

Past is Prologue

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At 89, Ed Moses is every bit the fierce artist of his youth

By **Michael Aushenker**



Ed Moses • Photo by Ted Soqui

When the international fine arts community speaks of Venice, three titans dominate the conversation: Ed Ruscha, Larry Bell and Ed Moses.

It is Moses, however, who may best personify the artistic spirit of his adopted home since 1964: Stay creative. Stay productive.

Even as he approaches his 90th year, the abstract expressionist works at a fever pitch in the courtyard of his urban homestead — a Hawaiian-themed Shangri La tucked away along a banal

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residential street many blocks east of the frenetic Venice boardwalk and trendy Abbot Kinney Boulevard. Moses may work on the outskirts, but he's close enough to occasionally talk shop, life or politics with Bell and Ruscha at Joe's Restaurant or, until its recent closure, Hal's Bar and Grill.

When an assistant opens the large wooden gate to Moses' home on a Tuesday morning in May, statues of pacing panthers prowl a landscape of longboards mounted on hut-like walls and clusters of palm trees. The mise-en-scene invokes the ship bound from Hawaii where his mother gave birth to him at sea in 1925.

His dogs Cat and Dasher at his side, Moses emerges with a walker and makes his way into the courtyard, where rows of unfinished paintings await. A member of the famed Ferus Gallery collective that in the late 1950s and early '60s challenged New York's reigning art scene and raised several L.A. artists to global prominence, Moses may now have a pacemaker but his artistic hand is no less potent or proactive.

"We were just pissed off and aggressive" toward the Manhattan scene-makers of the time, Moses says of the Ferus group, which included Ruscha and Claus Oldenburg as well as East Coasters Frank Stella, Jasper Johns and Roy Lichtenstein. "We'll show those guys!"

Ultimately, "They paid attention. I sold the work."

Moses has two paintings hanging at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Locally, he's the subject of two major current shows: a Los Angeles County Museum of Art retrospective of his crucial 1960s and '70s drawings and an exhibit of new paintings at the William Turner Gallery at Bergamot Station Art Center.

'Never Satisfied'

Inside the Moses compound — in 1984, he bought the property next door to have Venice architect Steven Ehrlich create two studios — more than a dozen large and colorful abstract paintings hang in a professional-quality gallery space, waiting to be seen by the world next year when they travel to New York to debut in a solo Moses show. Moses calls these works "craquelures" because he has treated the canvases so that the surfaces contain cracks and other textures.

But it is here in the courtyard — outdoors — where Moses says he does 90% of his work with the help of longtime assistant Jeff Hastings.

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"I don't want to be in control. I want to be in touch, in tune," he says, surrounded by canvases awash in loose dabs of reds and purples. "I don't believe in inspiration. I believe in responding. It's a multiplicity of activities. It's all movements of mutations. One thing leads to another. The process is the game; it's not the goal."

For a while, Moses' artist son Andy Moses and Andy's artist wife Kelly Berg had utilized the studio space.

Andy Moses says his father completely immerses himself in each new body of work, exploring every permutation of a particular artistic direction before shifting into new territory.

"He is perpetually restless and never satisfied. The only satisfaction comes from delving into the next exploration," Andy Moses says. "He has made paintings, drawings, lithographs and watercolors as well as sculptures and installations. He has designed houses, buildings and even a winery — all of which have been built."

Moses initially discouraged Andy, also represented by William Turner Gallery, from following him into the art world. He's now supportive of that choice.

"He's a better artist than I am," Moses says of his son.



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Art Takes Hold

The senior Moses — who while working as a messenger on the 20th Century Fox lot once took Marilyn Monroe out on a date to The Apple Pan — did not always aspire to be an artist.

Moses served as a surgical technician at a Naval hospital before he was sent to the South Pacific during World War II. A Long Beach Community College pre-med student, Moses seemed destined to enter the medical profession until a friend urged him to check out a flamboyant visiting instructor assigned to teach enlisted men about art.

“The doors [of his ride] popped open and he stepped out like a young prince,” Moses recalls of Art Institute of Chicago instructor Pedro Miller, the man who would change the course of his life.

Until then, Moses had only taken a mechanical drawing course in high school. He remembers digging the works of Picasso — “I thought they were cool; I had an intuitive connection to his work,” Moses says.

Miller and his philosophies cast a spell on Moses.

“I was attracted to this guy for some inexplicable reason,” Moses says of his first fine arts class, an intimidating experience. “I thought, I better get out of here. I didn’t know what to do.”

In class, Moses eschewed painting formally to veer off onto a more abstract course.

“I stuck my finger in the well and I did this finger painting. [Miller] looked at me, put it on the ledge and he told the class, ‘Here’s a real artist!’”

Moses studied under Miller’s mentorship for two years before enrolling to study art at UCLA. Dissatisfied there, Moses headed to the University of Oregon, where Craig Kaufmann introduced him to the leaders of abstract expressionism — Jackson Pollock, Willem De Kooning, Philip Guston. He spent a year in Manhattan but “didn’t like the weather,” and by 1957 was back in L.A. and aligned with the nascent Ferus Gallery on La Cienega Boulevard.

'Tracks in the Mud'

In Moses' courtyard, the commercial airliners flying in and out of LAX sound surprisingly fierce.

On the pavement outside the studio, Moses has worked up an accidental paint splatter from years of projects. It could almost quote passages from a Pollock painting, and a visitor might see caricatures of arachnids in it.

"I was always afraid of spiders," Moses says, "so this shrink told me you had to make friends with them."

Moses recalls the feeling of being a young artist in awe with the works of Mondrian and Modigliani and at the height of his powers and energy.

"You would chase it down a rat hole," he remembers. "You painted all night. You're obsessed with getting it right. You don't have an idea. You respond to the materials the way you respond to the Earth."

With the likes of Matisse or Van Gogh, there aren't enough pixels on a computer screen to truly represent the tactile otherworldliness their paintings present in-person.

"There's no way because all you have is a picture of the painting. You lose the quality of the paint," he says.

The same can be said for Moses. In creating one of his large craqueries, Moses layers the canvas plane with his "secret sauce" so that "it dries with hard crust, punching outside of the canvas — then you paint roll the whole thing," he says.

Making art is a primordial experience akin to early man "leaving tracks in the mud," says Moses, and realizing his own existence by the markings he left behind.

For Moses, a brush stroke on canvas is akin to the impulse of dragging a stick over wet ground.

"It's all evidence of my activity," he says.

Moses detests the distinctions critics make between high- and low-brow art.

"It's all bullshit that there's a division," he says. "There is no division."

'Not in Control'

The following evening, concentric circles of friends and admirers surround Moses during his May 13 opening reception at LACMA — among them Anjelica Huston, who formerly lived on Windward Avenue with her late husband, the sculptor Robert Graham. It's hard to get a word in.

"Seeing Ed's exhibition at LACMA of '60s and '70s drawings, most of which I was seeing for the first time in person, really connected all of his work for me," Berg says. "Ed's early drawings have a special power to them that really speaks to me. They recall that deep obsession of being an artist and the foundational role that drawing serves in all art."

At Bergamot Station, "Now and Then" is as apt a title as any for Moses' show at William Turner Gallery.

As well it should be, the "Now" comes first before the "Then."

Turning 90 in November, Moses keeps up his eight-hour workday ritual without much thought or concern about how his work will be received.

"I just ride the wave," he says. "I'm a surfer. I'm not in control. Someone will respond."

"Ed Moses: Drawings from the 1960s and '70s," runs through Aug. 2 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles. Call (323) 857-6000 or visit lacma.org.

"Ed Moses: Now and Then" runs through Aug. 8 at William Turner Gallery, Bergamot Station Arts Center, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica. Call (310) 453-0909 or visit williamturnergallery.com.