

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Off Camera, Hopper Wielded His Own Lens

Julie L. Belcove



Marin Hopper, daughter of Dennis Hopper, who took thousands of photos in the 1960s

DENNIS HOPPER made the black-and-white photograph in 1966: Claes Oldenburg, in blazer and skinny tie, standing tall among slices of white wedding cake laid out on the grass. The story the picture does not tell is that the two men were at a wedding whose guest list was the cream of the Los Angeles art scene, and that the slices were of inedible plaster, Pop objects made by Mr. Oldenburg as party favors. Hopper snapped the shot, then made off with 16 slices — enough to reconstruct a full cake, his first wife, Brooke Hayward, recalled in an interview.

“I remember Claes was very impressed,” she said.

Most of the other guests, she said, were too drunk to notice, but the artist George Herms spotted Hopper with a box. “I stopped him to see what he had,” Mr. Herms remembered. “I did not have even one slice, so I reached in and grabbed one. Dennis, in that voice of his, got hot at me. ‘Man, now I don’t have a complete cake.’ ”

Hopper, the actor and filmmaker, was insatiable when it came to art, whether collecting it or making it. Marin Hopper, the eldest of his four children, called his Nikon his extra appendage.

“He never took it off,” she said on a recent morning at the Bowery Hotel, where she was staying while visiting New York from her home in Los Angeles. “My brother Willie Thomas drew picture after picture of my father with his head as a camera.”

Hopper snapped roughly 18,000 black-and-white photos in the 1960s, and more than 400 were featured in a solo exhibition at the Fort Worth Art Center Museum in 1970. He often spoke of the show, but Ms. Hopper never knew what had become of the pictures until his death, in 2010. Looking through a closet that also held Christmas ornaments in his California compound, she came upon several sealed boxes. Pristinely wrapped inside were the photographs.

The Fort Worth show was recreated in Berlin last fall, and now the photos will be on display and for sale in “Dennis Hopper: The Lost Album,” opening on Tuesday at Gagolian Gallery on the Upper East Side. Some prints from the same period are also on view at the Museo Picasso Málaga, in Spain, where a Hopper survey of everything from paintings to film clips opened on Monday.

The rediscovered cache is both a time capsule of the era and an intimate personal diary: Marin on a jungle gym; the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and civil rights marches; the interior of Hopper’s house; Hell’s Angels and hippies; his artist pals Robert Rauschenberg and Ed Ruscha; and President Kennedy’s funeral on TV. There’s his good friend Jane Fonda on her wedding day in a Las Vegas hotel room, cigarette and bouquet in hand, one leg coquettishly resting on the knee of her groom, Roger Vadim. There’s Hopper’s buddy Paul Newman squinting in the sun, the shadow of a volleyball net casting a grid over his smooth, shirtless skin.

“They are marvelous photographs,” said Jeffrey Deitch, the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, which mounted a Hopper show in 2010. “It’s very rare that a talented photographer has this kind of access to the center of what is going on in our culture.”

For the most part, though, Hopper just thought of it as shooting his daily life, Ms. Hayward said, and his friends shared that view. “They were always relaxed because he did not pose them,” she said.

Case in point: a madcap shot of Irving Blum, co-owner of Ferus Gallery, nuzzling the supermodel Peggy Moffitt’s neck in the back seat of a car. “On one of the hottest days in New York, we were going up to visit Jasper Johns and have lunch with him,” Ms. Moffitt recalled in a phone interview. “It was a day where your heels stuck in the asphalt. Dennis, with his camera, was sitting by the cabdriver. He turned around, and we just did something campy.”

Hopper was also able to catch a bikini-clad Ms. Fonda practicing archery in the Malibu sand and Andy Warhol gazing at himself in a mirror at the Factory. Hopper had taken a chance on Warhol at Warhol’s debut West Coast solo exhibition, in 1962 at Ferus Gallery, the nexus of the Los Angeles art scene.

“The day our daughter, Marin, was born, Dennis came to the hospital and said, ‘Guess what, I just bought a painting of a Campbell’s Soup can,’ ” Ms. Hayward recalled. “I think he paid \$100. There were only maybe two paintings sold, so Irving decided to keep them all. He made Dennis give it back.”

About a year later Hopper snagged another “Soup Can”; he and Ms. Hayward gave a party for Warhol; and a friendship was forged.

It was Ms. Hayward who bought Hopper the Nikon in 1961 while they were dating. She could tell Hopper had a great eye. “He’d say, ‘Look at this,’ and hold his hands in a square,” she said. “I’d look through his hands and see it was indeed a good picture.”

Over the next several years, with Hopper’s difficult temperament stalling his acting career, making paintings, sculpture and photographs “kept him thinking and alive,” said Ms. Hopper, who bears a striking resemblance to her father. “He was taking pictures as his outlet creatively, and he wanted to document the world around him that he was so enamored of.”

Discovering the new enthralled him. His dreary childhood in the flatlands of Kansas had instilled in him a “let’s go” attitude, Ms. Hopper said, reflected in the many pictures of Happenings, love-ins and Tijuana bullfights, and he moved easily between Hollywood and the art world, hanging out at Ferus.

“We would get loaded and have a lot of laughs,” Mr. Herms said via e-mail. Hopper would drive out to Mr. Herms’s remote house at the end of a two-mile dirt road in the hills above Malibu and photograph him there. “It was idyllic,” Mr. Herms said. “Years later, the kiva scene in ‘Easy Rider’ was shot in the same hills.”

As Hopper started thinking about “Easy Rider,” an instant counterculture touchstone when it was released in 1969, he turned his lens on biker gangs. “The Hell’s Angels used to spend nights in our house,” Ms. Hayward said, adding that when she found them there in the mornings, “they were perfectly polite.”

But as the decade wore on, their marriage unraveled — as would his subsequent four. Devastated and in a downward spiral of substance abuse, Hopper put down his Nikon and abandoned Los Angeles for Taos, N.M. (Photos he made in Taos with an Instamatic and developed at a drugstore will be on view in a separate room at Gagosian.)

Ms. Hopper said that despite his being lionized for his roles in films like “Apocalypse Now” and “Hoosiers,” her father “very much wanted to be remembered as a serious photographer.”

“It was,” she said, “all he spoke about the year before he died.”

“Dennis Hopper: The Lost Album” opens Tuesday and runs through June 22 at Gagosian Gallery, 980 Madison Avenue, near 77th Street; (212) 744-2313, gagosian.com.