsibilities. I regret not carrying out a proposal for a stamp to honor Simon Rodia, the photos he sent me still languishing in my files. But not everything fell through the cracks. Though I was, for the last 30 odd

years, living 2000 miles away, telephone calls lasted well into the night — later emails flew across the country. Though people working around him never saw me, or may even not know of my existence, I was the 800 pound gorilla in the closet to whom Seymour fed his letters, proposals, and frustrations. I was the tough love respondent to requests expressed too harshly. I'm not sure that in toning down his language I was also taming the very quality the request demanded. Nonetheless, he generally took my suggestions seriously.

When he proposed to publish a SPACES newsletter, we did manage to produce a number of issues containing valuable news and information which was distributed widely to the folk art community. Despite the distance, they were designed in Chicago, written by Seymour and produced in Los Angeles. There were glitches here and there that sometimes riled my design sensibilities, but on the whole they looked well enough and contributed valuable information across the nation. The press of time and financial strain finally brought them to a premature end.

I've tried to recount the light and dark, the highs and lows that a long distance could not diminish. We met occasionally on his trips to Chicago and mine to Los Angeles where we traded lofty thoughts and frustrations over a pizza and beer.

But this is a celebration, and a celebration requires color. Seymour absorbed and reflected color — from the tiles of the Watts Towers, from the colorful undulating wall at Prairie Moon, from the painted figures at Chandigarh, the bright graffiti of east LA, the fanciful art on the Harley Davidson motorcycle gas tanks in his collection, and the vibrant personalities of the people he met and nurtured.

He had another passion, a lighter one that only those who worked at or visited his home really knew. He was a patron of cactus — and how appropriate a metaphor for him: a survivor in the harshest of environments, a stubborn plant more likely to crack than bend, a prickly surface to defend itself. It stands alone in the desert viewing the vastness, its moist reservoir, the salvation of a thirsty wanderer.

Wherever he is, he's winced at every chronologically misplaced event, every error or omission, every wrong date or number in this narrative. He turns to Simon Rodia, "Sam, can't they ever get anything right? We've both had enough of that place. Let's get a pizza and show me around here, whatever they call it."

Allen Porter

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