

## The New York Times

### Art & Design

#### Sublime Jumbles, Reverently Reassembled Jason Rhoades Is Getting a Solo Museum Survey



Ryan Collier for The New York Times

Jason Rhoades's 1998 installation "The Creation Myth" has been painstakingly rebuilt for a survey devoted to the artist at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia.

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**PHILADELPHIA** — Since the death of the Los Angeles artist Jason Rhoades in 2006 from an accidental drug overdose and heart disease at 41, his exuberant life has always threatened to overshadow his short career. But Rhoades, a canny student of pop culture, seemed to have anticipated that idea almost from the beginning.

His sculpture and writing were as obsessively self-referential as a celebrity's Twitter feed. In "Volume A," a 1998 book, he arranged information about his art and life into a cross-referenced encyclopedia that includes entries on sheep (he raised them as a youth in rural California); the movie "[Car Wash](#)" (he was crazy about it but not quite sure why); cocaine; Brancusi; and Bert, his father's dog, born with an anatomical defect that caused its anus to be almost on its back.

In "[Jason Rhoades, Four Roads](#)," the first American museum survey of his career, which opens on Wednesday



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"Untitled (from My Madinah: In pursuit of my ermitage . . .)," a 2004 installation by Mr. Rhoades that has been reconstituted at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia.

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Estate of Jason Rhoades

Mr. Rhoades.

at the [Institute of Contemporary Art](#) in Philadelphia, Bert the dog reappears as one of hundreds of biographical references in "[The Creation Myth](#)," a room-filling installation that attempts to represent in sculptural form how humanity processes information, forms memories and produces potentially transcendent things like art out of such messy raw material.

The piece, never before seen in the United States, stands as a kind of metaphor for the questions the exhibition is asking about Rhoades's work in the absence of its creator:

"Do the pieces need Jason to be here to animate them?" Ingrid Schaffner, the institute's chief curator, said. "Do they stand apart from him and the tragedy of his death? And I think they do. They're powerfully alive."

An early practitioner and one of the champions of the form known as scatter art, he made environments composed of Home Depots' worth of off-the-shelf hardware and electronics, eBay salvage, clothes, pieces cannibalized from other artworks and even food, all of which were assembled

with painstaking precision.

His work has always been better known in Europe than in his native land. But Rhoades's influence, direct or indirect, can be seen in the work of many younger artists in the United States, like Ryan Trecartin, Lizzie Fitch, Dawn Kasper and Mika Rottenberg, who grew up with the tangled multiplicities of the Internet that Rhoades's early work seemed to prefigure.

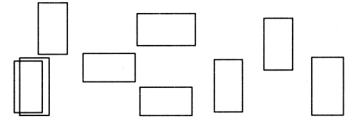
Writing in 1997 in The New York Times, Roberta Smith said that it was as if Rhoades "wanted to give sculptural reality to human thought itself." Yet in a review of an ambitious posthumous exhibition in 2007, she suggested that his pieces were "overly dependent on convoluted back stories."

On a merely logistical level, showing Rhoades pieces without his guidance is a thankless task. Unpacking an element for one of the show's four large sculptures recently, a registrar working on the exhibition had what she called "a momentary existential crisis" after removing protective Bubble Wrap and seeing that what it was protecting was a ball of Bubble Wrap marked "Art. Do Not Throw Away!"

"People say, 'It looks so chaotic, it just looks like a mess,'" Ms. Schaffner said. "But it's really not. Everything is considered. Everything plays a role."

As if to underscore her point, on a nearby table that made up part of the seeming salmagundi of "Creation Myth" sat an insignificant-looking coffee mug emblazoned with the words: "Yes, the details are very important."

Rick Baker, the manager of Rhoades's estate and a studio assistant to the artist during the



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last four years of his life, has become a traveling reassembler of many of the complex works, relying on memory, his intuition about what the artist would have wanted and elaborate manuals that Rhoades — a self-described control freak — left behind.

On a recent afternoon, he and others worked on “Creation Myth,” tinkering with a toy train that runs around the upper level of the piece’s “brain” and is equipped with a small video camera that shoots footage of its trip, shown on a nearby monitor — a kind of high-school-science-fair evocation of self-consciousness. The train is also festooned with the front section of a toy snake, and as it makes its way around the track it meets another train with the snake’s hind section — a makeshift ouroboros, the self-consuming serpent, symbol of eternity or regeneration or, in this case, maybe just inescapable solipsism.

“You want me to start it?” Mr. Baker asked.

“Sure,” Ms. Schaffner said, and the train began to chug along, joining other animated and powered-up parts of the sculpture, like an electric massage chair, a vintage video game playing on a television set and [lamps fashioned from plastic construction buckets](#).

Toward the end of his life, Rhoades pursued an exhausting pace; he was overweight and pictures showing him wearing a favorite white suit, shirtless, evoked late Elvis in a way he clearly intended. “With my work,” he explained in one [interview](#), “it needs to be bigger than me to control me.”

He admitted that the pieces — which used sexuality, vulgarity and excess as subjects and basic building blocks — asked a lot of viewers, requiring a commitment of time, attention and open-mindedness few would probably ever give.

“They’re not for everybody, for sure,” Rhoades said. “I think people should be overwhelmed. I think it should shut you down; it should make you give up something. I think you should come to a work of art and be able to offer it something and be able to stand there with it and just say ‘Yeah, I’m prostrating myself, I’m giving in to you.’”

The gallery owner [David Zwirner](#), who gave Rhoades his first New York solo exhibition in [1993](#), the same year Rhoades graduated from the masters of fine arts program at the University of California, Los Angeles, said he believed his work was less known than it should be in the United States in part because institutions did not quite know what to do with him.

“Curators, to their discredit, were afraid of him, I think,” said Mr. Zwirner, who represented Rhoades along with the gallery [Hauser & Wirth](#), which [showed his work](#) in Europe. “You couldn’t go in with Jason and say, ‘We’re going to show X, Y and Z.’ You really had to give him carte blanche. It was never easy.”

Mr. Zwirner said that while it was premature to discuss specifics, American museums’ interest in Rhoades was now beginning to solidify, seven years after his death.

Ms. Schaffner, who worked with Rhoades for a 1997 show that she organized in Germany, said that one revelation in seeing four of his large sculptures resurrected in proximity was how deeply of their own soil they are.

“There’s so much American can-do and farm-boy can-do and garage-mechanic can-do,” she said. “It’s not going to be easy for people to like. It’s aggressive. It’s on boil. But it also really does its job, and I think people who come here are going to see that.”