

Ed Moses says he doesn't make 'art' – he makes 'magic'



JIM NEWBERRY

Ed Moses at his home studio in Venice.

Ed Moses hates the words "make" and "create" and "art." As far as he's concerned he's a "shaman" who engages in "magic." At 89 years old, he continues making... whatever it is he makes.

The first Los Angeles exhibition of Moses' art was nearly 60 years ago, in a landmark show at the Ferus Gallery. From that moment, Moses and a group of his contemporaries, including Robert Irwin, Ken Price, Billy Al Bengston and Ed Ruscha came to define modern West Coast art. As he gets older, Moses says that his contemporaries are dropping off like flies.

Moses is the subject of a new show at the L.A. County Museum of Art called "Ed Moses: Drawings from the 1960s and 70s." When we arrived at Moses' Venice compound, we started by touring one of his two studios with his assistant, Jeff Hastings. He says that Moses loves chaos around his studio. Moses also does a lot of editing in his work, Hastings says, throwing out works that don't work.

Maloney, Darby and John Horn. "Ed Moses Says He Doesn't Make 'Art'—He Makes 'Magic'," 89.3 KPCC, May 29, 2015.

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"In the nine years that I've been here, it's something that we do on a daily basis," Hastings says. "We'll rip up a canvas, we'll rip up a waterwork, we'll rip up something. We'll even go to a painting that he worked on in the '70s and look at that painting, and it'll come to him in the middle of the night: 'Oh, this painting that I made in the '70s, that's one of 500 paintings somehow came to my head, and I need to do this one extra little thing.'"

From the studios we moved to the Japanese-styled garden where Moses was sipping a green drink that he regularly has made for him at Whole Foods. As we settled down, he reflected on how drinking this strange-looking elixir, like a lot of things in his life, is repetitive.

"There's too much tedium. Everything is tedious. Everything is the same old thing, repetition," Moses says. Similarly, Moses says that he's an obsessive painter. Every once in a while, he'll make something that he thinks is special and catches his attention.

Moses says he destroys around three-quarters of his work. How does he know what's right?

"If it lights up. It's a very subjective thing," Moses says. "It takes on a notion that says, 'That's it.'"

Moses says that, when he started, his work and that of his contemporaries came from being "pissed off." Seeing his work in a museum celebrating contemporary art — LACMA — seems ironic, he says. "It's sort of like a dream, in a sense. It's not real," Moses says. "And I go to bed at night thinking about it, and I can't-- it's so strange, the phenomenon of this attention suddenly. Although there was semi-attention, but never to the degree now, getting an exhibition like this."

The exhibition shows Moses' obsession. He says that the work seems foolish to him now, that he could think something would materialize out of that work.

"Now I look at them as something dead, but at the time, I was very frustrated. I thought, 'I'll do another one, I'll do another one, I'll do another one.'"

He sees his art as being like early man's response to the world, which is why he likens himself to a shaman. He creates art based on things he observes and interactions with other people.

"God was creative — he made something out of nothing, he made man. We make something out of something. Hoping, which is anti-Buddhist, to hope, but the activities of daily activities are all about hope, aren't they? We hope it's gonna be better. We hope it's gonna be more beautiful — I'm gonna make something that's so fantastic, that even I will step back and look at it, and say, 'Wow.'"

Moses says that happens — on occasion. Moses has a message he'd like to deliver to anyone who goes in to look at his art.

"Just look. Don't think. Don't extract some ideas or some meaning. It doesn't have any meaning — it is what it is. You'll just look on the wall and see what it is," Moses says.

After our conversation Ed went out to the outdoor space between his studios where he works. And he started painting on five canvases at the same time



Listen to the audio for our full conversations with Moses and his assistant. His show of drawings from the 1960s and '70s is on view at LACMA through Aug. 2.

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