

SUMMER 2006

# ARTWORKS

A VOICE FOR THE ARTS

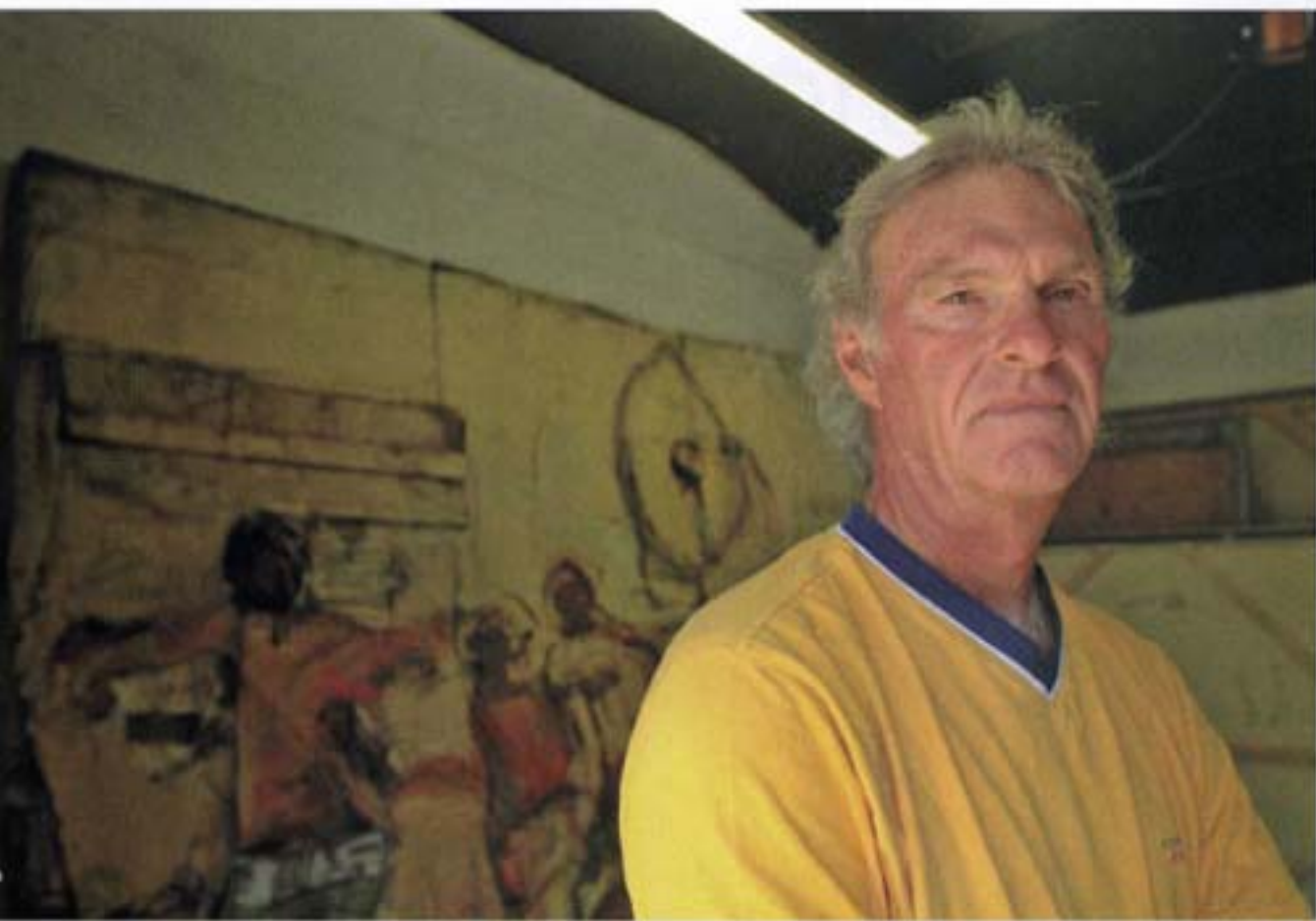
**RAY ROMANO**  
**DENNISHARE**  
**KLIMT-MARIA ALTMANN**  
**THE PALEYS**  
**JENNIFER STEINKAMP**  
**URBAN LANDSCAPE**  
**ART & FUNCTION**  
**Pho Buu**  
**10 Most Expensive Paintings**



# DENNIS HARE

Success came early and easily for southern California artist Dennis Hare – maybe too easily. He was, after all, an aging athlete with no formal art training. It wasn't part of the plan. If not for an impromptu visit to a museum and a run-in with a Van Gogh painting, Dennis Hare might be teaching volleyball at a summer camp somewhere. Instead, he is one of the most provocative artists around. He has tasted success, earned some cash and pretty much given up both to stay true to his art. Hare has always chosen the unconventional way, so it's no surprise that he's a bit backward on his artistic path – successful artist to struggling artist. He takes it all in stride – in his world, there is no compromise.

Written by **ERIN CLARK**  
Photography by **GINA TARO**



California free spirit Dennis Hare looks and acts the part. With his blonde, sun-bleached hair, quick smile and laidback, "surfer dude" attitude, he looks like he belongs on the beach. And for a good part of his life, that's exactly where he spent his time. Back in the day, he was in on the new thing, competitive beach volleyball. New? Well, yeah, in the 1970's it was downright revolutionary. Today, it's an Olympic sport that enjoys widespread support, including big money sponsors, but back then it was, well, unconventional. Dennis loved it and was good at it – really good. He and his partner, Fred Zuelich, won the first commercially sponsored tournament held in San Diego in 1974. Winston cigarettes was the sponsor and Dennis and his partner split a whopping \$1,500. Ok, not a lot of money, but it was, as they say, the start of something big. Dennis traveled the world, wrote a book called *The Art of Volleyball* and had a blast. But you know what happens – with all elite athletes there needs to be a next chapter.

Dennis found his in the de Young Museum in San Francisco. Vincent Van Gogh's *Entrance to Public Gardens in Arles* changed his life. "I couldn't speak. It just blew me away. I left the museum knowing I was an artist." Call it an athlete's confidence or maybe it was just fate, but on that day an artist was born. Dennis went out the next day and bought paint. Is there any connection with volleyball? "Only in approach," says Dennis, "I think there is a





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certain freedom associated with the beach. We know we can't do the nine-to-five. I've been freed from every real job I've ever had. I need to do my own thing." Lucky for him he found art – or maybe art found him.

It sounds so simple and perhaps naive to just decide on being an artist, but Dennis Hare was relaxed and supremely confident. He knew it was right for him. "I moved to Santa Cruz. I would point in the middle of the day and then teach volleyball in the afternoon to make money." He started with watercolor and eventually graduated to oil. Through five years and a move to Mexico, Dennis found his painting voice. In simple terms, he got good and felt it was time to make the push into galleries. He headed to San Francisco and started pounding the pavement, pitching 17 galleries and receiving 17 rejections. On his last try, he walked into the Campbell/Thiebault Gallery. "They

were getting ready for a show and I saw all these awesome paintings – all of them done by Diebenkorn. I didn't even take my paintings out. I just figured I was out of my league." But two weeks later he got a call. Charles Campbell had seen one of his paintings, liked it and wanted to see more. Campbell was putting together an emerging artists show and asked Dennis if he might be interested. "Are you kidding?" Dennis packed up his car and drove all night so he could be there the next morning.

"They had all my paintings spread out across the floor. They walked around, looking at each one, not saying anything." Finally, Dennis did get a reaction. The gallery bought 'em all – every single one of them. They handed him a check for close to \$30,000. Dennis Hare, the artist, was on his way. For the next 10 years, he sold just about everything he painted. He made some money and established himself as

a painter to watch but then things started to change. Dennis' art started to change. His figurative abstracts that had been so refined started to take on added dimensions. It was almost as if his art was exploding out of him and off the canvas. At first, it was gobs of paint and then he began experimenting with all kinds of materials – anything to add texture and weight to the piece. His art took on an untamed look. One of the first pieces of this new era, *Children of Rosarito*, is huge – about nine feet by five feet. Dennis had to do it in three panels simply because of the weight. It is really a combination of sculpture and painting. From a distance, it looks like children playing, but come closer and you are blown away by his materials: scrap metal, ripped canvas, old tires and a lot of paint. Somehow he fashioned all of it into a figurative piece, giving the children motion and emotion. It is defiantly different. He loved it – his galleries, however, did not. One gallery owner called it "college level work." They gave Dennis an ultimatum – go back to the old style of painting or hit the road. Guess which path he chose?



About once a month, Hare drives his Toyota Tundra over to the landfill in Lancaster. The guys there know him – they kind of chuckle when they see him coming. Dennis spends hours going through the garbage looking for stuff he can use. Once he loads up the flatbed, he pays for his haul. "It doesn't usually run me more than five bucks," he laughs. The dump and The Depot, as is Home Depot, are his art supply stores these days. He uses all kinds of things to forge his large, three-dimensional pieces: Old army cots, discarded baseball mitts, tires, twisted metal, bed springs, tar, epoxy – just about anything is for game. Where most people see garbage he sees something useful. "What most people perceive as ugly, can be beautiful," he says. But before you think, "Oh no! Not another artist with a message" – damn the thought. Dennis Hare ain't about preachin'. "I don't have a message or statement. It's all about feeling. I paint to please myself. If that translates to someone else, that's great, but it's not why I do it."

Dennis Hare is in great shape. He works out at the 24 Hour Fitness just a couple of miles from his Redlands home and he plays tennis almost every day. "I like tennis because, even at my age, I'm still improving. With volleyball there was only one place to go – down – but right now I'm playing the best tennis of my life." He's a 4.0 player. Tennis aficionados know that means he's pretty darn good. Dennis plays tournaments all over California and it satisfies his competitive side. He also gets a workout every day in his studio. His work is physically demanding since the pieces are big and heavy and sometimes he literally attacks the canvas – throwing things against it and tearing things off until he gets the exact results he wants. His studio is long and narrow and can accommodate many very large paintings at the same time. Hare likes it that way because it allows him to work on several at a time. But it can be physically exhausting. "I work myself into a frenzy. I see myself as kind of a mad scientist – only I don't have a plan. I don't want to think about it. I want it to happen spontaneously, so I work quickly. The pieces and everything that goes on them can get heavy. I have to be in good shape." Once an athlete, always an athlete.



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PHOTO AT RIGHT: Dennis Hare's studio with current work.

Hare lives about 75 miles outside of Los Angeles, about 75 miles from anything resembling the rat race. Redlands is hot in the summertime, warm in the wintertime and quiet all year long. He likes it because it's close to the mountains, the beach and the desert and, for the most part, no one bothers him. He lives alone and he's never been married or had kids. "I don't have any regrets about that. I'm no monk. I've had plenty of relationships, they just didn't work out. As for the kids, I love kids but to have your own, they have to be the priority. My priority is art. So no, I don't have regrets about that." His studio stretches out behind his small-but-comfortable hacienda style home. The studio itself is relatively neat. The real chaos is out back. Behind the studio, Dennis has his own personal junkyard. Piles of "recycled art supplies" are everywhere. For him, it's heaven. "I don't trust a place that doesn't have a junkyard. See this?" he asks, picking up a piece of scrap metal. "This could be great. I never know what I might use until I come hunting through all of this stuff." Even though the artist himself never knows what he ultimately may end up with, it would be a mistake to assume that Hare's art is random. In fact, it feels exactly the opposite. Take *Traffic* - a dark collage of old tires, tar and paint; *Yesterday is Here* - a collection of old army coats and military fatigues arranged in a multidimensional hanging sculpture; or *Culture Clash* - dozens and dozens of old books mounted on a large wooden frame, partially painted over and all of it covered with layers of plastic sheeting. Like a lot of his work, these pieces feel like commentary on a whole range of issues, but Dennis isn't going there. Yes, he wants people to consider his art and to really think about it, but he insists there is no hidden message or statement. He simply does what he does intuitively.

He calls his work "Wabi Sabi" art - the art of the unconventional. "There's nothing like this out there. I'm not copying anyone and I try not to repeat myself. It's ok that not everyone likes it. If everyone liked it, it would be pretty shallow work. I don't like things that are too perfect. Life's not that way." He admits it's a struggle to find exactly the right outlet for his art these days. Hare wants his pieces to be seen, but he's willing to wait for the right fit.

Living out in the boondocks can be lonely. He used to have a dog named Scruffy. Scruffy was a thasa Apso-terrier mix - an L.A. gallery dog that kind of adopted Dennis. Scruffy needed a home and Dennis thought, "What the hell, it'll be cool to have a dog. I figured I could just take him to the beach with me, but the first time he hit sand it was all over." Turns out the dog hated volleyball, volleyball players and the beach. But Dennis loved him anyway, and it was sad when Scruffy died recently. But Dennis doesn't wallow; it's just not his nature. "I don't freak out. I just keep doing my thing and I know everything will work out."



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