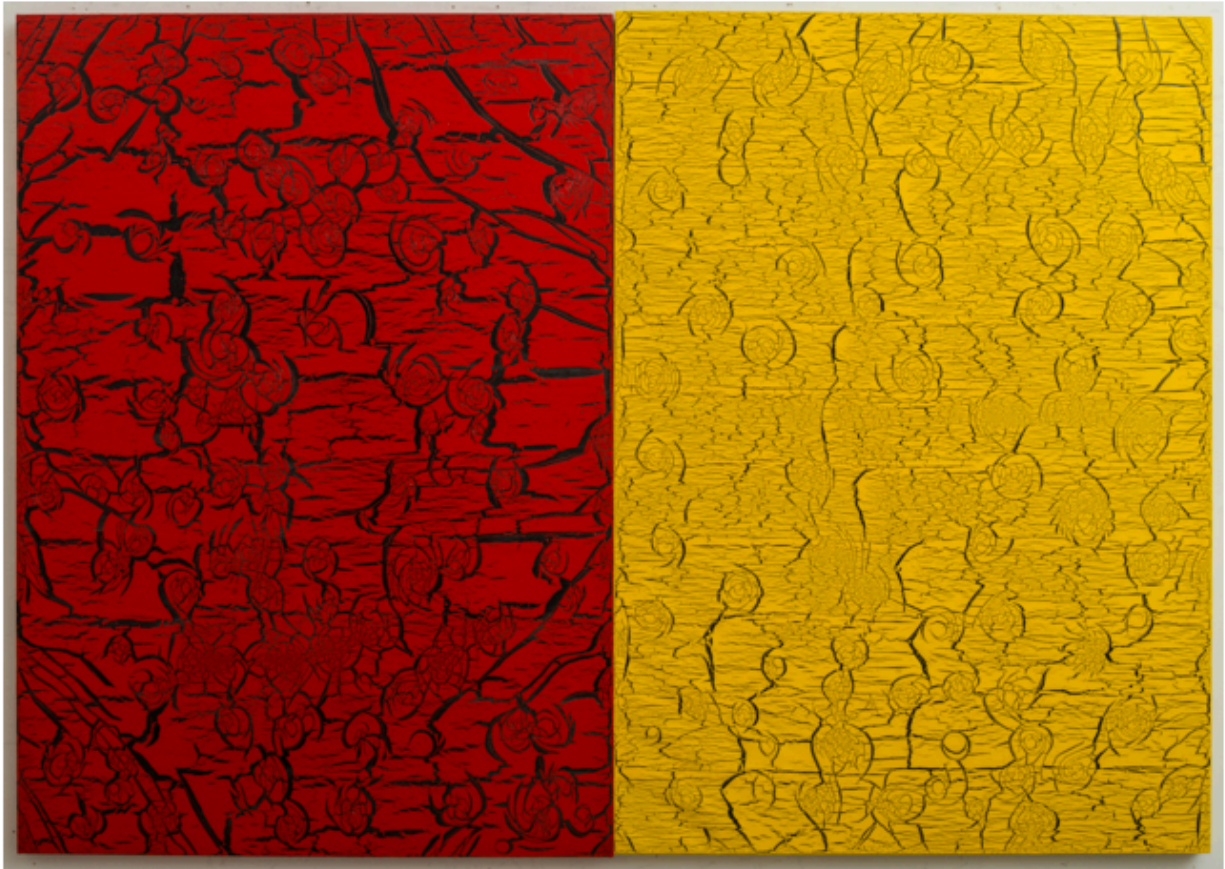


# HYPERALLERGIC

## Beer with a Painter, LA Edition: Ed Moses

by Jennifer Samet on July 25, 2015

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*Ed Moses, "Red over Black, Yellow over Black" (2013), mixed media on canvas, 84 x 60 inches each panel, 84 x 120 in. overall (all images courtesy the artist unless stated otherwise)*

Researching the work and career of Ed Moses prior to our visit was like uncovering a trove of stylistic experimentation with abstract painting, and a whole segment of West Coast art history. Moses has been a central figure in the Los Angeles art world for over fifty years. He was close to the circle of artists who lived in Venice and exhibited with the legendary Ferus Gallery, like Billy Al Bengston, Robert Irwin, Ed Kienholz, Larry Bell, and John Altoon. Ferus Gallery, founded by Walter Hopps, catalyzed the Los Angeles art scene from 1957 to 1966 and was one of the first venues nationwide to exhibit Ed Ruscha, Andy Warhol, and Roy Lichtenstein.

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I met Moses at his home and studio in Venice and drank coconut water in the dappled sunlight of his patio garden, lush with tropical plants and guarded by a Buddha sculpture set on a corner rock. After Moses and I had spoken for an hour, a Bentley pulled into the driveway. It was Anjelica Huston, accompanied by the artist Laddie John Dill. Hugs and exchanges ensued among the old friends. Moses located a painting in his storage racks that he was gifting to Huston. Dill began directing the installation of one of his light sculptures over a doorway in the living room — his gift to Moses. Meanwhile, I followed them around the space and we all kept talking.

The divisions between indoor and outdoor in Moses's live-work space are completely fluid. Stone paths lead to a barely enclosed studio office as well as the garden, the house, and a large studio which he uses more as a viewing room. Moses seems to work outside as much as he does inside. Dozens of small watercolors in progress were installed in the sun and mounted on his studio's sliding doors. On his home's green plywood siding were vintage surfboards and paintings of spiders.

Moses's career is marked by a restless play between drawing, painting, printmaking, vellum, installation, stencils, and spray paint. His painterly vocabulary has incorporated grids, gestural marks, monochrome, polychrome, and sculptural objects. During our day together, I was conscious of this energetic embrace of twists and turns. As friends visited and we moved in and out of his home, garden, studio, and car, ending up at a local restaurant for lunch, Moses never lost the conversational pace.

Moses was born in Long Beach, California, in 1926 and served in the navy as a surgical technician during World War II. He attended Long Beach City College after the war, before transferring to UCLA. In 1958 he had his first exhibition, of graduate student work, with the Ferus Gallery. He showed with L.A. Louver Gallery throughout the 1980s, '90s and early 2000s, and is currently represented by ACE Gallery, Los Angeles. In 1996, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles held a retrospective exhibition of his work. Moses's drawings from the 1960s and 1970s — which had not been shown for forty years — are the subject of a current exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, on view through August 2, 2015.

\* \* \*

**Jennifer Samet:** Can you tell me about your family, and your early experiences with art?

**Ed Moses:** My mother's family was Portuguese and lived in Hawaii, and my father's family was from Wales and settled in Nova Scotia. Theirs was an arranged marriage; they lived in my grandparents' town in Hawaii, a little village called Lapahoehoe, which was primitive and magical. You would ride down the cove by the main road and come across a yellow Buddhist chapel and wild tropical foliage. My parents separated and my mother moved to Long Beach, California, where I was born.

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When I was a child living in Long Beach, I had tuberculosis and I was taken out of school for a year. All I did was listen to soap operas and draw in Crayola coloring books, filling in the animals and forms. I think that is where I first got the idea of compartmentalizing and repetition. I have been considered an obsessive compulsive. I had to get it right. However, as much as I wanted to keep the color within the edges, and just fill in, I would always go past. But by going past the edges, I was leaving patches of color in the coloring books that became very intriguing to me. In high school, rather than take art classes, I did mechanical drawing, because it was a guy thing to do. I loved making the lines, and how the graphite felt as it moved across the paper, how it came in even and not smeared — precise, and just defining a situation. Then I learned that by doing many lines, I could set up fanning patterns much like I did with the Crayola books. I used a T-Square to make horizontals and verticals, and liked that feeling of control I had with the medium. It wasn't until years later that I realized the idea is to not be in control, but rather, to be in tune with the situation on a sensate level. It is about being aware through the touch and the feel.



Ed Moses, "Untitled (Hegeman Series)" (1970), acrylic, resin & masking tape on canvas, 77 x 95 inches.  
Collection of Ced and Pamela Moses

In 1933, a big earthquake hit Long Beach. Everybody had to leave their homes, and holes were dug around the foundations. I lived with my mother in a 16-unit apartment building. The

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earthquake took down the whole back of it. My mother was dating a man and when they went out she would leave me alone in the apartment and tell the neighbors to watch out for me. I was terrified. I would lie awake in my Murphy bed that folded out of a closet into the little breakfast room.

I spent two or three summers with my father in Hawaii. He always rented a bungalow at the Moana Hotel, and I would spend summers with him surfing.

**JS:** What did you do after high school? How did you eventually end up studying painting?

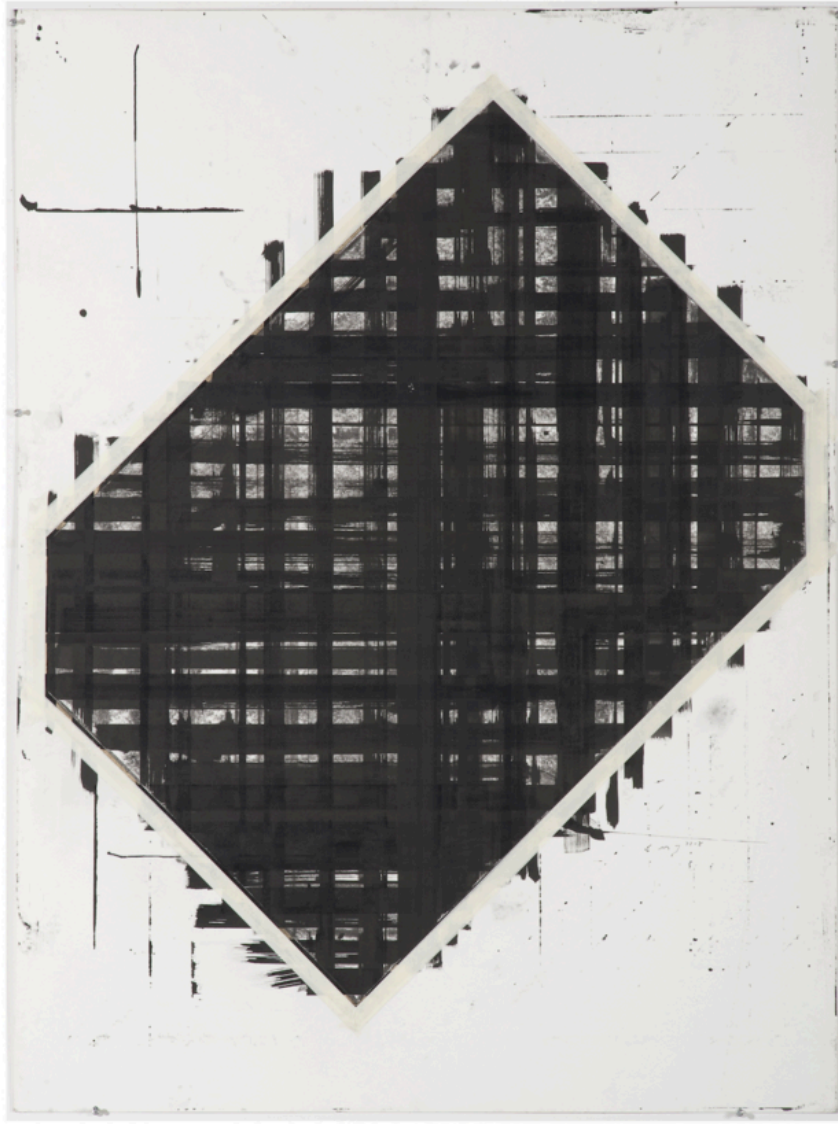
**EM:** I served as a surgical technician in the navy. I learned a great deal and wanted to be a surgeon, but I couldn't memorize anything. It was an affliction. I wanted to get the information, but I was always more interested in the thing around the corner, rather than sticking with the first spot. This pattern has characterized me as a person and artist. I meander, mutate from one thing to another, searching and confused. I always wanted to be in control of that confusion until I finally learned about being in tune with it, swinging with it.

After I got out of the service, I went to Long Beach City College. I was taking science and math classes, hoping to become pre-med, but there was an art teacher my friends told me I had to meet. They said, "You've never seen a guy like this." It was true. He rolled in one day, banged his car against these telephone poles that were markers for parking. He was driving an old Willys with canvas stretched across the top. It was about 1946, right after the war. He stepped out, all disheveled, with the pockets torn out of his coat, hanging there, his hair a mess, covered in paint and mud. I thought, "Wow, Where did you come from?!"

His name was Pedro Miller and he had studied at the New Bauhaus and talked about Teppiche and Moholy-Nagy, the early theorists. I learned about architecture in that way. I was fascinated by architecture, especially since I had that experience with mechanical drawing in high school. I liked to make marks that I thought of as secret. I called them secret marks that represented a dimension, like 24 feet or 22 inches. I wanted them to imply a magical notion.

Miller also used to set up these placards on a four-inch shelving ridge around the room. They were images of work by Braque, Picasso, and Cézanne, and he talked about them. I had never been introduced to that way of pictorial thinking before.





Ed Moses, "Cubist Drawing #10" (1977-1978), charcoal, acrylic, India ink, and masking tape on rag mat board, 55 x 41 1/4 x 2 inches framed. Collection LACMA

I don't think I was particularly talented as an artist, but I got into the idea of intensity and obsessiveness and thought about what that drive came from. I was also taking social anthropology classes in college, and I learned about early man, and the discovery of self-awareness: realizing he existed by seeing a reflection in the water, or a footprint in the mud. He wanted to leave evidence that he existed by making a mark, and evidence that other things existed, like deer. So he made paintings of animals rushing across the cave walls. The paintings evolved over several thousand years. The first ones were just repetitious scratches. I was intrigued by the impulse to leave evidence that I exist. And I felt that my compulsive drawings, even the first Crayola ones, were manifestations of that impulse.

I had an intuitive relationship to artistic activity. I didn't know what it was. I later called it a kind of shamanism, where you are leaving evidence for the tribe, the people. The shaman brings information to the unknown through ritual dances and markings. Also, you meet people and realize they are part of your tribe. They have associations similar to you. That was Pedro Miller, my art teacher. He was a true shaman.

**JS:** You also became a Buddhist and follower of Trungpa. Can you tell me more about that?

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**EM:** I am constantly looking, constantly on the search for some shamanistic evidence that I do exist. But actually I don't. I am always terrified that I am going to disappear into some invisible zone.

I became a Buddhist in the 1970s and Buddhist teachings revolve around that idea: that we are not solid, we are in process. I always pushed for a goal, until I realized through studying Buddhism that the goal is not the thing; the path is the thing: the process, this meandering. I met Trungpa in 1971 when he gave a talk. He kept us waiting for an hour and a half, and I was so pissed off. Who does this guy think he is?! Then he finally came out, dragging his body. Trungpa said that anything you are afraid of, you should make friends with. If you have nightmares, you should play with those things in your dreams and laugh. You should not let them subvert you. That is why I painted spiders on the outside of my house — because I have a terrible fear of spiders.

**JS:** Can you talk about the Rose drawings and early graphite drawings you made in the 1960s and 1970s? Were the Rose drawings tracings?

**EM:** Yes, I was thinking about Jasper Johns's ideas, where images were pre-designed and then you would paint them in. Rather than getting involved with making a design, you would find a design, like the American flag. In the Rose drawings, I started with a pre-designed thing. It was a piece of Mexican oilcloth I got in Tijuana and I liked the pattern.

I made a tracing over it and I transferred the tracing by using yellow carbon paper on a panel. I transferred all of the rose patterns and set up a procedure of filling these things in. It was about the mechanics of pressing hard enough on the materials to manifest a tension. I felt that the tension and repetition would transmute into a shamanistic activity. It would not just be design or decorative, but would transform into an energy field.

**JS:** This graphite work evolved from patterns into grids and diagonals. What led to that work?

**EM:** There are some big resin paintings that I did based on Navajo blankets. They were first grid paintings and then diagonal paintings. The artist Tony Berlant had introduced Navajo blankets to me, and to our circle of friends associated with Ferus Gallery.

I stretched canvas and put strips of wood at the edges, and used a carpenter plumb-bob to make lines. You pull the string out and snap it and it instantly makes a line, which I found magical. Then I put masking tape in different places to make "lazy lines," which are also part of the blankets — the places where the thread goes off the warp or weft. I lived in New Mexico for a while to look at all of these sources.

I had an exhibition at Riko Mizuno Gallery in 1970, and I was told you could do anything in her gallery, including take the roof off. So I decided I wanted to do that. There were two false



Ed Moses, "Rose #5" (1963), graphite and colored pencil on board, 60 x 40 inches. Collection of Michael and Jena King

ceilings under the roof, so I tore those out and let light come in through the one-by-fours. The light projected onto the walls, and over the course of the day it would start on one wall, crawl across the floor, and at the end of the day would exit up and out. I stretched canvas and laid it on the floor so it became a drawing created by light. On the last week of the show, I cut the whole ceiling out, so it was just a plane of light above, a sky plane.

I also did drawings on vellum, some of which were based on Navajo chief blankets. I was interested in making delineations of patterns. I wasn't interested in the space, but they became very pictorial; people always commented on that. The pictorial space was a byproduct of the activity, and I do like that idea that you do it for one reason and something else results.

Often, when I am working on a series of paintings, I am going in one direction, and out on the edge something flutters. I say,

"Yeah I see you. I'm going to finish this now, but I'll come back to you." That thing flashes in the corner again, and after about three or four times, I give in. That is when one series ends and a new one begins.

**JS:** We are looking at these massive, multi-panel mirror paintings currently in your studio. Can you tell me about them?

**EM:** In Jean Cocteau's film *Orpheus* (1950), a man walks into a room, puts on a pair of rubber gloves and walks through a mirror into the other world. Unfortunately, Cocteau shows us his

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idea of what's in the other world — a long hallway with an early Sorolla painting. Actually, we don't know what is on the other side of the mirror.

I was always interested in black holes and thinking about what happens if the black hole draws into such a tight space that it either explodes as the Big Bang or turns inside out. What happens then? Is the whole game of symmetry and balance and mathematics over?

My mirror paintings are multi-panel pieces with mirrors covered in patterned shapes and physical elements, combined with craquelure paintings. The mirrors are bent and buckled, so when you look at them you have a bent view, showing these other walls and surfaces. The mirrors are covered with polka dots, funnel shapes, teardrops sprayed through stencils, or rocks collected from my garden, so that they do not just establish themselves as mirrors. The bending breaks the patterns on the mirror and shows other patterns, a whole world. Is that what's on the other side? At first I liked the patches and pattern but they stole from the phenomena of these things. I am painting them all out now.

To make the craquelure paintings, I paint a surface black and put what I call "secret sauce" over that. When it dries, I hit it, and it makes a concussion, spreading the craquelure. It is named after the Jack in the Box ingredient. We all have secrets we cannot divulge. And I'm not sure we know the secret at all — that is what this activity is all about.

I like the idea of not trying to answer questions. I think our mind will give us the answers if we ask the questions and just allow it to engage. I like to put work up and look at it and not ask for an answer. One day, six months later, I will walk down the street and something will kick off a response, or I will walk into the studio and a metamorphosis will take place. Metamorphosis is about two simultaneous activations — like yin and yang.

I work on ten or twenty paintings at once. At a certain time, if the right catalyst takes place, the work is ignited. These paintings are all about engaging the activity of the search, the fool, the meandering. I think about the gap—the interval between yes and no—where the secret lies, because it has no dimension. By doing enough work, I will end up with one that is really magic, one that transcends just good or decorative, and has that secret sauce.

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