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“Ed Ruscha & Billy Al Bengston on art, friendship and their new show in South Korea”

by Michael Slenske



In the spring of 1969—two years after Los Angeles’s pioneering Ferus Gallery shuttered—two icons from that scene, Billy Al Bengston and Ed Ruscha, opened the conceptual survey show “Three Modern Masters” at the Reese Palley Gallery in San Francisco. Housed inside a red-brick building just off Union Square that Frank Lloyd Wright had redesigned in the 1940s, the two-story skylit space—with its spiraling ramp wrapping circular walls—was a test case for the architect’s interior for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

“I think what we were really doing was overworking an idea,” admits Ruscha, with a laugh, about pairing his early text-based paintings

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and gunpowder works on paper (“Oily”, “Lisp”, “1984”) and Bengston’s “Dentos” (lacquered pop art paintings on dented aluminum panels) with Wright’s “mousetrap” design. “But our show did look really sexy with that circular staircase,” he says. “I think Billy would agree with me that we do this stuff for the sport of it first.”

“Three Modern Masters’ was a commercial gallery show, one of many in the world, and it certainly would have been lost to time if a historian or curator or another interested party—like us—had not taken the initiative to bring it back,” says Esther Kim Varet, who is launching VSF Seoul, a South Korean outpost of her Hollywood gallery, Various Small Fires, with a fiftieth-anniversary reprisal of the show, “Three Modern Masters: Reunited.” (Varet’s gallery represents Bengston in Los Angeles and is named after the seminal 1964 Ruscha photography book “Various Small Fires and Milk”).

For this inaugural exhibition Bengston is contributing new “Chevron” paintings while Ruscha is recontextualizing some early work. Since the gallery is located in a former nail salon in a nondescript building in the buzzy Hannam-dong neighborhood, Wright’s contribution will come in the form of two armchairs and a bench he designed, both of which Varet sourced on 1stdibs.

“At this point in their lives, Ed and Billy don’t do anything unless it gives them pleasure,” adds Varet. “I promised them that this show will be driven by the pleasure principle. It will be driven by us looking back on their friendship over the past fifty years and really celebrating that.”

Though Bengston, now 84, probably spends more time in Hawaii than he does in his beloved Venice compound, and Ruscha, at 81, is still recovering

from a partial knee replacement, they agreed to sit down with “DesignLA” and look back on the long, strange trip that’s brought them from the epicenter of the early L.A. art scene to a joint venture in Asia’s budding new art capital.

When did you two first actually meet?

Ed Ruscha: It was maybe ‘62 or ‘63 but possibly in ‘61.

Billy Al Bengston: That’s when you were driving a ‘39 Ford, right?

ER: That’s right. Billy was a mentor to me before I even knew him. I knew of Billy’s artwork three years before I met him. I remember he was doing the verboten thing of putting an object in the smack middle of a canvas, and that was really frowned upon.

BAB: I’ve been doing that ever since year one, ever since I learned you shouldn’t do it.

ER: You should have known better, Billy, you just never knew better, did you?

BAB: You know when I started doing that, Ed? Remember when I had the apartment upstairs behind the Ferus Gallery? That’s where I first did that.

And you’d seen all of his early shows at Ferus before you two met?

ER: Let’s see, I saw Billy’s B.S.A. Motorcycle parts show, and that was 1961, right, Billy?

BAB: I don’t know, Ed, I’m not a chronicler of my own work. I just dissected the motorcycle. I guess it was my Gold Star. It was Skinny’s 21, and it was the love of my life for a long time. I haven’t seen a motorcycle yet I’d wanted to buy since that. I wish I still had it today.

ER: I was very impressed with Billy painting something he seemingly loved to do, which

was motorcycling. I thought, What a perfect combination, that is, making art out of something you’re really in tune with. Later on Billy got me into motorcycling, which diverted my attention away from making art. We went to Baja, all points north and south, a lot on motorcycles.

So how exactly was Billy an influence on you, Ed?

ER: He’s a senior. I’m newly 81, so that makes you 84, Billy?

BAB: I’m 84 years old? I should be dead. Did you ever know anybody as old as me?

ER: What do they say, getting older is not the kiss of death, at least not until the very end.

BAB: I knew I’d get a good quote out of you. That’s good, Ed.

So what was the initial bond between you two?

ER: Ferus was a real hotspot, a tiny hotspot, in a city that really had no artwork at all. But there was a community of artists, many of whom lived in Venice, like Billy, Larry Bell and John Altoon. It was the only artist community that was happening at that time.

But you were in Hollywood, right?

BAB: Yeah, he was a Hollywood boy with Joe Goode.

ER: I was over on Western Avenue for years, and Echo Park and Silver Lake.

Why didn’t you move to Venice?

ER: It was just the happenstance of living conditions. There I am and I don’t mind it and why change? I can drive to Venice if I want to see some friends. I never had the urge to settle there. But Billy, you didn’t come out here to go to art

school, did you?

BAB: I was brought out here by my parents. My dad was working in the Douglas Aircraft factory, and before that he was working in the shipyards. My Uncle Ed was out here playing in jazz bands.

Ed, you left Oklahoma specifically to go to art school?

ER: Yeah, I wanted to be a sign painter and I thought, well, there's art schools out there so I'll try one of those. I settled on this idea that Art Center was the hot place to go, and then it turned out there was no more room on their roster, so I had to go to Chouinard. It also turned out to be the best of all opportunities. Art Center had this dress code and you could not have facial hair, you could not wear a beret, you could not wear sandals, you couldn't carry bongo drums.

BAB: I did all that.

ER: All those things were prohibited at Art Center, so the renegade school turned out to be Chouinard, and that turned out alright. I got out of school around 1960, went to Europe for a year, came back, didn't know what I was doing. I used to design books and got some jobs doing that and typography and sign painting.

Where were you painting signs?

BAB: Any place they'd hire him.

ER: I also did a lot of personalizing of gift items. I'd put kids' names on gift items at this place called Sunset House over on South La Cienega. They had all these gift items and you could have them personalized and I would do hundreds of these things in a day's time—four cents for one, five cents for another, that sort of thing. I could work September, October, November for Christmas and sorta stay alive for the following year. That became a habit for about five years. I was able to then work on my own art, but things were really slow then. L.A. was like the Indonesia

of the art world—it was out there.

But things sort of came into focus when Walter Hopps put you in the “New Painting of Common Objects” show with Warhol and Lichtenstein at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1962, which led to the first show at Ferus.

ER: I think it was '63, and then I did one in '65. When was the show at Reese Palley?

Michael Slenske: That was 1969.

ER: Oh boy, we were already getting old by then weren't we?

How did the “Three Modern Masters” show come about? Reese Palley seemed like a P.T. Barnum-type of gallerist, and maybe a bit of an odd choice for the two of you coming out of the more avant-garde scene at Ferus. What made you want to show there?

BAB: Money. He paid me a salary.

ER: He was a P.T. Barnum type, you're right. At his gallery on Maiden Lane in San Francisco he showed this artist Edward Marshall Boehm, who made ceramic birds.

How did this “Three Modern Masters” concept come about?

BAB: Well, the gallery was in a building designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

ER: With all those years that have passed, memory is kind of fuzzy, but Billy and I were in New York and somehow got this brilliant idea to be photographed in front of the Guggenheim with that floor plate [it reads “Let Each Man Exercise the Art He Knows”] that is still in place.

Were you there for a show?

ER: I don't think so, but I do remember one thing. It was very cold, and Billy, I don't know how you

found this, but you found this guy selling earmuffs on the street, and the earmuffs were not those big puffy kind you normally associate with earmuffs, they were very flat and made of felt. They were just this skinny membrane that fit right around your ears, and they were the best earmuffs I've ever had in my life. You remember those?

BAB: I remember now that we were freezing our asses off and those made a big difference.

So basically you guys took this photo and spun it forward into the catalogue for this show because Frank Lloyd Wright designed both buildings?

BAB: Well, Ed and I were in New York and we just thought we'd have some fun. Was that fun, Ed?

ER: Yeah, and the world is not as scary as it looks, and fun can be had.

How do you remember the show turning out in that Frank Lloyd Wright space?

BAB: We had the show and we left.

ER: We did have an opening, and I have faint memories of that, but I'm not even sure if we even sold anything. Was anything for sale?

BAB: Everything was for sale, Ed. Reese Palley was a salesman.

ER: I don't think it was a lasting relationship with either Billy or myself and Reese Palley. That was kind of a one-night stand.

Looking back, did it ever occur to you at the time that you would possibly revisit that show 50 years later?

BAB: Sure.

ER: You thought "sure" back then?

BAB: Ed, it's taken too long.

ER: Is it Dizzy Gillespie who said that in order to be up to date with yourself, you have to put one foot in the past and one foot in the future?

MS: Well it seems like you've both projected yourselves here.

BAB: Where are we?

ER: (laughing) I will say I'm glad it's being shown outside the U.S.

BAB: Ed, are you going to Korea?

ER: I don't have that on my dance card. I can't travel.

BAB: I became a draft dodger so I didn't have to go to Korea. I started taking peyote so I didn't have to go to Korea.

How are you approaching this show differently from the 1969 show?

BAB: Avoiding it the same way.

ER: It's kind of ad hoc. I have quite a bit of my work, and now is an opportunity to jiggle it and put some things together. What are we doing, Billy?

BAB: Ed, I don't know, and I'm not going over there to find out. The best day of my life was when I was told I was 4F. I was living at this place on Bonnie Brae with Ken Price, and the fellows from the draft board came to visit me and they looked at the place said, "Where do you live?" I said, "This is where I live." They said, "Where's your bed?" I took them out to the front porch and they said, "You live out here?" I said, "I sure do." I said, "You guys want a cup of coffee?" Those guys looked at me and said, "We'll be going now."

ER: And you won't be going.

BAB: I weighed 135 pounds in those days, what did you weigh, Ed?

ER: Oh, probably 115. Remember it was Larry Bell who had an appointment with the draft board, and he put on his father's boots and walked from his studio in downtown L.A. and didn't eat for three days and arrived there and fell flat on his face, and they said, "Go home."

If you're not going to Korea, what exactly are you two taking? From the looks of the studio in the next room, it appears that Billy is showing a bunch of these new blue paintings in Seoul.

BAB: I am?

MS: That's what your wife says.

BAB: That's just because they haven't sold yet. Ed, have you got a theme?

ER: Not really, it's just my way of shouting out no particular information. It all just gathers around together and I make something out of it. I'm glad I'm not around to hang my own show, because I'm a terrible hanger of shows. Usually what I do is go in and take the best wall and take the best work that I have and hang it all on that best wall and then everything else falls apart. So I need somebody else to come in and arrange.

I've also heard that in the absence of a Frank Lloyd Wright building, you guys will be squaring off with Frank Lloyd Wright furniture at the gallery in Seoul.

ER: Someone has arranged for that beyond our knowledge.

BAB: Why don't we offer them \$500 for all of it and then use it in every show?

Maybe you could do "Three Modern Masters" as an annual from here on out.

BAB: I like to think of it as "Three Modern Half-Masters."

ER: Yeah, then people will say, "Boy, that Bengston-Ruscha combination really offers us a way to sell Frank Lloyd Wright furniture."

MS: Your paintings can just decorate the furniture.

BAB: That's usually what it's about. What do people buy paintings for? So they have something to hang above the sofa.

You've always talked about that, and that was why you and Frank Gehry incorporated all of that furniture in your LACMA retrospective. This idea of "looking" seems to be a huge component in both of your work, just slowing people down to look.

BAB: The problem with Ed's work is that you have to know how to read.

ER: You have to know how to read, but I'm sort of a linguistic kleptomaniac anyway, so I use whatever is out there. A painting is only a picture made with paint. What more do you want?

I think a lot of people try to read too much into the symbols and metaphors, whether it's with the chevrons or the wordplay. In a certain sense you're making these paintings not just to look at but to really push the boundaries of what paintings can be.

ER: Yeah, I think someone else will come along and say, "That's serious nonsense." And I guess they're right.

BAB: How about semi-serious nonsense?

MS: Perhaps, but you have long said you were premeditated in your approach to painting, Ed.

BAB: Pre-medicated?

ER: (laughs) To face a blank canvas, I have to have some thought about what's going to go on it before I work on it, before I even think of

rolling my sleeves up, and that was counter to everything I was taught in school. At Chouinard you were taught to paint the picture on the floor, light up a cigarette, keep it moving, don't quit on it, fill in that little area over here, and don't forget the bottom over there. I started out making art that way, but it just never worked for me. I had to have some sort of premeditated idea.

Didn't Herbert Jepson tell you something similar when you were at Otis, Billy?

BAB: Jepson was full of shit. He was a fiddler. The most important quote I ever heard was, "You can't put your subject in the center."

ER: That was a license for takeoff.

Back then you really looked up to John Altoon, didn't you, Billy?

BAB: I still do.

And Ed, Bob Irwin was a mentor to you?

ER: Yeah, beside Billy and Irwin, who was my watercolor teacher, but also Altoon, because he would suck up all the air in the room.

BAB: He was a genius.

ER: When he entered a room, he didn't even need to say anything. He was just total sunshine, and you wanted to break up laughing or you were awestruck.

BAB: If he didn't have three girls chasing him all the time it was a bad day.

MS: It seems like Altoon and Craig Kaufman led the way early on.

BAB: Craig was easily the most advanced artist in 1956, I would say, and he was the biggest asshole, so I got along fine with him.

Altoon, Kaufman and Ed Kienholz were so

unlike you two in their approach, but they were all very much idols of yours. Do you think what they taught you was how to be artists?

ER: Yes, that's what they did. Each one of them had his own voice, and they really were not affected by each other on a personality level. We were influenced by the way Kenny Price or Ed Moses talked, but our work was totally different.

BAB: Ed, did you start showing when it was the first Ferus?

ER: No, I only knew the one at 723 North La Cienega.

MS: That's when Irving Blum was there.

ER: Chico [Walter Hopps] was still there for a little while.

BAB: Walter was a savant.

ER: He could put everything into words because he was a word man. He had a way of reaching people. Irving was always into who was the most famous and who was making money. Walter was the opposite. He gave as much respect to obscure, forgotten people as he did to anyone who was famous.

So if L.A. was the Indonesia of the art world back then, what do you think about it now?

BAB: Do you know anything about it, Ed?

ER: Well I know there's a whole lot of it, whatever it is. You know people have asked me, "What do you think the most beautiful city in the world is?" And right off, and I really believe this, it's San Francisco. There's something mysterious about it, and I don't want to live there—and I never have lived there—but I still find it the most mysterious, beautiful city in the world. I always loved driving around L.A., but man it's changing so fast. They're putting mini skyscrapers up all over Hollywood,

and we're going to have less sunshine and more shadows.

MS: Maybe that's why you're in the desert a lot these days and why, Billy, you're in Hawaii so much.

BAB: We're done. Aren't we done, Ed?

ER: Well, I guess so, but we can't badmouth this place, Billy, because we keep coming back here.

BAB: Oh, I like it, but I think we're done. It's hard now because the first thing anyone does is start talking about money. Remember when nobody talked about money, Ed?

ER: There wasn't enough to go around.

What made you both want to stay in L.A. and not go to New York?

ER: Everything here was just so swank. You had progressive jazz and Central Avenue, all these things at the edge of our knowledge, and it was so tasty it just seemed like it was never going to end. What do you call it? The central casting of cities?

BAB: That's a good one, Ed. This place is great—it's got Ruscha.

Are you working on anything else besides your blue paintings, Billy?

ER: Sounds to me like a Blue Period.

BAB: Can I tell you, that's all the paint I had at the time. I painted a lot of blue backgrounds, and I said, "Shit, I've got all this blue paint lying around." And then I thought about it and I realized blue paintings sell. Did you know that, Ed?

ER: Never knew that.

BAB: Well that's because you've never painted blue paintings.

ER: It's never too late, I guess. You'll do something to blow our hair back, Billy.

BAB: We don't have any hair to blow back.

ER: That was a lead-in for you to say that, Billy.

What are you working on, Ed?

ER: I'm working on the same things I did when I was twenty years old.

MS: Back when you guys were just doing it for each other.

ER: That's close to the truth. You weren't doing it for money, because there wasn't a lot of that. We wanted to impress each other. I don't know, we all just want to open the gates to heaven with whatever we do.

BAB: Well, you're a Christian. Ed, I just like it if you or any of my friends come in from anywhere and they see things and they laugh.

ER: Getting a chuckle is something.

I think that's something both of you got early on, that something serious could also be humorous. Do you still feel like this is fun?

BAB: No, I know too much.

ER: That doesn't mean you're not having fun doing it, Billy. I get up every morning and I feel like a hot piece of Kryptonite and then I say, Let's go.

BAB: I wish my wife felt that way about me. But I still love Ed's work.

MS: I'm sure you guys still have lots of love for each other, too.

ER: We've got some of that for each other. We've logged in the time and we're still here.