

# ARTNEWS

ARTISTS

## WITHOUT DOUBT: AT 90, ED MOSES IS FLUSH WITH CONFIDENCE

BY *Suzanne Muchnic* POSTED 10/13/16 12:39 PM



Ed Moses. Courtesy of the artist.

I never thought I would live this long,” Ed Moses said with a wry grin. It’s a gorgeous Sunday morning at his home and studio in Venice, California, and he was in his element, amid a batch of big abstract paintings-in-progress. But, at 90, Moses has some physical challenges.

“About a year ago, I had a new valve put in my heart and then I got a pacemaker,” he said. “I’ve been in a wheelchair ever since. My legs lost their ability to articulate. All that time in bed just discombobulated the whole thing, but I keep on painting. Otherwise my life would be empty. I have two people helping me make paintings and my caregivers sometimes get wrapped into it.

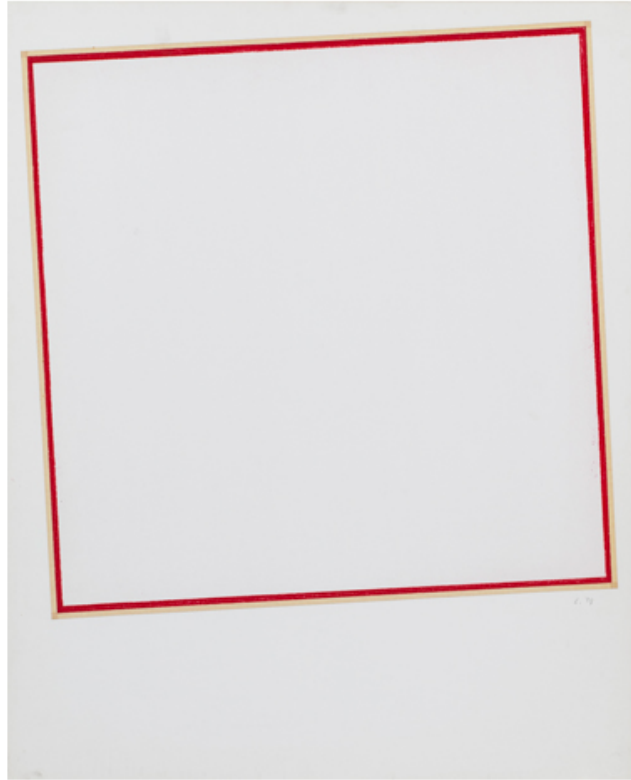
Muchnic, Suzanne. “Without a Doubt: At 90, Ed Moses is Flush with Confidence,” *ARTNEWS*. October 13, 2016.

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Every day I invent ways to paint with the materials and tools and space I have, and I have fun doing it.”

Moses has also been on a roll with exhibitions. Over the past three years in Southern California, the William Turner Gallery has offered one Moses show after another, the University of California, Irvine, has mounted an extensive survey of his work, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art has presented a major exhibition of his drawings. And now in New York, “Ed Moses: Painting as Process,” a five-decade retrospective curated by Barbara Rose, is at New York’s Albertz Benda gallery, through October 15. Meanwhile in Brussels, at the Roberto Polo Gallery, he is one of 16 artists featured in “Painting after Postmodernism, Belgium-USA,” on view through November 13, also curated by Rose.



Ed Moses, *Untitled*, 1977, charcoal and masking tape on board.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ALBERTZ BENDA

“It’s really strange,” Moses said. “Suddenly all these shows started coming up.” But the fresh surge of interest in his work doesn’t exactly represent a comeback. Known for his energetic merging of Asian and European aesthetics—often expressed in bold gestural strokes or multilayered diagonal grids—he is an enormously productive artist who has rarely been far from the public eye. “I’ve never had a pause long enough for a doubt to come in,” he says. “Something always comes up.”

Even so, his physical setback has put him in a reflective mood. “I like the question,” Moses said when asked about where he fits into art history and today’s art world. “I like to think that I’m in there in some way. But I’m atypical. I like *not*fitting. In fact I am working on pieces that are all about that, things that come together by chance. I think my whole life has evolved from chance factors. I don’t know what I’m doing. I go into things, like this interview, cold. I don’t know what I’m going to say. And that’s the way I have always approached painting. I like dealing with things I don’t know about.”

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Uncomfortable with standard art-world terminology, Moses defines himself as a mutator rather than a creator or a visionary. “I never liked being called an artist, or creative,” he said. “I thought creation was God’s game, and since there is no God, there is no one to be creative.” Unlike some of his artist-friends whose talents he particularly admires—Brice Marden, Ed Ruscha, and Billy Al Bengston, for example—Moses tends to work intuitively, letting inspiration come from his ever-changing process of making art. “I’m an explorer and I try different materials,” he said. “I don’t know how they become called upon. I guess that’s the chance factor. They sort of get together with me following along. I try this and that and the other thing, and then mutate one thing to another. When I catch onto something, I push it a little bit and sometimes I get lucky. I say, ‘Wow, how did you make that?’ If it has the wow factor, I’m OK.”



Ed Moses, *Ranken #3*, 1992, oil, acrylic, and shellac on canvas.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ALBERTZ BENDA

Since the 1980s Moses has done most of his painting outdoors. He pours, sprays, rolls, swabs, rakes, or brushes paint on surfaces laid flat on a broad expanse of paving between his house and two barn-like buildings that serve as galleries and storage facilities. Now that he is wheelchair-bound, he works with a paddle attached to a long stick. “Putting on paint is a very sensual, physical thing for me,” he said. “And then taking it off, and seeing the ghost that’s left—I have to decide whether to engage with that. Is the ghost an invitation to further activity or do I stop? Sometimes I pour paint on canvas and hose it all off. That leaves a footprint, a shadow of what it was before. So it’s like painting, but not painting.”

Today Moses is engaged with about a dozen big paintings, temporarily assembled as multipart works but still jostling for position in a cavernous viewing space. He points out one arrangement that pleases him—two side-by-side abstractions connected by a smaller, overlapping painting inspired by a Giorgio Morandi still life. Another experiment—a line-up of canvasses that

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wraps around adjacent walls, cutting off a corner of the room—wins his approval too, partly because of the way it seems to rearrange the contours of the space.

And then there are the “chain things”—groups of paintings loosely joined by long metal chains. Hung from nails on the walls, the chains loop over painted panels. And, as Moses observed, the loops cast shadows that lace the paintings together. He can’t remember why he happened to have a box of chains in storage, but when he came across it, a new adventure began.

Moving on to another viewing room, Moses shifted his attention to craquelure paintings and reflective Plexiglas panels. The craquelures, in which cracked paint exposes an undercoat of a sharply contrasting color, were sparked by an early painting by Piet Mondrian. “The divisions between the colors had these little crackles in them and I thought, ‘God, wouldn’t that be great. You could make a whole field that way.’ So I found out how to do it,” Moses recalled. “The material I use, I call secret sauce, like the one they have over at Jack in the Box. First I paint the canvas black and then I put on the secret sauce.” In a couple of mid-stage works, the dark gray “sauce” has been applied in wide horizontal stripes, like elongated bricks. In the next step, he will hit the heavily painted canvas on its back side, producing a pattern of cracks. “Then I roll a color—white or yellow or red or whatever—over the cracked secret sauce to get this kind of activity,” he said, pointing to finished works with networks of black lines beneath the surface.

In sharp contrast to the craquelures, the tall rectangular Plexiglas pieces are shiny, mirror-like works that appear to undulate. Moses has painted a few tiny black crosses or raindrop-like shapes or attached painted stones at regular intervals across the slick surfaces, but much of the attraction for people walking through the room is the reflective quality that incorporates surrounding works as well as the viewers themselves.

When it was time to wind up the interview, Moses proceeded to the living room of his house and settled into a chair in front of “a testing wall,” as he calls it. For much of the past year or so, the narrow wall between a bar and the door to the kitchen has been occupied by a dazzling diagonal grid, composed of bright red lines and a complicated interplay of delicate splotches and marks on a white background. Paintings are finished when they “light up,” he said. And this one has passed the test. “It’s a honey. It sits up there like a little soldier, all ready to be counted.”

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