Dustin Yellin adds his mark in L.A. with art that's a 'missile for social change'

Dustin Yellin is an artist who comes in many guises.

In Vanity Fair last month, Yellin, posing naked but for mismatched socks and eyeglasses at his Brooklyn studio, was presented as the art world’s "it boy."

Other images in the media collage that is his public history: Yellin break-dancing in Jay Z’s 2013 performance art video, "Picasso Baby"; the sky-high dollar amounts that his elaborate sculptures command (one installation went for $1.7 million in a private sale at Sotheby’s last year); Yellin’s romance with actress Michelle Williams; the time in the late ’90s when he was accidentally stabbed in the leg by model-actress Bijou Phillips; and the artist's 1999 mental breakdown, which landed him in a psych ward — but not before he recorded the entire episode, ultimately turning it into a performance art video called "The Crack-Up."

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Then there’s Yellin the nice Jewish mensch, who has brought his 87-year-old Nanna to the Hollywood construction site where his newest sculptural installation will be unveiled on Thursday.

Wearing a faded Jimi Hendrix T-shirt and black jeans, the scruffy-haired 40-year-old takes his Nanna’s hand, leans in and asks with a sheepish smile, "What ya think?" Just for today, the brown butcher paper covering the artworks has been removed for a private viewing.
"Oh, it’s awesome. I was blown away,” Anita Kaplan tells her grandson, before heading home with her caretaker to Westwood.

"OK, bye, Nanna. I’ll see you later,” Yellin calls after her, waving.

Six Yellin sculptures — towering glass and stainless-steel encasements housing elaborate collages that from afar look like 3-D human forms — were commissioned by Kilroy Realty Corp. for a Hollywood redevelopment project on Sunset Boulevard, just east of Vine Street. The company says that the installation is valued at $1.5 million. The six-building Columbia Square compound, opened in 1938, was for decades the site of CBS’ West Coast radio and TV operations. It’s now being turned into a $450-million "mixed-use creative campus” with workspaces, retail stores and restaurants. Yellin’s towering sculptures occupy the central courtyard facing Sunset.

"I like the idea that you can keep coming back and finding things in them, a thousand times,” artist Dustin Yellin says. (Ricardo DeAratanha / Los Angeles Times)

Each of Yellin’s glass monuments — he calls them “psychogeographies” — contains thousands of intricate cutouts from magazines and books, an explosion of cultural, visual detritus arranged on 28 sheets of glass, on which Yellin draws and paints. He then stacks the glass-backed, laminated collages like pancakes, then stands the 16-inch-thick block of glass vertically.
The multicolored cutouts — a pocket watch, a UFO, a Coors beer, a Viking in warrior gear, all orbiting around one another at different depths in the glass — form dystopian human figures that appear to be floating inside tanks of water or frozen in blocks of ice.

"Imagine if I put you between microscope slides and I slowly cranked the vice until you just exploded," Yellin says. "And instead of seeing blood and bones and guts and entrails, I would see your memories, your experiences, your thoughts, your history, your future. All those things would come out in this sort of visual DNA, this roadmap, this architecture of space and matter. That's what these are."

A self-taught artist and high school dropout who grew up in L.A. with his dad and Aspen, Colo., with his mom, Yellin moved to New York in the early 1990s to pursue art. He cites Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys, Jean Dubuffet, Joseph Cornell, Max Ernst and Hieronymus Bosch as influences, as well as Henry Darger and Robert Rauschenberg. He's also inspired by ancient ruins in far-flung locations such as Machu Picchu, Petra and Angkor Wat.

So it makes sense that his psychogeographies — which when grouped together he hopes conjure the Qin Tomb terra-cotta warriors and horses in Xian, China — are blissfully shot through with contradictions. Depending on the light, they're either shadowy and opaque or translucent and dappled with warm yellows, deep blues and fiery reds. They're both realistic in form and abstract at once, simultaneously conjuring the corporeal human body and a cerebral prism of history and pop culture.

The psychogeographies are part of a series of 120 — he's currently "in the 80-area right now," production-wise. Some are already in the hands of collectors; others have been promised to individuals or institutions but haven't been created yet. The six works on Sunset, which took about a year and a half to create, are different from others in the series because they are site-specific.

Yellin says he responded to the mass media and pop cultural legacy of the site, where the inaugural 1938 broadcast starred Bob Hope, Al Jolson and Cecil B. DeMille. The collages include pictures of Jack Benny, Orson Welles and Bob Dylan, all of whom recorded there, as well as Lucille Ball, who filmed the pilot episode of "I Love Lucy" at Columbia Square in 1951, and James Dean, who once worked there as an usher.

He also included imagery that evokes the city of Los Angeles. There's a frenetic, almost apocalyptic feel to the collages, with cars racing down crowded freeways, random fires, iconic Hollywood buildings, spindly palm trees and other dry, brittle foliage.
"I paid homage to the site," Yellin says. "But also to L.A. I like the idea that you can keep coming back and finding things in them, a thousand times. This is supposed to be your unconscious. Everyone sees something different."

A big part of what drew CEO John Kilroy to Yellin was the artist's Pioneer Works, which Yellin founded in 2012. Located in Red Hook, Brooklyn, Pioneer Works is part exhibition space, part community center where neighborhood kids take classes, part artists' colony offering residencies, and part research hub for art, science and technology.

"We like to think of it as a museum of process," Yellin says. "It's Black Mountain meets MIT Media Lab meets the YMCA" — with parties. Making art accessible and fostering cross-pollination between disciplines are key to Pioneer Works' vision, as is building community. Kilroy says he chose Yellin as much for how he works as for the sculptures themselves.

"I visited him in his studio in Brooklyn, and he had several pieces being assembled for a major showing at Lincoln Center, and it was just so inspiring," Kilroy says. "Dustin's originally from L.A. He's such a young, smart, gifted artist, and I was so impressed with how he nurtures others in the art field and how that really creates a community at his Brooklyn space. His vision was in sync with our project, which has a truly collaborative spirit."

Yellin, who’s represented by the Richard Heller Gallery in L.A., says public art is close to his heart, his preferred exhibition arena. "I'm all about public art, bringing it to the streets, social sculpture," Yellin says. "I like the bottom-up approach."

Earlier this year he exhibited 15 of his psychogeographies on the promenade at New York's Lincoln Center as well as 12 sculptures at Washington, D.C.'s Kennedy Center for its annual Art Series. The new L.A. work, however, will be Yellin's first ever permanent — and first outdoor — public installation. Which presented challenges. To protect the outdoor sculptures, they were coated with a material making them resistant to graffiti, scratches and other vandalism, says Deanna Postil Krawczyk of DPA Fine Art Consulting, which connected Yellin and Kilroy.

The idea of permanence may have been even more daunting to Yellin.

"In the studio, you can change everything; once they're installed, you can't be like, 'Let's move that over to the left or the right,'" Yellin says. "I'm neurotic; so I was like: 'I should have done this bigger or started this higher.' I drove myself crazy."
As the sun begins to fade, and the green canvas construction fence goes back up, hiding the sculptures from view, the psychogeographies — once alive with color — morph into shadowy, sci-fi-like creatures, the human shapes now resembling fossilized forms.

The artist's dad, Ben Yellin, who has also stopped by to view the work, gives him a vigorous rub on the head.

"Who woulda known? That's all I can say," he says of his son's success. "You make papa proud!"

"Bye, Dad. I'll call you later," Yellin says, before adding that much as he's close to his family and likes Los Angeles, he doesn't envision ever returning here to live. "I have genetic interference in L.A.," he jokes.

For a second, waving off his dad, Yellin appears more the 12-year-old kid who was obsessed with geology and found objects and worked in a rock shop called the Crystal Kingdom rather than a celebrity artist.

"This is all pretty natural, though," he says. "I'm still obsessed with found objects, found imagery."

As for the whole "fame thing," Yellin says it's toward a greater cause.

"I'm one of those weird, hippie-bearded-freakazoids who believes my work is a missile for social change," he says. "Part of the draw for me — and I don't know if anyone knows me or what I do, but if they did — is to change things."

He presses his nose up against the glass on one of his sculptures, peering into the explosion of imagery.

"Art brings people together to see the same thing," he says. "And then maybe you can help them sort of galvanize and rally in concert around things like climate change, HIV awareness at the level of the street, the water issue. You can't change the world unless you have a voice."
‘I ALWAYS FEEL LIKE I’M MAKING FUTURE ARTIFACTS’: DUSTIN YELLIN ON HIS NEW INSTALLATION IN LOS ANGELES

BY Alex Greenberger POSTED 10/15/15 10:00 AM

As machines whirred and whined in his Red Hook studio, Dustin Yellin told me that he had recently been to Africa, where nearly a quarter of some countries’ populations are affected by HIV, and where Yellin was collecting experiences to discuss at a United Nations conference with politicians and scientists. He was also collecting rocks—so many, in fact, that, when he packed his suitcase with them, he could barely carry it. “Rocks. Rocks. Just so many rocks,” he said. “Like, ‘Oh, this rock is so beautiful. It came out of this river. I don’t know what it is, but it represents everything that this river means for last ten million years.’”

Yellin is a packrat. He accrues objects and, more often than not, doesn’t know what to do with them. He’ll cut out images from old magazines and books, and file them away in drawers, classifying them loosely by ideas, periods, or places, like “Pre-Columbian art” or “Machinery.” Some of the lucky images get used for his “Psychogeographies,” elaborate collages that are pressed between glass and resemble humanoids from afar. Yellin’s first major permanent installation of the “Psychogeographies” goes on view in Los Angeles, at a new development project on Sunset Boulevard, this month.
The artist demonstrated some of his ideas for the “Psychogeographies” using my head as an example. He said, “If I was to take your head right now between two glasses with a vise and then start going like this and like that”—he mimed tightening the glass panels—“so that the vise closed, and your head exploded? Now, in this reality, I would just see blood and brain, right? But what’s that made of? That’s what I try for these to be—things we can’t see.”

He added that the “Psychogeographies” are what might happen “if there was a way to rip the shell off of the human and see into their soul, and if there was a way to then take that information and make it legible.”

Yellin, whose reddish beard and clear-rimmed glasses seem to have personalities of their own, thinks of the Los Angeles works as being like aliens, in a way. “It feels a bit sci-fi because it’s a public work,” he said, and then added, “If you’re far away, it looks like this two-headed human stuck in these tanks of water, under these microscope slides, but then, if you go up close, there’s the reveal of what you’re looking at,” by which he meant cut-out images of Lucille Ball, the Lone Ranger, and Bob Dylan.

From the Manson murders to 1920s movie stars who held séances, Los Angeles has had a long history of occult activity, much of it drug-induced—“people going west, doing lots of LSD and magic, talking to dolphins,” as Yellin put it. In that sense, with their supernatural undertones, the “Psychogeographies” fit right in well in the city. Yellin explained that the new works ascend in height and are placed in a diagonal line. The smallest are human-size; the largest is closest to the sunset, “a deity, so this unattainable thing,” he said.
“I feel like there’s an apocalyptic undertone in everything,” he added. “I relate it more to the species. Not the romantic sense of apocalypse so much, just the facts.” He cited rising temperatures and natural disasters as evidence of something big and bad coming, “things we’re actually dealing with in real time. So I always feel like I’m making future artifacts...It seems like there’s a lot going on here, but in my art practice, I feel like I’m many years behind what’s in my head.”

The series’ name, Yellin said, refers to this idea of working within a headspace, not Guy Debord’s Situationist concept of the same name, as I suggested. “It wasn’t like, ‘Guy Debord! I’m going to name the works “Psychogeographies” because I’m such a Guy Debord freak!’ They felt like these geographies of the psyche,” he said.

I asked if Yellin found these works personal at all, since he was born in Los Angeles. “Well, I don’t know because I don’t believe in place,” he responded. “So it’s a bit of a homecoming, I suppose, but I believe that my home is Earth. That’s just a cool coast on a cool piece of land.”

Nevertheless, people seem to identify with the “Psychogeographies.” Yellin enthusiastically recounted how a woman came into his studio, saw one of the new works, and said, “Shit, that’s my daughter! How’d you get a picture of my daughter?” Yellin said he didn’t think it was her daughter, but she was adamant that Yellin was wrong.

“Maybe it is her daughter,” he said. “That’s what I like—that, in a hundred years, someone could be like, ‘That’s my daughter, that’s my father.’ You know, [the ‘Psychogeographies’ are] not about an individual. It's about us as a collective.”

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New world: artist Dustin Yellin unveils his first outdoor installation in LA

Brooklyn-based artist Dustin Yellin was approached around 18 months ago by the Kilroy Realty Corporation, about permanently installing six of his popular Psychogeographies in Columbia Square, the plaza outside the 1938 CBS Headquarters, which will re-open this month as NeueHouse.

About a year and a half ago, the Kilroy Realty Corporation approached Brooklyn-based artist Dustin Yellin about permanently installing six of his increasingly popular Psychogeographies in Columbia Square, the plaza outside the 1938 CBS Headquarters, which will re-open this month as the Los Angeles outpost of NeueHouse. Over this period, these monumental glass collage works — created by Yellin and a small army of assistants with small paint gestures and thousands of print images clipped from magazines — have anchored a TED Talk, an installation at Lincoln Center for the New York City Ballet, and a comprehensive Vanity Fair feature. This project, however, was Yellin’s first al fresco installation; providing many new challenges, such as finding the right UV-protected laminated glass, stainless steel frames and concrete plinths to secure the work. He also had to consider his source of inspiration.

'It was the first movie studio and I got a bunch of historic shit from them, some I copied and some I destroyed,’ says Yellin during a tour of the site, noting that Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash, and Orson Welles (‘cats that I dig’) all worked in the building over the years. ‘There’s the Lone Ranger, some movie tickets,’ he says, pointing to hidden micro-clippings of CBS ephemera. ‘For me, these pieces are supposed to be like if you put a piece of glass on one side of your body, and another on the other side and just started cranking yourself until your skull exploded into a thousand pieces, but instead of blood and guts you’d see your memories, your experiences.’
By trapping the collective consciousness of the Hollywood landmark — or 'DNA in images', as Yellin calls it — he hopes to project the city back onto itself. 'I think when you die you realise this layer was just one existence and you'll become aware of many worlds,' says Yellin, now 40, who first got the inspiration for this mode of thinking at 18 after going through a series of *Altered States*-like 'consciousness experiments' (think intramuscular ketamine injections) administered by Adam Trombly, a physicist in Aspen who once worked with Buckminster Fuller and tried to launch a Tesla-like free energy initiative. 'I think a lot of my work came from those days. I was on all these drugs making art and I had no culture, and I thought if I became the most famous artist in the world I could convince the billionaires and movie stars to give money to the scientists to make free energy.'

Though he hasn’t fulfilled the latter promise, he has connected the monied classes and artists with various Nobel laureates ('my brain trust') at his Pioneer Works art centre in Red Hook, Brooklyn. 'It's mixing all these weird fucking people all the time,' he says. Having completed this installation, the artist-activist hopes to do more public projects should the opportunity arise. He's also busy making new works, be it his new 'ant farm' series (made from detritus paper stuffed between glass panels with a stick) or the 32-ft landscape inspired by the epic 12-ton triptych he showed at the SCAD Museum of Art, which all began simply as a 'series of accidents'.

'With the glass I can go backwards, change my mind, add perspective, build a city, put a horse in the city, cut the city in half or add an explosion. Then I saw the Terracotta Warriors and realised I don't want to make figurative art, I want to make an army,' says Yellin, who hopes to create 120 *Psychogeographies* for a huge retrospective, whenever or wherever that might happen. 'I don't believe in the art world, I just believe in the world. I just make shit that I would want to live with and shit that in 500 years would be artifacts I care about because I'm obsessed with artifacts. I don't think about anything else.'
ART + AUCTIONS

Artist Dustin Yellin Opens His First Permanent Installation Along Sunset Boulevard

Dustin Yellin stands in front of his first permanent installation, Psychogeographies.

TEXT BY NICK MAEI
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARAH ANDERSON

Artist Dustin Yellin has been in the spotlight in the past few years—a cameo in rapper Jay-Z’s 2013 video for “Picasso Baby”; being labeled the art world’s It boy by Vanity Fair this past September—all the while creating works of art that sell for millions (one of his installations went for $1.7 million in a private sale in 2014). Now, the Brooklyn-based artist has left his mark on his hometown of Los Angeles.

On October 15, a permanent outdoor exhibition of Yellin’s artworks was unveiled in a public courtyard adjacent to Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles. Psychogeographies consists of six sculptures made of glass encasements holding complicated 3-D collages that take the shape of human beings.

The installation, valued at $1.5 million, was commissioned by Kilroy Realty for a Hollywood redevelopment project. Located within the historic Columbia Square compound (the former site of CBS’ West Coast radio and TV operations), Kilroy Realty has turned the grounds into a $450-million mixed-use space for offices, retail stores and restaurants.

Architectural Digest talked to the artist about his inaugural public installation, his inspirations as an artist, and his methods of creating art.
Architectural Digest: Not all artists see success, and not every successful artist lives long enough to see his or her work appreciated. How does it feel to have six of your sculptures featured in such a prominent location in your hometown?

Dustin Yellin: I’m grateful that I’m not dead. I was born in Los Angeles, so there’s some genetic impulse to drive down Sunset Boulevard from Hollywood to the sea quite often. It was challenging to make something that would work both from a car window and with your nose pressed up against it.

AD: Can you walk us through your process?

DY: A series of accidents over many years. I was pouring resin over colleges and noticed an optical quality. From there I built some Joseph Cornell-esque boxes and made a 3-D collage of objects in layers of resin. This led me to start drawing around the objects the way detectives draw around a dead body at the scene of a crime. I realized I could draw in space, which led to my own taxonomy of invented specimens. Eventually, they became life-size, and I switched to glass. This has allowed me to go backward and edit, change my mind, build narrative and tell stories about our species and its relationship to this spinning rock.

AD: Do you have a favorite publication from which you obtain collages?

DY: Trash in the streets, Life Magazine, art history books, books about rocks, National Geographic, weird encyclopedias from the 1950s, atlases from the turn of the century, and many more places that would make the list too long.
AD: Did the fact that the sculptures in *Psychogeographies* would be part of a permanent installation change your approach?

DY: I am always thinking a thousand years from now. Hence, the stainless-steel casings to house these humanoids.

AD: Some would say that art is at its best when it causes the viewer a momentary pause from everything else in life, allowing them an escape or a possible revelation through the work they are witnessing. What is your message through these sculptures?

DY: If you took humanity and put it between two panes of a glass and squashed it together with a vice, maybe we would find our DNA in images and dreams to resonate at some common frequency that would harmonize and reveal some common quotidian understanding. Possibly a vision of peace and inclusivity, one of storytelling and mythmaking that would articulate the human condition in all its weight and gravity—the suffering, joy, and mystery that surrounds our very magical reality.

AD: How does it feel presenting your art on the streets as opposed to in a museum or gallery?

DY: I came from the street, and I will go to the street. Accessibility has always been something I constantly think about. If I could, I would take everything I’ve ever made and put it in the street so it was free and easy to touch.