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“Moses, Ruscha, Bell, Bengston: Backstage with the Cool School of artists, cooler than ever”
by Deborah Vankin

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It’s dark backstage as artists Ed Moses, Ed Ruscha, Larry Bell and Billy Al Bengston get miked up to appear before a packed house at the Broad Stage in Santa Monica. The glow of house lights seeps in from the stage wings and the audible bustle of audience members settling into their seats fills the tiny backstage nook. Pre-show suspense hangs in the air.

The four artists, however, are nothing if not relaxed. Moses, now 90, zips around in his wheelchair sputtering “toot-toot” sounds while 82-year-old Bengston, in a floral-patterned jeans jacket and felt fedora tilted over one eye, cracks one-liners: “Gotta have sound effects,” he quips to Moses. Then: “Don’t step on my feet!” Chit-chatting and ribbing one another, the men more closely resemble a posse of teen boys hanging on a street corner awaiting a bus rather than art legends waiting to address about 500 friends and fans.

“If you feel like you’re about to throw up, save it for the stage,” Ruscha, 79, jokes, leaning back on a folding chair, chuckling. “That’d be so great if we could all throw up on cue, you know?” “You know, I’ve never thrown up in my life?” says Bell, 77. “This could be a first.”

“I know it’s planned a little late, but we could have some vegetable soup in our mouths and then all throw up at the same time,” Ruscha says.

Bengston and Bell unleash a round of comic sound effects. “Blech.” “Cough.” “Blahh.” “Yuuuk.”

It’s the kind of long-simmered camaraderie that comes from six decades of friendship. The men were among the renegade, experimental artists at the storied Ferus Gallery in the 1950s and ’60s. They were known almost as much for their raucous, hard-partying ways as for their exploration of minimalism, abstraction and Pop art. Hence the nickname the Cool School.

The men, who are still prolific and regularly attend one another’s openings, have reunited for “Artists Talk: L.A. Legends,” the inaugural event in a two-year series at the Broad Stage. The series, co-organized by Sotheby’s Institute of Art-Los Angeles and executive produced by gallerist William Turner, presents artists discussing the past and present of the L.A. scene. Robert Irwin, a core member of the Cool School, was supposed to appear Wednesday night but couldn’t because of a back problem.

Backstage, an audio engineer hovers over Bell, adjusting his headset microphone.

“Larry, you’re losing your jawline,” Bengston teases, nodding to the mike-wire that now cuts across Bell’s face.

“Jaw?” Bell asks.

“Line,” Ruscha clarifies, before adding: “Oh, we all shoulda just thrown up.”

When the men finally walk out on stage, they're met with vigorous applause from a crowd that's thick with celebrities and art world figures: Frank Gehry, Doug Aitken, Maria Shriver, James Franco, Los Angeles County Museum of Art Director Michael Govan, and philanthropists Eli and Edythe Broad, to name a few.

The hour-long talk that follows, moderated by art critic Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, touches on the early days of L.A.'s contemporary art scene and Ferus Gallery co-founders Walter Hopps and Edward Kienholz, as well as the artists' own journeys to Ferus; their mutual respect for watercolor teacher Irwin at the Chouinard Art Institute ("Bob's strength was in conveying a sense of how one trusts oneself," Bell says); and their respective day jobs as aspiring creatives and how those experiences influenced their work. (Bell worked in a frame shop where he learned to cut glass, and Bengston raced motorcycles where he developed an affection for the airbrushing technique.)

Ruscha recalls personalizing 300-some gift items a day, things like birdhouses or ceramic false teeth holders called "Ma and Pa Chopper Hoppers." ("I just remember painting the name John John many times," he says.) The conversation traverses surprise studio visits, like the day 22-year-old Bell found Marcel Duchamp standing on his doorstep. "I sort of threw myself back against the wall. ... This legend was there in my studio," Bell says.

Compliments and affectionate ribbing ensue. "You are a great artist," Moses tells Bengston. "You have the ability, when something isn't working, to make it worse!"

At one point, the group debates how much Andy Warhol's soup can prints sold for in a 1962 Ferus exhibition. Twenty-five bucks apiece? \$50?

Suddenly, Irving Blum, who took Kienholz's place as co-owner at Ferus in 1958, stands up in the crowd.

"They were \$100 apiece," he yells out. "But Andy would get half of that!"

What was the draw about working in gallery-sparse, collector-thin Los Angeles back in the '50s and '60s?

"All of us wanted to make a contribution of some kind," Bengston says. "We didn't need museums, galleries. ... We didn't [care] what anyone else said."

"We thought we were great too," Moses chimes in.

"Well, we were!" Bengston says. "I'd say everyone sitting here was fantastic." To which the audience erupted in applause.

As the crowd files out of the auditorium, Blum stands still, facing the now empty stage.

"I knew them all when they were in their teens and 20s. And to see them now..." he says. "Wow, they're geriatric now! But so am I. I couldn't be prouder."

At a small post-show reception, fellow artist Peter Alexander greets Bell, now snug in a puffy red ski jacket.

"A little stiff in the beginning, but hey, it got going," Alexander says to him.

"It was fun, it was fun," Bell says. "That's the point, right?"