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Hopper has always been in the picture

The actor's photographs bespeak a long-standing passion for more than just a life in film.

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Here comes the artist, dressed in black sweater and trousers, head bowed in concentration and carrying a framed photograph in each hand. This artist, however, happens to be a movie star. Dennis Hopper has taken a day off from playing a colonel on the NBC series "E-Ring" to install an exhibition of his own photographs and other works at Ace Gallery.

Hopper puts down the photographs and starts the guided tour of his past. He saunters down a long corridor already hung with framed black-and-white pictures that he took in the 1960s. "Do you recognize these guys?" he asks, knowing well that most of his friends from that era are almost as famous as he, artists like Andy Warhol, David Hockney, Ed Ruscha.

Hopper, 69, has his salt-and-pepper hair cut stylishly short. His light blue eyes twinkle mischievously as he recalls hanging out at L.A.'s first contemporary art gallery, Ferus. In the low-voltage voice still recognizable from roles in classic films such as "Giant," "Easy Rider" and "Blue Velvet," he tells the stories behind a few photographs.

Of a young Pop artist seated on the floor of his studio, he says, "That's Roy Lichtenstein with the painting that I bought. I think I paid \$780 for it."

Hopper pauses before his photograph of a balding man in a cardigan holding a wax mannequin head in his hands. "That's Ed Kienholz," he says. "I got those wax heads from a film I'd worked on and he used them in his installation of 'Barney's Beanery' where I'm one of the characters sitting at the bar."

Kienholz, who co-founded Ferus Gallery in 1957 with Walter Hopps, proved to be an inspirational figure for Hopper because he introduced him to the art of assemblage made from the combination of everyday objects. One of Hopper's assemblages is with his photographs in the exhibition "Los Angeles 1955-1985" at the Centre Pompidou in Paris through July 17. Another is in the show at Ace, along with his photographs from the '60s, some reproduced at monumental scale, and the abstract photographs he has taken since the mid-1980s.

Weston Naef, curator of photographs at the J. Paul Getty Museum, calls Hopper's work "a monumental affirmation of the redemptive value of art ... proof of the transformative genius of photography."

Hopper was interested in art from an early age, but it accelerated after his family moved from the family farm in Kansas to San Diego in 1950. He became an apprentice at the La Jolla Playhouse, where he learned about photography from set designer Hank Milam. "He took a lot of pictures, and I started thinking about it as an art form," Hopper says. "I took photos from that time, but they have disappeared."

Thanks to Milam's friendship with Mary Price, wife of actor and art collector Vincent Price, in 1954 Hopper was invited to their home in Beverly Hills. "I saw my first abstract paintings by Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline and Richard Diebenkorn. I was 18 and I'd never seen an abstract painting before. When I saw those, I got it immediately," he says.

After just a few years in L.A., Hopper had achieved a measure of notoriety both for his role in "Rebel Without a Cause" and his friendship with its star, James Dean. Under contract with Warner Brothers, Hopper took on a rebellious identity after Dean's death in a car crash in 1955. Already prone to drinking and experimenting with drugs, he insulted director Henry Hathaway as well as a few studio heads, according to a 1988 biography by Elena Rodriguez. His 1961 marriage to Brooke Hayward, daughter of producer Leland Hayward and actress Margaret Sullavan, could have advanced Hopper's career but for his attitude problem.

About that time, Hayward bought Hopper a Nikon for his birthday. "He never left the house without it," she wrote in "1712 North Crescent Heights," a 2001 a book of his photographs edited by their daughter, Marin Hopper. "It turned out that he was as natural a photographer as he was an actor," Hayward wrote, and he took pictures of everything and everyone that intrigued him.

"I'd screwed myself in the movies," Hopper admits now. "The only creative outlet I had at that time was painting and taking photographs. That's what I did most of the days." By his mid-20s, he was acting so rarely that he had time to hang out at Ferus, meeting similarly youthful artists who were kindred spirits in their affiliation with Beat poets, jazz musicians and a new realism in film.

In 1961, a fire destroyed Hopper and Hayward's Bel-Air home and hundreds of his paintings. "I tried to paint again after the fire, but I couldn't," he says. After the couple moved into the smaller home on Crescent Heights, Hopper avenged the loss of his paintings by dedicating himself to photography.

Art dealer Irving Blum, who bought Kienholz's share of Ferus in 1958, used Hopper's photographs of artists as announcements of their shows. "They were wonderful and appropriate," he says by phone from New York. He also found Hopper to be a perspicacious collector of then unknown artists like Ruscha. "I was selling art to Dennis quite early and he had an extraordinary grasp of what was happening at that time. Of all the movie people who might have come around and who I might have sold to, it was pretty much Dennis who I was really friendly with. I think he is an inordinately gifted guy, not only as an actor but as an artist."

Hopper recalls, "I got all my education about the art world from going to galleries and meeting artists. I looked around and to me it seemed that an artist being one-on-one with canvas or camera was a much more honest approach as far as creating was concerned.

"The artists were my support system. The only two actors I knew who had any knowledge of art were Vincent Price and Edward G. Robinson. They went on 'The \$64,000 Question,' and Vincent won once and Edward won twice, all on art."

Perhaps the most often reproduced picture in the Ace show is a view of two Standard gas station signs at Doheny, Santa Monica and Melrose, as seen through the windshield of a car. Cecile Whiting, professor of art history at UC Irvine and author of "Pop L.A.: Art and The City in the 1960s," which includes many of Hopper's photographs from the period, says that "Double Standard" announced "a new aesthetic sensibility defined around the car," one that became particularly pronounced among Ferus artists.

"His photographs of commercial wordplay, the unpredictable and fleeting Happenings that took place in Los Angeles, and the decaying urban walls often

scrawled with graffiti all defy the standardization of a city that was growing at an unprecedented rate in the 1960s," she says via e-mail.

Hopper says that one reason he didn't crop his photographs -- and still doesn't -- "is that I realized that you couldn't crop if you were going to be a movie director, you had to use full frame. Photography certainly helps you to learn how to compose."

His opportunity to direct arose in 1967, when actor Peter Fonda called him with the idea for a script. Hayward, alienated by Hopper's wild ways and no fan of this latest career move, left him before he began filming "Easy Rider." But after years in obscurity, Hopper emerged with a counterculture hit. Eager to direct again, he put down his camera and did not return to photography for about 20 years.

When he did, he turned not to people but to the patterns and graffiti found on walls in Kyoto, Morocco, Berlin and elsewhere that, when enlarged, assume the appearance and proportion of abstract paintings.

His recommitment to his art led him to buy a loft-style building designed by Frank Gehry and Brian Murphy in Venice, where he lives with his wife of 10 years, actress Victoria Duffy, and their 3-year-old daughter, Galen.

Looking around the works at Ace that reflect his many friendships and his creative relationship with L.A., Hopper says: "I've lived a privileged life. I have dealt with culture my entire life, and I've been able to make a decent living most of the time. I've been an actor, I've been able to write and paint and take photographs and assemble objects. I always loved what I was doing even though it was very difficult at times to be denied the ability to do it.

"But [poet Rainer Maria] Rilke said in your darkest moments, don't blame your life, blame yourself for not being able to see the poetry."

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`Dennis Hopper: A Survey'

Where: ACE Gallery, Los Angeles, 5514 Wilshire Blvd.

When: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays; closed Sundays, Mondays

Ends: July 1

Price: Free

Contact: (323) 935-4411 or www.acegallery.net