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A Rowdy Roundtable Discussion With Three L.A. Art Legends

By JANELLE ZARA APRIL 6, 2016

From left, the artists and longtime friends Ed Bereal, Ed Moses and Larry Bell, who recently reunited for a dinner at NeueHouse Hollywood. Anthony Cabaero

The ’50s and ’60s were an explosive moment in the trajectory of Los Angeles art history. Now-legends like Ed Ruscha, Robert Irwin and Ed Kienholz were then just a dynamic group of artists fostered by the Ferus Gallery, Chouinard Art Institute (now known as CalArts) and a little dive bar called Barney’s Beanery. Far removed from the art establishment in New York, the crew was known for radical explorations in Pop Art, assemblage and the development of Light and Space — as well as a tight-knit social circle, with a reputation for womanizing and boys’-club debauchery.

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Decades later, astonishingly, those tendencies persist. “You have very nice knees,” Ed Moses, just a week shy of his 90th birthday, told Meredith Rogers, the program director of NeueHouse Hollywood, last Tuesday night. “I notice everything that’s good.” The abstract painter, along with friends Larry Bell and Ed Bereal — all artists of this period who had remained relatively under the radar for decades — were meeting for dinner at NeueHouse in celebration of a flurry of new shows of their work: Bell’s mirrored and transparent sculptures are the subject of Hauser & Wirth’s current exhibition “From the ’60s,” while Bereal’s political cartoons and assemblage are on view at the downtown L.A. gallery Harmony Murphy’s “Disturbing the Peace.” On April 30, the Santa Monica gallery William Turner will present a survey of Moses’s works on the occasion of his 90th birthday.

Robert Irwin, another friend of the group, had to call in sick to dinner. (Today, the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., will open “All the Rules Will Change,” a survey of Irwin’s early paintings.) “Irwin, it’s Larry,” said Bell, calling Irwin on speakerphone. “I’m sitting here with Moses and Bereal. We’re here talking about you, and you’re not here to defend yourself, you schmuck. You may call me back.”

As they approach their 90s, all four artists continue to create new work, retaining their raucous sense of humor and close friendships. These are edited excerpts from their pre-dinner chat, moderated by Janelle Zara.

The dinner doubled as a 90th-birthday celebration for Moses. Anthony Cabaero

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Janelle Zara: Thank you all for coming to dinner, especially since everyone's been busy lately. Moses just mentioned he's done 50 paintings in the last month for his upcoming show.

Larry Bell: Well, wherever they'll take me, I'll go. I have no prejudices. But the work has been going on pretty steady all my life. What I've gotten lately is a burst of action.

Ed Bereal: Oh, somebody finally noticed?

Zara: It's a shame, though, that Robert Irwin couldn't make it. Larry and Ed, I know that you were both students of his when he taught at Chouinard, yet your work has gone in entirely different directions. What did you learn from him?

Bell: He didn't tell me to leave school, but he suggested it. Although I liked school very much, I had trouble with being in any kind of situation that required discipline and consideration for others. With Irwin, whatever I did, I didn't piss him off. I really liked being around him, mostly because of his charisma.

Bereal: I formed this almost instant affection for him. Periodically, we still agree to meet in some place, and we just walk and talk, and it's been happening for almost 50 years.

Moses: He's so generous. Bob has no faults. And he's really strong! I remember he and Billy Al Bengston were having an argument about Billy's then-to-be girlfriend, Penny Little. I heard them yelling in the hallway of our Venice studio, and when I opened my door, Irwin had Bengston slammed up against a wall by the neck with one hand.

Zara: Over a girl? Well, my next question was who was the biggest ladies' man.

Moses: John Altoon. I was a playboy, but the master was John Altoon. He was charming, but he wasn't good-looking.

Bereal: He sent out some real subliminal stuff. I've seen him walk into a room and make married women leave their husbands. Seriously.

Zara: I know that those Ferus days were full of uninvited critiques of each other. Given your vastly different approaches to art, did it end in a lot of disputes?

Moses: Well, I always wanted to punch Bob, but I knew if I did, I'd be dead. I had a lot of ego with Bob. I must've been jealous. He makes incredible things. But when he first came on the scene, he was painting sailboats down at Landau Gallery, this semicommercial, serious gallery.

Bell: It was 100 percent commercial, but only somewhat serious.

Moses: Once, I said, "Here, let me help you with that," and had the gall to take the brush and start painting on his canvas. That really pissed him off.

The three friends in conversation. Anthony Cabaero

Zara: In the '60s, it seemed no one was taking much art outside of New York very seriously. Was there a rivalry with the East Coast?

Bell: There was kind of a hostile thing about the relationship between us and the gallerists who were representing us but giving more action to the New York artists. People were pissed off, but I don't believe it was any kind of serious hostility. I went over there and stayed for two years. I bought some equipment that changed my life, and I learned a huge amount from the studio activities in that short amount of time. Then there was the blizzard of 1966, and then the blackout, and I realized I didn't want to be there anymore. I didn't like those things. It took 35 flights of steps to get to my place during the blackout.

Moses: I love New York. It's a disseminator of art. I spent two lovely years there living in a dog cage.

Zara: Despite the different media and approaches to your work, do you see any commonalities?

Moses: That's a good question. None.

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Zara: When Ferus closed in 1966, it seemed to leave a void in L.A., the energy of which was never replaced.

Bereal: During the Watts riots, I noticed that the whole art community just pretended it wasn't happening. You could smell the smoke, and it looked like the city was going to burn down, so by then, I had already jettisoned the art community to go back to the ghetto. What was happening in the streets was more interesting to me than what was happening in the gallery.

Zara: And racial politics became a large part of your work. Did the lack of diversity in this group ever make you uncomfortable?

Bereal: I was not subjected to overt racism like some of my brethren were. But I was aware of the terminology of "black artist" people were using for me. I was being dealt with like a trophy. I probably made the art world feel more liberal than it was. But I got so much support from other artists — John Altoon, Richards Ruben, Bob, obviously — that it trumped my thoughts on the broader issue of racism. Ferus was a magical place. A lot of us started working there, and I remember painting the walls and getting ready for Andy Warhol's first show. It was this amazing environment. People were talking about and sharing things that had deep meaning for me.

Moses: I'm glad to hear that. I never felt that way. All the people there were part of this amazing phenomenon, but I had no clue at the time.

Zara: Is there anything you would do differently?

Moses: How about everything?

Bell: How about nothin'?