

# WHITEHOT MAGAZINE™

OCTOBER 2016

"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

## Ed Moses: Gracefully Mutating



*Ed Moses [American, b. 1926], Untitled, c. 1971, resin and powdered pigment on canvas, 96 x 108 inches, 243.8 x 274.3 cm*

McVey, Kurt. "Ed Moses: Gracefully Mutating," *Whitehot Magazine*. October 2016.

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**By KURT MCVEY, SEPT. 2016**

“Just call me Ed,” offers the celebrated painter Ed Moses, a man who rarely goes by Moses, but allows his friends on the West Coast to call him Mr. Ed. Moses (used here for the sake of art-world formality) is currently showing over five decades worth of eclectic and masterful work on two separate floors in the consistently top-notch Albertz Benda in Manhattan. In *Ed Moses: Painting as Process*, which was curated by Moses’ friend, art historian and critic Barbara Rose, viewers are treated to the most comprehensive collection of Ed’s work ever assembled on the East Coast, starting from the 1950s and on through the ‘90s, allowing for an immersive and affectionately vicarious voyage through the oeuvre of a veteran artist in perpetual transmutation.

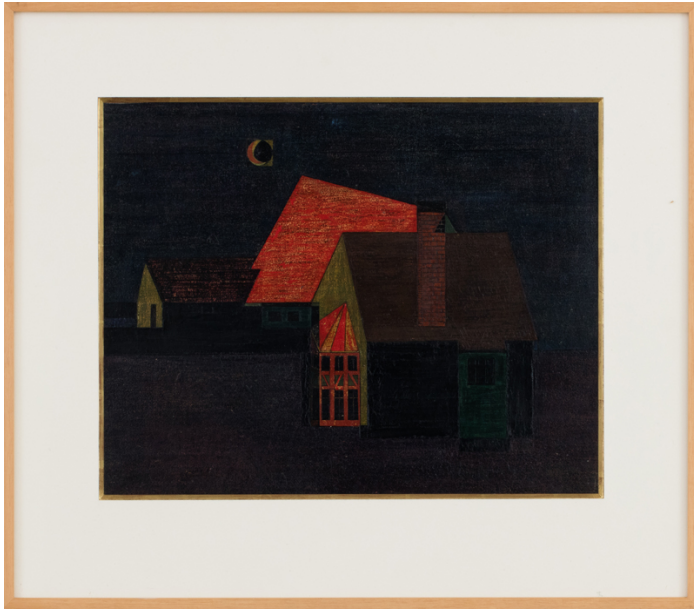
“My days are numbered,” says Moses—certainly not without a dash of black humor—over the phone from his home in Venice, California. “I’m ninety years old. I had a heart attack about a year ago and recently had a pacemaker and a heart valve put in. Now my heart moves in a set pattern, much like how I paint, eat and live.”

As you can probably tell by the title of the show, process is paramount to Ed and though he’s had to make a few adjustments (concessions) lately, including the addition of two, considerably more hands-on assistants, the act of painting, at its core, hasn’t changed much for the artist, or as he says quite frequently during our conversation, “It’s all the same adventure.”

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*Ed Moses [American, b. 1926], Holmby Home aka Red Barn, 1952, Crayon and egg tempera on board, 16 x 20 1/2 inches, 40.6 x 52 cm, 25 1/4 x 29 inches (framed), 64 x 73.7 cm*

Moses likes to paint outside, weather permitting, which he concedes is most of the time considering his place on the map. He likes that the paint dries quickly in the open air, which is doubly important considering he also likes to hose down and saturate his un-stretched blank canvases with water, sometimes up to ten at a time, like individual

plots of a larger, recently seeded garden, brimming with untold potential derived from the happy confluence of man and nature.

“I’m currently working on these Mondrian paintings; you know, the guy who made the crisscrosses with colors,” says Moses, unafraid to cite the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Dutch painter as an influence, intentional or not. When Ed Moses says “crisscrosses,” one immediately leaps back to the late ‘60s and much of the ‘70s, when he created the majority of his signature diagonal crosshatch paintings, which merge his early architectural curiosity with his (at the time) newfound appreciation for Navajo blankets and their zigzagging patterns. But after making so many gorgeous, mature, gestural, and unrestrained Ab Ex paintings,

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which he began exploring in the late '80s and worked on concertedly throughout the '90s, why the return to the grid?

"I always make circles; the metaphorical ones," Moses adds. "I go here and I go there. I'm a mutator. I mutate from one concept to another. You could also say I'm a zigzagger. I like to zigzag."

Ed clarifies here, with a gracious laugh, that this term has nothing to do with owning or using a medicinal marijuana card, despite his sunny Southern California lifestyle and the fact that he of all people would certainly qualify for one, but for Ed, zigzagging is all about the freedom to execute a swift Aristotelian reversal of his own artistic narrative whenever he so chooses.

"I'll introduce the paint to the water, sometimes with multiple brushes fastened together, which will make the paint move in different directions and patterns," he says, illustrating a kind of Brice Marden meets Rorschachian experience. The paint will indicate something or introduce ideas, which then leads back to another way of distributing paint and so on. "I don't want to be *in control*, I want to be *in tune*."

Barbara Rose, who also contributed to the catalogue *Cross-Section*, a recent survey of Moses' work at the University of California, Irvine, regularly speaks to Ed's seemingly inborn ability to gracefully stick the aesthetic landing between chaos and structure. Moses, on the other hand, says he prefers the word *circumstance*. He'll also use the word *situation*, claiming that one situation inevitably, "leads to another, leads to another, leads to another."

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“The only goal is that I have no goal,” says Moses, before using “situation” in a different context, mostly in response to the prevailing notion that he’s become a cherished paternal figure in the Los Angeles art scene. “The situation is that people have an attitude that I’m somebody and I sort of like that idea; that I’m somebody. I don’t know who that body is, but I know that he’s a painter and that he explores.”



*Ed Moses [American, b. 1926], Montirr-Aix, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 inches, 182.9 x 152.4 cm*

As the primary resident expert of Moses’ work, Rose has the right and the confidence to site Jackson Pollock as a kindred painter, if not spirit, primarily due to the artists’ shared interest in the “preservation of spontaneity” as well as their looming approach to the splayed out canvas. A comparison to Pollock, which must include his immense shadow, has the potential to intimidate or

frustrate many Ab Ex practitioners, though it’s clear to anyone with a decent eye that a painter can have a strong, unique voice within this

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particular school, it's just that most artists don't. "I have no problem with the attitude that Pollock had, because it leads to painting," says Moses. "I couldn't do 'em the way he did 'em. So I do 'em the way I do 'em, which is spasmodically and formally."

One could trace Moses' "spazzy formalism" all the way back to Long Beach City College, when the 22 year-old former scrub assistant and surgical technician in the Navy Medical Corps abandoned his medical school aspirations for a go at painting. Pedro Miller, his then professor, an Art Institute of Chicago graduate, famously declared the young, laid back, somewhat defiant Moses "a real painter" when he casually finger painted his first in-class still life assignment. "I had no ability," admits Moses. "I wanted to be immediate. To this day I carry that immediacy as far as I can carry it." **WM**



*Ed Moses [American, b. 1926], The Court, 1951-52, graphite and casein on Strathmore board, 12 1/4 x 24 inches, 31.1 x 61 cm, 20 1/2 x 32 1/4 inches (framed), 52 x 82 cm*

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