

Alex Streeter

Best Dressed Pirate

MOCA Tucson

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A renowned jewelry designer whose pioneering, eponymous shop at 152 Prince Street was a Soho mainstay from 1971 to 2001, Tucson came into Alex Streeter's consciousness by way of a silversmith acquaintance, and he eventually decamped to the Old Barrio in 2006. Since then he has continued crafting ingenious highly-acclaimed jewelry while also assembling an eccentric accumulation of memorabilia, making his home a destination for fascinated locals and international devotees alike. "Best Dressed Pirate" consists of numerous relics of personal and social historical import, with the majority of artifacts from the house's walls, shelves, nooks, and crannies re-installed in MOCA's North Galleries. Diverse items touch on everything from the beginnings of New York City's loft laws to Streeter's Japanese cult following, social justice addressed through concept line ornamentation, and outsider and folk traditions, all personifying a heartfelt, passionate engagement with myriad inspirations. This singular environment and its treasure trove are a literal "museum within a museum" with an immersive and rustic ambience reflecting a remarkable path in life and art and the intersection and inseparability of the two.

The 1904 adobe house at 551 S. Meyer Street is a bygone New York-meets-mythic Sonoran wunderkammer chock full of curiosities and bibelots, slightly dusty, eclectic, deftly curated with intent. A mood of unrevealed mystery greets initiates, with numerous framed magazine pages (Madonna in *Vogue* wearing a Streeter-designed silver eye patch, to name one example), and the 1967 expulsion letter (for "patterns of behavior and performance which are not consistent with the standards and regulations of this college") from the Rhode Island School of Design next to the 1976 artist certification by the New York City Department of Cultural affairs giving permission to "occupy a legal living-working loft in the M1-5A District." Carved corkscrewed walking sticks are in a corner, and a four-foot long handmade model of "The Promised Land" sailboat is suspended from the rafters. As the visitor advances they enter "Vision Hall," before turning left into the "Buffalo Room," where stage pistols and Jake the Poor Boy's Chihuahua sombreros hang above a scroll emblazoned with Japanese characters. Lit by vintage Christmas lights, it is both a meditative space and a utilitarian atelier outfitted with hard-edged (though comfortable) homespun Donald Judd-like furniture. Through a doorway an "Angels and Devils," sign can be glimpsed, hand-lettered in enamel paint, impishly demarking yet another zone of a symbolic individual cosmology.

The eye is drawn to outlandish “Trival” long-toed Mexican cowboy boots, rolled woolen blankets over doorways, theatrical statuary, and saddles. Objects and images are hung floor to ceiling to maximalist effect, bringing to mind a badlands version of a 19th century salon in Tombstone, Arizona. A correlative are the period rooms found in historic homes or at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s American Wing, preserved in situ or meticulously reconstructed but no longer occupied or functional. The crucial difference is these quarters are inhabited and very much lived in, with a one-of-a-kind docent generously offering a cup of coffee and enthusiastically furnishing piquant anecdotes and commentary.

“Best Dressed Pirate” is a partial transferral five blocks south to Church Avenue, an evocation through synecdoche with the parts representing the whole. A metaphor, with a sizeable amount of ingredients weaving a magic wand of analogy. The straw won’t be peeking through the adobe, but the talismans produce a convincing air of verisimilitude. There are related precedents, such as “When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013”, a reconstruction of Harald Szeemann’s seminal Bern Kunsthalle exhibition at the Fondazione Prada in Venice, or Charlotte Perriand’s unrealized 1934 beach house built eight decades later by Louis Vuitton in Miami. This is decidedly not that but a one-to-one scale displacement, a re-contextualization conditional on a fairly faithful adherence to the original configuration done with the proprietor’s blessing, which in a performative offshoot of the endeavor will obligingly do without most of his belongings for the duration. An exhibition as opposed to a house tour, which thanks to relocation and subtractions has become a new artwork in its own right.

From seeing Roy Rogers Rodeo at Madison Square Garden as a child to his time in San Francisco as a 1960s fellow traveling with The Diggers, to later east coast interactions with such disparate figures as Axl Rose, Malcolm Morley, and Alanna Heiss (the founder of PS1), to acting as a model for Alexis Hunter’s early 1970s “Sexual Rapport” series, to being captured helming the real “Promised Land” by the legendary *New York Times* photographer Bill Cunningham, deep layers of cultural and personal significance flow through this aggregation. The subject is one person’s muses and how varied catalysts supply motivation, creative sustenance, and a foundation for Streeter’s belief that, “the arts move under the radar and really control modern life without anyone knowing it.” Herein bodies of unique memory are accrued, with trenchant weight, density, and emotional resonance. And as an added bonus, Streeter has graciously donated his iconic “Bisbee Bomber” motorcycle to be auctioned off to benefit the museum. De-commissioned but spiffed up, it will take pride of place in MOCAspace, where his popular winged-heart rings and other designs will also be for sale arrayed under a selection of his Gothically inflected preparatory drawings. The overall result is a rustic, fragrant, an almost cinematic experience, like entering a charming, dreamily offbeat southwestern stage set that dispenses a welcome counterbalance to humdrum “reality.”

Alex Streeter was born in 1947 in New York and raised on the Upper West Side in the “West Side Story” era before decamping to San Francisco to be educated by The Hippies and Diggers in 1966-69. Back in New York Streeter established the first eponymous designer store in Soho in 1971, at which through 2001 he took custom orders for jewelry (Golden Ballet slippers, bulldog buckles, wedding rings, engagement gifts) and carved new work while traveling in Mexico, Italy, India, and Morocco. He now resides in his personal museum in Tucson, has his headquarters in New York, and travels yearly to Japan, Korea, and Thailand.

Drawing Room

Buffalo Room

Clockwise from door

Logs from stove in Buffalo Room

Saddlebag by Enger Brothers, with original “winged heart” ring design by A.S., and emblems of bones and cowgirls

“Loft Ware” furniture designed and built by A.S. in New York late 1970s, multi-purpose, on rollers, with storage space

“Buffalo Room” hand painted sign by Johanna Martinez

Plank for hanging pistols, hats, etc. by Tony Guzman

Scroll with Japanese characters hand-lettered by S. Negi, father of the owners of Kings Road shop in Nagoya, Japan, reading “Alex Streeter” twice, the lower iteration in Japanese motorcycle gang lettering

Photograph of A.S. in his shop, 1986

Model of the “Bisbee Bomber” by Jun Kanda, based on photographs

Authentic 19th Century Civil War cap and ball and black powder guns, gifts from the Enger Brothers.

Alex Streeter designed “Space Chevy” silver-adorned belt

Traditional Palm Sonoran hat painted with cardinal points by A.S.

Chihuahua sombreros bought at tourist shop in Columbus, New Mexico

Moroccan traveling bag with charms

Three vintage hats owned by A.S.

Lamp carved by A.S., walnut with copper shade, 1992

A.S., Longhorn skull made of tin and saguaro

MOCA shop

Eight preparatory drawings for A.S. jewelry

Bisbee Bomber, 1999, Kawasaki 800 Vulcan Drifter ("Blackout") Model, custom color shifting paint by Spider, Tucson, Arizona, custom graphics by the Enger Brothers, New York, NY, custom western saddle with motorcycle studs, custom pistol holster, custom cobra shotgun pipes

Across from door to Vision Hall in MOCA Shop:

Oaxaca, unidentified face carving

Northwest Gallery

Vision Hall

Clockwise from door

South Wall:

Victorian-style lamp bought at Tohono O'odham swap meet

Photograph of white buffalo statue in Snyder, Texas, based on one of the two only confirmed shootings of albino buffaloes in Texas history, by A.S. 1976

Photographs of American roadside monuments by A.S., German *Playboy*, 1981

Two digital photo collages using 1976 "American Monument" photographs by A.S., showing tallest cowboy, boll weevil statue, Ant Farm's Cadillac Ranch, and "Whistler's Mother" memorial to mothers in Ashland, Pennsylvania, amongst others, 2005

West Wall:

"Two-Ten Tour" poster for 2010 Japan Visit by A.S.

X-Caliber sword, alabaster and bronze, anti-first Gulf War protest piece, 1991

"Vision Hall" hand painted sign by Johanna Martinez

Crucifix by James Fendenheim, Tohono O'odham carver, with turtle, feather, and serpent motifs

Portrait of A.S., in saloon set, taken at photo studio on Allen Street in Tombstone, Arizona

Figure of death holding skull and staff, bought in Magdalena de Kino, Mexico

North Wall:

Two A.S. photo collages showing Tucson with Pascua Yaqui masks, the Fox Theatre, angels, highway signs, and the "Tucson" steamboat with local architectural elements, 2005

Bill Dilworth, finger painted landscape, 2004

Mark Enger "5 minute painting", 2005

"Trival" long-tipped cowboy boots, bought in Tombstone, Arizona, 2013

Plastic dog skeleton from veterinary medical shop

Three guitars by C.F. Martin and Co., Mexico, with tattoo flash done with a soldering iron by A.S.

East Wall:

Two paintings by Amy Novelli, 2010

Two prints based on paintings by Ettore "Ted" DeGrazia, "Piccolo Pete" and "Roadrunner," bought at Goodwill

"Earth Man Crying," painted concrete, Tony Guzman

Blood Painting by Brian De Lioncourt , 2014

"Baby Dragon" design for "Birth of Evil" A.S. ring

"Creation Man" by James Fendenheim, saguaro, ironwood, and copper, 2010

Painting of the "Bisbee Bomber" by Pablo de Leon, 2013

Painting by S. Negi, 2013

Northeast Gallery

Angels and Devils

Clockwise from door

East Wall:

A.S. on Route 66, Kingman, Arizona, photograph by James Fendenheim, 2010

A.S. cowboy boot tips, *GQ Magazine*, 1976

Page 6 item by Richard Johnson, *New York Post*, 2008

Axl Rose with A.S. bracelets and ring, with Stephanie Seymour, photograph by Bruce Weber, 1992

New York Magazine "Best Bets" item about A.S. cowboy boot tips by Corky Pollan, 1976

A.S. supplemented outhouse on cover of *Sag Harbor Express* Garden Issue, 2002

New York City Department of Cultural Affairs living-working loft permit, 1976

Letter from President Albert Bush-Brown of Rhode Island School of Design requiring A.S. to withdraw from attendance, 1967

Indian Larry with A.S. eyeball ring for Rat Fink Ed Roth party, Brooklyn, 2003

Japanese magazine article on A.S., 1999

A.S. ivory and black chrome necklace, photograph by Sheila Metzner, c. 1988

A.S. eye patch in German *Vogue*, 1984

Madonna in *Vogue Magazine* wearing A.S. designed silver eye patch, 1982

Advertisement for Byblos clothing company with A.S. designed silver eye patch, c. 1982

Necklace by A.S., ivory, silver, touches of gold, 1977

Crown for type-ball in IBM magazine advertisement, 1994

Re-configured electrical outlets for switchblade display at A.S. store, *Newsweek Magazine*, 1990

Elaine Irwin with A.S. crystal and silver "Worker's Series" necklace in Sheila Metzner photograph, c. 1988

Bill Clinton letter thanking A.S. for letter of support, 1999

Indian Larry and A.S., Brooklyn, 2003

Universal Life Church certificate, 1969

Model with “Lost Cities” necklace, 1978

Model with A.S. “Magician’s Mirror” Necklace and bracelet, 1970s

“I live below 42nd” advertisement for Japanese “42” brand Vodka

North Wall:

A.S. pentagram ring in C.R.E.A.M. advertisement, Japan, 2003

Charlotte Rampling wearing A.S. black opal pentagram ring in Alan Parker’s “Angel Heart,” 1987

Painted foam mouse by A.S. for “Celtic Collection,” 1994

Foam horse’s head by A.S. for 42nd Street “Grand Windows” sponsored by PS1, 1988

Three A.S. drawings for Michael Jackson “Healing the World” theme, 1991

East Wall:

Portrait painting of A.S. with Jake, Min Min, Korea, 2013

Portrait of A.S. by Robert Grumley, 1972

Handmade model of “The Promised Land,” surf boat by A.S., 1986, based on Smithsonian Archive plans for 1882 cod fishing surf boat, New Bedford, Massachusetts, tested in Central Park Conservatory Water

Opium addict Diggers “1%” flyer, San Francisco, 1966, on A.S. work bench

Prow builder’s model for I. Magnin Titanic lifeboat photo shoot, 1989

Prow for I. Magnin Titanic lifeboat photo shoot in front of A.S. shop, 1989

Two photographs of A.S. and daughter Lilly on “The Promised Land,” c. 1995

A.S. in “The Promised Land,” Bellport, Long Island, photograph by Bill Cunningham, 1988

South Wall:

Illustration for cover of the *Haight-Asbury Maverick* by A.S., 1968

A.S. New Treasures Series, "The Battle of Thermodon," 1982-3

Presentation drawing for commission for bracelet with cut crystal and stones, 1978

Front of A.S. Store, 1970s

Opening day of A.S. shop, 1971

Photograph of A.S. with eye patch, other wares, Japanese magazine, late 1970s

Photograph of A.S. from Alexis Hunter's "Objects" series, 1972

"Timeless Elegance" "Non-watch" by A.S., 1991

Front of A.S. Store, 1970s

Granite and silver Key Wes inspired "Wear it in the hereafter," necklace, 1983

"Time Machine" with Casio F-85 watch inside of A.S. bronze shell, 1993