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Like a Fish Flopping on the Ground: A Q&A with Ed Moses

Ed Moses, 1970.
(Courtesy the artist.)

Ed Moses is more influential than he is famous. Despite a 65-year career, during which time he has experimented in — and mastered — virtually every major style of painting that emerged over the second half of the 20th century, producing an incredible number of works along the way, his name is not known to most, especially outside othe west coast.

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Moses first came to prominence as part of the legendary Ferus gallery scene in the late 50s, alongside such artists as Craig Kauffman, Ed Kienholz, Alan Light, Billy Al Bengston, Robert Irwin, Larry Bell, and Ed Ruscha. For a short time in the late 50s, he lived in New York, near Agnes Martin and Ellsworth Kelly, and frequented the Cedar Street Tavern, where he met Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko and others. In the early 60s, he joined the faculty of the art department at UC Irvine, alongside such artists as Irwin, Kauffman, Bell, Vija Celmans, and John Coplans.

More than anything, Moses's career is marked by a insatiable sense of experimentation and a true love for the medium. He turned 90 this year, and remains every bit as restless. He still paints almost every day.

On September 8, the New York gallery Albertz Benda will open "Ed Moses: Painting as Process," the first comprehensive East Coast survey of the artist's work. The show, curated by the critic Barbara Rose, features dozens of works from 1950 through the 1990s.

For the occasion, Moses talked with Artinfo to discuss his career, his love of painting, and why he still feels like a fish flopping on the ground, gasping for air.

Right after graduate school, you began showing with the Ferus gallery, and became a central figure in the "cool school" of LA artists. What did that community mean to you?

All my compatriots in the early days at the Ferus were really smart and talented. At the time, I didn't know how good they were. We discussed how good we were and we looked at the New York painters. Jackson Pollock was

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the quintessential painter for us. He was the person that we all wanted to be like. Phillip Guston was another one. Craig Kauffman was the smartest artist around LA and Billy Al Bengston was the second. He was smart and charming and an amazing painter. And he had confidence; he had no doubt who the best painter was — it was him.

Did you have ambitions to be the best painter at that time too?

Sure, I wanted to be the best. I thought I was and everybody else thought they were. And the New Yorkers thought they were too. We thought we were better or at least as good as they were.

The idea of the painter being the "best" — that seems like an antiquated idea these days.

It really does. When I was in New York, I lived down near Coenties Slip, where Agnes Martin's studio was. We became good friends. She was a fabulous painter. Very persisent. Relentless in her tracking of what she was doing. I had two good painter friends in New York besides Agnes Martin. Who I really became good friends with was David Novros and Brice Marden. They were the quintessential painters, I thought. Particularly Brice — he was in his own class. Also Ellsworth Kelly. He was more of an aquantance, but I was a big fan of his.

How else did your experience in New York inform your work?

That's a good question. I don't know if it did inform my work. I reacted to what I saw. I never know what I'm doing. What I'm really saying is it's a kind of personal term exploration not knowing what I'm doing. It's sort of a

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mish mash of activities and aspirations and one thing leads to another and then it multiplies into five others and then it deviates into something else. I never really know what I'm doing. For me, it's a kind of personal personal exploration. Finding out and doing. Finding out what I'm doing or what takes place in the painting. I'm more an explorer than an artist in the creative sense. I hate the word "creative." I feel it is pretty used up. Jesus Christ was creative. God was creative. How can we compete in that territory? I'm just fishing, throwing my line out and once in a while I catch something I like and often what I catch is fish that is flopping around on the ground, trying to get breath. That's what I feel I'm trying to do, get a breath.

The other Ferus artists were known for their "finish fetish" aesthetic and for being more conceptually driven. Your style of working is much different than that.

It was indeed. I never could finish anything. I never liked alignment. When I was a kid, I took a lot of mechanical drawing and drafting classes, and worked in the aircraft line as a draftsmen, but I was never any good at it. I could never get anything to align. Once in a while by chance of circumstance, when things lined up something would come out of it and I would say Wow, did I do that?

Is that the way you feel about your painting, that you didn't create them so much as the organised them?

Found them. It's like going through a dust pan or trash can, just pulling shit out.

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Is that why your styles over the course of your career have been so diverse?

I think so. I didn't know what I was doing or what I wanted. What I wanted was magic. Again, I was just like a fish flopping on a table, trying to gets its breath. Once in Once in a while, I would get that breath. That was best.

Recently, in the last few years, I have been doing some amazing paintings and I don't know how they happened. I guess it was by chance. Setting up a non-controlled situation. Recently I've been working on some paintings in parts. I nailed them together and rip them off with a crow bar and put them on a wall and tear them off. The remnants of that process, what's left after tearing it off the wall, it can result in something else entirely, and I think, Wow, how did that happen? I could have never done that.

In what ways do you put yourself in that kind of uncontrolled circumstance?

I'm naturally in it. [Laughs.] I live in a uncontrolled situation! I would like to be in a controlled situation of course—it makes me feel good. The only time I could ever do that was when I was dancing. I was a pretty good dancer.

When you are working in that uncontrolled studio environment and you create something that you consider successful, is that a moment of control?

That's a moment of magic.

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You've experimented with, and become fluent in, so many different styles— virtually every style of painting that's emerged in the last 50 years.

I felt very comfortable when engaged in different styles. It was a natural habitat for me. You unlock different kinds of opportunities when trying different things and engaging in different emotions. For me, it's about regression and submission. I am an aggressive guy by nature, which is kind of in conflict with the painting I am interested in.

Going back to your Ferus days, many of your contemporaries made careers out of exploring clean aesthetics and formalist ideas. However, your work diverged greatly and became much more gestural and expressive. Why do you think that was?

I like the moving of paint. I like when it strikes the surface and when its wet. I paint on a wet surface now. I used to paint outside with a large piece of canvas rolled out — I'd hose them down, then introduce paint; sometimes I'd throw paint and sometimes I'd use a brush.

Do you get the same pleasure in experimenting with different materials that you do in painting?

I wouldn't say pleasure. I would say engagement. I really liked to get engaged. When I was young I had a lot of girlfriends — I was always trying to get engaged.

What about masking tape? It's a material that's appeared in many of your works over time.

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Well it's a tool I used in drafting to keep the paper down on the surface. In painting, went you use tape and remove it, it leaves evidence of where it's been. It leaves its mark. It's the same reason I like to brush with thick paint on paper or canvas — it establishes its own kind of figuration. That figuration opens up into other worldd. The painting divides itself or mutates. I like the word "mutated paintings. Paintings that advance through process to another state of adding and taking off. Or I put the paint on and hose it off the canvas and the evidence is left by the residue of the paint. After it's removed, it leaves an image that I could have never thought of.

I don't move around on the canvas. I've thought about it — sneaking around the canvas with your body, but it's not for me. I always loved the way Jackson Pollok painted. He really engaged in the paint. I also liked the way that Augustine painted with the undulating surface of the paint on the surface. He made his own formations and patterns.I like those patterns. And Morandy, he's my favourite painter of all. Often I try to paint like Morandy. I can do it, but it's not legimate. I feel a little bit uncomfortable with appropriating that kind of working of the paint, but i Iove it.

You were often ahead of certain formal trends in painting, but at other times it seemed like you were working in styles that in vogue at the time you were you were engaging with them.

I wanted to fill the bowl up with as much activity as I could. And then, when I did, I reacted to that by wanting to remove as much of it as I could, revert to a minimal state. There's such a beauty in the minimal state. My friend Bob Irwin is a master of that.

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Throughout your career, how closely did you follow the trends of painting painting styles?

I'd get seduced by them. But I didn't feel right doing it. It was a moral thing. The morality of painting is a terrible thing to be caught up in. It sets up doubt and when there's doubt, the brush indicates that.

Many of the artists you came up with have had more traditional careers in a sense. They found a style, stuck with it, became gallery darlings, went on to have museum shows, and so on. But you obviously had a much different trajectory.

My trajectory was paused, dark, full of chaos. Just a fish flopping on the ground.

How do you feel about that now looking back?

Looking back, I feel like that poor guy you had a rough road. I had a rough road, but I managed to make some paintings I was really proud of.

Despite the fact that you say that you never finish anything, you managed to turn out an incredible amount of paintings throughout your career.

More than anything, I love to paint. I just love to get out there and throw it around.

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