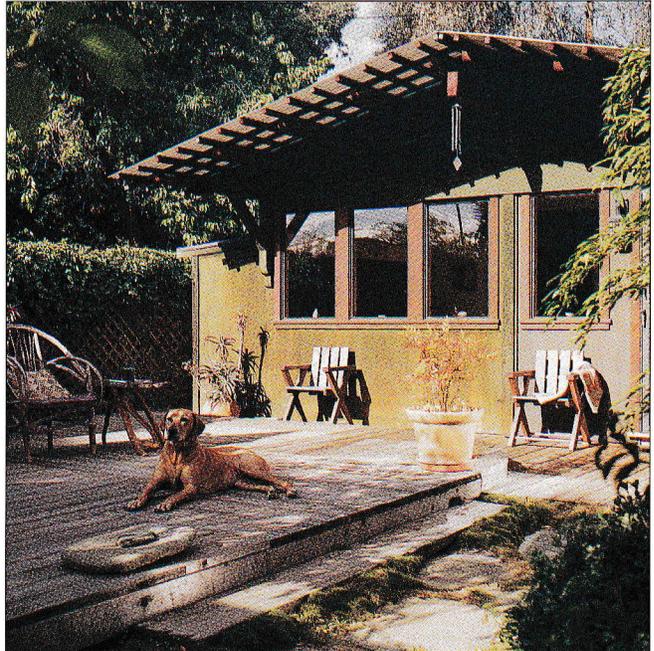




JIM MICHUGH



ED MOSES IN VENICE

EVOLUTION OF THE ARTIST'S HOME AND STUDIO

TEXT BY HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP

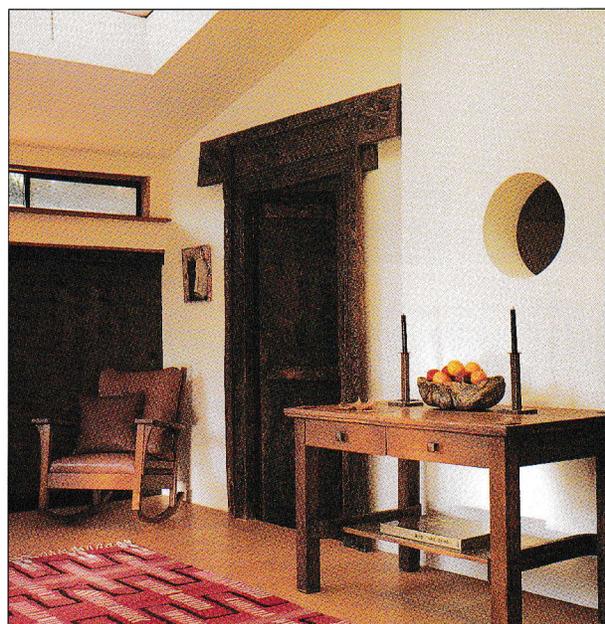
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM STREET-PORTER

Ed Moses (above, in his studio) creates abstract works from his base in Venice, California. Of the creative process, he observes, "I don't make paintings, I find them." ABOVE RIGHT: Lulu rests on the deck beside the bungalow, which was a "shack" when Moses first saw it. "My artist friends helped me gut the place."

BELOW: Moses conceived the sitting room addition in collaboration with designer-artist Ned Evans. Tony Berlant's *The New Order No. 44* is above the Craftsman rocker. Door and surround are from Kenya. OPPOSITE: Two 1960s works by Moses lean below shelves lined with Ken Price pottery and a collection of arrowheads.

Ed Moses hauls two luminous abstract paintings out of a storage rack. With some effort, since each measures five by six feet, he hangs the diptych on the wall of his studio in Venice, California. The room seems dark for an artist's studio, but Moses believes that his paintings should emerge slowly and delicately as the eye adjusts to the crepuscular light. The work glows with iridescent gold and burgundy against a black background. It is based, he says, on a Renaissance tapestry at the Norton Simon Museum. "I never know something like that when I'm doing it," he insists. "It comes to me after I've finished." He stands back to appraise the subtle interplay of hues. "To me, the paintings are transformative. Sometimes when I look at them they just go, 'Wow.' "

Moses turned seventy in April, and his birthday present from the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles is his first major retrospective. Works made of paper, wood and resin, paintings in the form of grids, monochromes and great washy fields





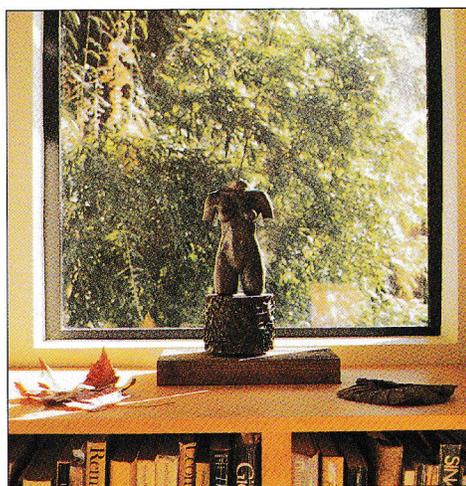
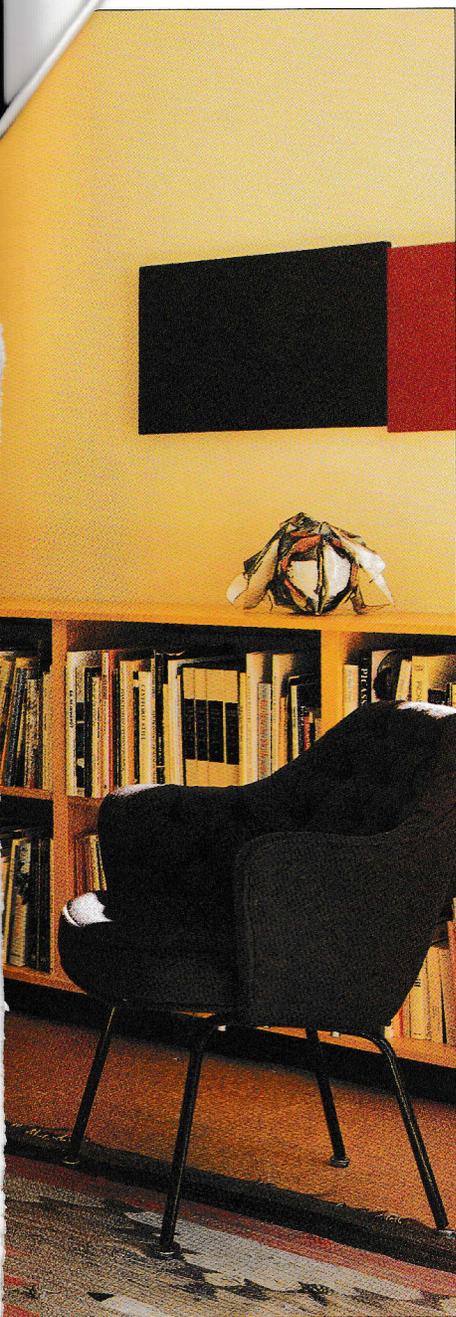
of color, demonstrate the range of the prolific and unpredictable artist.

Moses seems slightly put out to find himself an elder statesman of Los Angeles painting. "I like to say I'm fifty, give or take ten years," he jokes. But his age contributes to his philosophical acceptance of the ups and downs in an artist's work. Anticipating his response to the show, he says, "In some places I'm just going to cringe. Other places I'm going to say, 'Well, that's not bad.' And in other places I'm going to say, 'Wow, that is really good!' The question may be why I didn't have just those last paintings in the show, even if it's only six. But this is an institu-

tional situation. And you can't do those all the time."

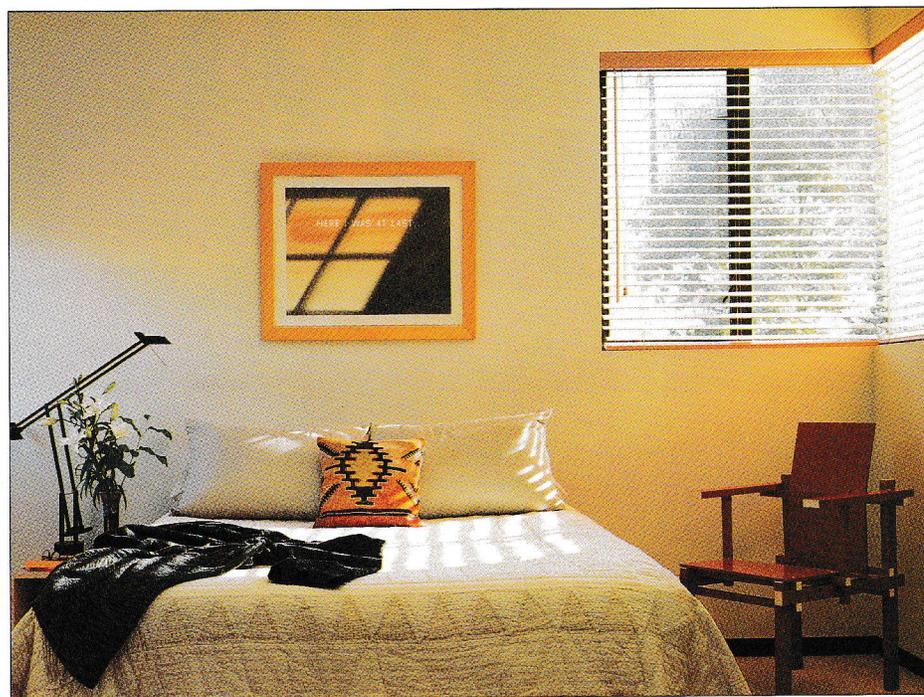
In appearance, at least, Moses seems the quintessential abstract painter. His hair has turned gray; his face is etched with evidence of hard-won experience. A high school dropout who found discipline during a tour of duty with the navy, Moses was a cab driver and a lifeguard and worked on a sardine boat and as a technical draftsman before graduating from UCLA with his bachelor's and master's degrees in fine art in 1956.

He hails from a group of painters who showed with Los Angeles's Ferus Gallery from 1957 to 1966. Although he was influenced by the Abstract Expres-



FAR LEFT: A John Miller painting is above a table by George Nelson in Moses' "book room." The chairs are by Eero Saarinen. At right are a Scot Heywood painting and John Chamberlain's sculpted steel *Untitled*. LEFT: A Robert Graham bronze is offset by dried leaves, one of the small still lifes that Moses likes to arrange around the house.

BELOW: *Here I was at Last*, an Edward Ruscha watercolor, is displayed in the upstairs master bedroom, which is part of the new addition. "I call it the tower room," says Moses. "When you're off the ground you can let all the spirits out—evil and otherwise." The chair is by Gerrit Rietveld.



sionists and their belief in the holistic and total integration of art and life, his work, grounded as it is in jazz, Beat poetry and Buddhism, reveals a decisively West Coast flair. A practicing Tibetan Buddhist since 1971, Moses has spent decades pursuing a spontaneous approach to laying paint on canvas, hoping to tap into what he calls its "transformative power" so that other viewers, too, will go, "Wow."

As art critic and poet John Yau, guest curator of the MOCA show, writes in the catalogue, "Moses extended [Jackson] Pollock's declaration, 'I am nature,' to include culture and its collision with nature. The painting spreads and seeps, the structures can be

firm and solid or ghostly with ragged edges. Splatters and swirls appear and disappear from view. Order and entropy mesh seamlessly together."

Moses' commitment to an all-encompassing aesthetic is evident in his Venice house and studio, on a modest street twelve blocks from the beach. Behind a hedge and a wood door is an old bungalow that has been subject to Moses' "transformations." A shady lawn is dotted by a walkway of large flagstones leading past a makeshift office to a wood deck and the entrance to the house. The studio, designed by architect Steven Ehrlich with Moses' input, takes up the side yard.

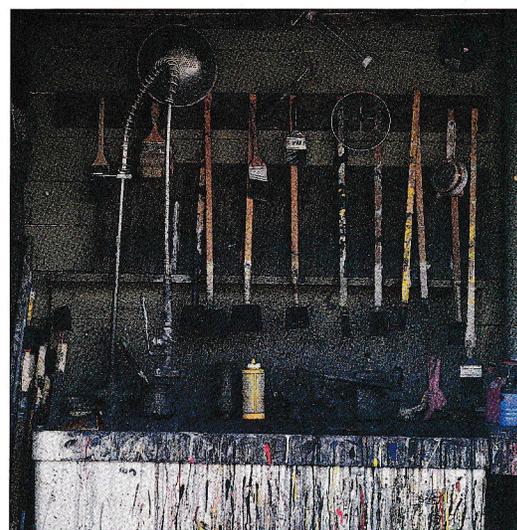


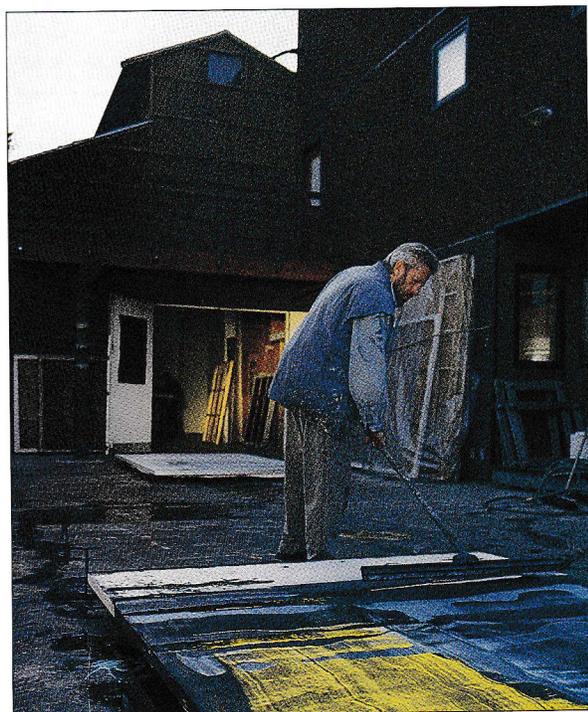
ABOVE: Moses' *India*, a 1995 acrylic and shellac on canvas, hangs in the studio, which Moses uses mainly for showing one piece at a time. Architect Steven Ehrlich, who designed the building with Moses, says, "It was meant to be very simple, very minimal."

BELOW: The implements of Moses' work fill the paint locker, which he describes as "my outside palette." He paints outdoors, on a 23-by-65-foot concrete slab that he laid alongside the studio. At the end of the day he brings his canvases into the studio for viewing.

The harmonies of the buildings and landscaping are vaguely Japanese in feeling. Not surprisingly, given his penchant for spontaneity, Moses says, "There was no planning. The house and its planting came about because I moved in and said, 'I don't want to deal with all the dirt, so why don't we put a deck here?' I always liked the idea of being able to eat outside, though I do it very little."

The yard is lushly planted with bamboo and native California trees. Moses asked garden designer and artist Barry Campion to re-create the feeling of the old TV series *Hawaii Five-O*. "Growing up I spent time in Hawaii," he recalls, "and I wanted that look. But she wanted environmentally responsible plants that water themselves. So little by little it shifted." The yard now appears a happy mixture of the two creative minds.





ABOVE: What Moses calls “*Hawaii Five-O* planting” surrounds the studio, which was inspired, he says, by “the idea of a Pennsylvania barn.” LEFT: Moses works on canvases that are stretched onto panels and placed on skateboards so they can be moved for easy access.

Moses gutted the bungalow and divided it into a kitchen and living area, a bedroom and a bath. Working with Ned Evans, a designer and artist who is also *Campion’s* husband, he later added a sitting room, a library and an upper-level master bedroom and sun deck. These design decisions were all driven by the budget. The floors are plywood or cork. The exteriors of all buildings are sheathed in what Moses calls “the cheapest available sawn plywood.” The house and the studio are stained in olive paint. But the paint store had run out of that color when Moses built the addition, so he stained it in tones of sienna and clay. The muted surfaces complement and unify the individual buildings.

“I love great architecture,” says Moses. “I always wanted a Greene and Greene house, but I knew that

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it was already a closed statement. I want a house that isn't a statement, just a place where I live. It doesn't have to have any particular feeling because I always have a bunch of stuff thrown around."

Considering the chaotic and convulsive nature of Moses' painting, the interior of his house is surprisingly ordered and spare. Japanese *tansu* chests share space with thrift-store pieces, like the steel bureaus in the main room that the artist stripped of their old paint. "I think the interior is addressed to things that I like," he says. "I used to collect Stickley furniture because we could get it at the Salvation Army for ten or fifteen dollars. I always liked the style because it looked so fundamental and clean. It wasn't all ornamented up. It looked modern, though it predates Loos and Wright and all those guys. Now it's expensive, but I'm all decorated up. It's embarrassing."

The interior of the house is painted a warm cream. Skylights provide the indirect illumination that Moses favors. The main room, largely filled by a pool table, is separated from the sitting room by a wall painted the color of gray clay and a nineteenth-century carved portal from Kenya.

Throughout the house are works by Moses' friends: Ed Ruscha, Ken Price, Billy Al Bengston, Tony Berlant, Vija Celmins, James Hayward and Scot Heywood. In the living room and library are the artist's own small drawings from the early 1950s, which he put up in preparation for the retrospective. A drawing of a courtyard apartment where he once lived will most likely hang at the entrance to the MOCA show. Like the other early works, it is notable for its meticulous realism and its debt to the Italian still-life painter Giorgio Morandi. "I was into structuring and locking things then," he explains. Lowering his voice, he adds in mock seriousness, "Because I was afraid of sliding off the face of the earth."

Like many artists, Moses benefited from the resurgence of interest in

painting in the 1980s. Sales were solid, prices were up, and he decided that he needed a proper studio. He took a drawing of a barn scribbled on the back of an envelope to Steven Ehrlich. The result is a double-height structure with a gabled roof, knotty-pine rafters and clerestory windows that can be blocked out to control the light. By the time it was completed, Moses had already begun working outdoors. "I thought then that the studio was a big mistake, that I really didn't need it, since I paint outside. But it ended up that I needed it." Although the studio now houses many of his paintings in storage racks and his drawings in drawers and bins, it serves primarily as a space where Moses can assess his work.

On the concrete slab outside the studio, blank canvases stretched on mahogany panels are laid out horizontally, awaiting paint. "In 1983 I started to use these squeegee things that I got at Allen Janitorial in Santa Monica," he says. "I pour the paint on and take the squeegee and level it off so it looks stamped and marked. It's a sort of primal gesture—and a search. When it lights up, I know it's finished. The question is how to hang with that place where it just opens up. You can't get artistic or go back and use brushes. That's cheating."

Moses' first exposure to modern art was in the mid-1940s, when the heroic struggle of Abstract Expressionism was omnipresent. A photograph of Jackson Pollock hangs next to the sink in his kitchen. "Pollock is absolutely the guy who broke the spine of all that painting with a brush," says Moses. Yet, when citing artists who he believes capture the transformative essence in their art, Moses most frequently brings up Renaissance painters such as Piero della Francesca, Giotto and Cimabue. "When those people's paintings activate you in a physical way, it's like perfume—it takes over your mind. That's the sensation I'm looking for in my studio, and every once in a while that special feeling might occur." □

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ers to level the floor. When they got through there was so much dust, it was the first time that anybody had seen snow in Bangkok. We used shovels to dump it out."

The main residence, containing Pierce's dining room, bedroom and study, in addition to his living room, is the most formal building in the compound. But it is counterbalanced on the other side of the garden by the rambling plantation-style house.

Evocative of a New Orleans riverfront home, the "beige house," as he sometimes calls it, was originally located in central Bangkok across from the British Embassy and the American ambassador's residence. It is typical of the upscale houses that were built at a time when Thailand had just opened itself up to Western influences.

When Pierce purchased the structure, many of the interior walls were damaged. Beyond that, transporting it across the city turned out to be a nightmare. "We discovered that in Bangkok you can only run trucks between midnight and five A.M., which meant that we were keeping some pretty odd hours," Pierce says.

Able to salvage only about a third of the wood, he reconfigured the seven-room structure, eliminating the interior walls on the second floor to create a single loftlike space—"like a ballroom," he says. He stripped the paint and restored the teak to its natural condition. In the dramatic staircase tower, he added a decorative ceiling that once belonged to a Burmese temple. The building is elevated to avoid flooding, designed for cross ventilation and fitted with intricate filigree over dozens of top-hinged shuttered windows that one could easily imagine in the American South.

The major difference is that there is no veranda. But that certainly has not stopped Pierce from outdoor entertaining. "When I throw big parties, we have drinks in the beige house and dinner outside," he says. "It feels great, like we're putting on the dog." □