

## Drawing

## Ed Moses: I mark therefore I am

Now 89, the artist - and former boyfriend of Marilyn Monroe - has been involved in many of the most influential art movements of the past 50 years, but his work proves the power of pencil on paper



Ed Moses in his studio in Venice, California. Photograph: Jordan Riefe for the Guardian

Decades ago, on a visit to the caves of La Salle in southern France, Ed Moses heard a voice from millennia past when he glimpsed the markings of early man. “He first discovered he existed by a blood print on a wall, or a footprint in the mud,” the 89-year-old artist says, sitting in the courtyard of his studio in Venice, California. “He suddenly realized he existed by evidence, markings.”

Moses remembers grappling with the same self-reflexive riddle in the early 60s, following his successful debut at Ferus Gallery in 1959, the year he graduated from UCLA. “I asked myself, what is it you’re doing?” he recalls. “Are you a decorator? Are you an artist? What are you? I said, I’m not any of those things. I do what I do in response to my awareness of living.”

Moses marks, therefore he is. Those marks are on display in *Drawings from the 1960s and 70s*, the first exhibition of his drawings in 40 years at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

The earliest drawings from the show, which features more than 90 works, include manic graphite pencil crowding the borders of a repeated rose pattern which Moses found on a Mexican oilcloth in Tijuana. Obsessive manicured graphite scribbles imply a fanatical compulsion that came to characterize the artist’s work throughout the decade.

Riefe, Jordan. “Ed Moses: I mark therefore I am,” *The Guardian*, May 26, 2015.

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Ed Moses: Rose #5, 1963. Photograph: LACMA

“He talks about just wanting to get it out,” says the show’s curator, Leslie Jones. “He grits his teeth when he’s making that [drawing] gesture. But because it adhered to a pattern, and later to a grid, it’s controlled and held in check. He feels he can express himself within these defined parameters, a pattern or a grid.”

As a young man, Moses never considered becoming an artist. Born in Long Beach, California, he served as a scrub assistant in the navy medical corps during the second world war, and went to school on the GI bill to study pre-med. By his own assessment, he was a lousy student (he didn’t read his first book until he was 16), and wound up taking art classes when he couldn’t qualify for medical school. In between, he worked a variety of odd jobs, including at Douglas Aircraft, where he was a draftsman.

“Laying the pencil down with the right amount of hardness, the pencil leaves residue,” he observes, sitting in the shade of the garden. “It’s much like a caterpillar that tracks his passage on the ground. He leaves his silvery surface as he passes over it.”

The graphite drawings were done in the mid-60s when Moses, along with Robert Irwin, Ken Price and Billy Al Bengston, had a show called Young Studs at LA’s Ferus gallery. But while he was considered one of the guys, Moses’s art was unlike that of the others.

Across from the gallery was Barney’s Beanery, which still occupies the same intersection in West Hollywood and was immortalised in Ferus co-founder Ed Kienholz’s 1965 installation, The Beanery. The group used to hang out there and talk about anything but art. It’s the same eatery photographer Tom Kelley took Marilyn Monroe to after the red velvet nude photo session in 1949, around the time Moses dated her. “She wanted to be a movie star, and she got to be it,” he remembers. “That way of talking was something she developed. It worked for her, that sort of baby talk.”

Earlier this month, at the show’s opening, Moses reminisced with sculptor George Herms, whom he met at the Syndell Studio in nearby Brentwood. “He had a girlfriend, or two or three girlfriends, and they were all sitting around with their skirts hiked up, with no panties on. I said, wow, you’re a far-out cat!”

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Hermes glanced over at the series of rose drawings and recalled seeing them for the first time at a gallery in San Francisco in the 60s. While he was part of the Ferus gang, Hermes, like Moses, was aesthetically on the periphery. “We were what they call parallel play,” said the sculptor. “He was in the sandbox, I was in the sandbox and it was like scientists working in a laboratory.”

Ed Moses's studio in Venice, California. Photograph: Jordan Riefe for the Guardian

Moses's 1969 installation, *Deconstruction*, marked a transition for the artist. He and some surfer friends removed the Mizuno gallery's ceiling, allowing stark sunlight to flood into the space. “The light came through where the one-by-four boards were,” he smiles, “and it projected the light on the wall and on the floor and out the other wall, and escaped at the end of the day.”

And while the work fits well within the light and space movement of the time, characterized by artists like James Turrell, *Deconstruction* sent Moses in a different direction. He drew from the mesh of diagonal lines the basis for his grid paintings, which indicated a step away from graphite, though not completely: “Marking led to painting. Painting is a way of marking.”

The other prevailing mode of the time, finish fetish (the use of high-tech materials like resins, plastics and coated glass) was addressed by Moses in a similarly oblique manner. While most were sculpting these exotic materials, Moses used resin to encase a drawing made from powdered pigment in his 1972 work, *ILL III*, one of the few he did using the substance due to its dangerous side effects. It's an abstract piece that draws its influence from Navajo blankets rather than traditional European sources, a tendency that set the LA scene apart from New York and Europe.

“There was a kind of funny pressure coming from the east and west, and they collided in California, which made it a very unique place,” says Moses. “Of course, New York doesn't want to accept that. And Asia doesn't want to accept it. New York did their thing out of Europe, and we had this. Now, they're giving us attention for the first time,” he says about LA's emergence as a contemporary art centre.

Moses gets around with a walker as he recovers from recent heart surgery. Otherwise, he's in good health, though the doctors insisted he stop smoking marijuana, which he says he “took to like a fish to water” back in the 60s. He rises at 6am and paints outside till about 8pm, then works in the studio for a few hours at night. Even so, he says he's destroyed over 75% of the work he's done through the years. “When they light up, I keep them. And if they don't light up, I don't want them,” he shrugs, then sighs. “I'm obsessed. I love it. I'd go crazy if I can't do it.”

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