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Formally Perfect and Utterly Fleeting: Dennis Hopper Photographs at the Royal Academy

Martin Gayford



Dennis Hopper's "Irving Blum and Peggy Moffitt" (1964) (© Dennis Hopper, courtesy of The Hopper Art Trust / www.dennishopper.com)

LONDON — “I didn’t read a lot,” Dennis Hopper (1936-2010) once confessed, “but the idea of the decisive moment, catching something at a given moment, was very interesting to me.” Consequently, an unexpected presence presides over “The Lost Album,” an exhibition of Hopper photographs at the Royal Academy, London (through October 19). As you walk around, you keep being reminded of Henri Cartier-Bresson. The great Frenchman was obviously Hopper’s principle influence when he picked up a camera.

Hopper’s best images are at once formally perfect and utterly fleeting. Take his picture of Ed Ruscha — his friend and fellow artist — in 1964, for example. Ruscha, looking almost ridiculously handsome in the James Dean manner, is standing on the street in Los Angeles. Behind him is a window through which a neon sign reads “TV Radio Services.” Mirrored in the glass of the window are the road and the buildings on the other side of the street.

So there, in one shot, are Ruscha’s preoccupations as an artist: lettering, commercial imagery, the LA scene, plus Ruscha himself, the acute observer. And it all works because at that instant, the tilt of Ruscha’s head precisely echoes the diagonal of the V in TV. This is a shot that encapsulates a person and an ambience as perfectly as, say, Cartier-Bresson’s famous picture of Jean-Paul Sartre smoking his pipe on a misty bridge over the Seine in 1951.

In a way, Cartier-Bresson and Hopper were a good match. Cartier-Bresson — whose credo was summed up in the words “decisive moment” — believed in a sort of existential photography. “It’s a joy,” he once explained to me in an interview. “It’s an orgasm. You guess and you’re

sure.” The photographer would stalk his prey like a hunter, and when it came into view, in a fraction of a second — that moment of decision — click the shutter. And that was that. Always use black and white; afterwards, no cropping, no retouching. Those were the Cartier-Bresson rules.

It was a hipster’s credo. And Hopper surely was a hipster — in the characters he portrayed as an actor in “Easy Rider,” for instance, or Wim Wender’s “The American Friend,” and also in life. “I’m really from jazz,” Hopper said. “I’m from Abstract Expressionism and jazz.” That is, making formal beauty from improvisation, living in the moment.

Hopper’s photographs came from a circumscribed period in time. The exhibition covers the years from 1961 to 1967, when Hopper was between 25 and 31 years old. “They were the only creative outlet I had for these years until ‘Easy Rider,’” he said, referring to his debut as a director and breakthrough as a star. “I never carried a camera again.”

The pictures are full of that time and place: Flower Power, Hell’s Angels, Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement, the feeling of living in Los Angeles then, and — perhaps best of all — the arts scene of the ’60s.

Generally speaking, of course, there is nothing worse than a movie star who wants to be an artist, except perhaps a rock star who paints. But Hopper was different. He said that it was a myth that he was an artist before he became an actor. “I did it all simultaneously.”

There are perhaps a dozen truly memorable images in this show; several of artists: Robert Rauschenberg sticking his tongue outrageously out, James Rosenquist — master of bill-board-derived Pop Art — standing in front of a giant poster of a woman’s head, wearing shades and looking remarkably like Jack Nicholson.

Marvellous too are several photographs of LA streets. “Double Standard,” 1961, is a view of a gas station at a junction, seen through a car windshield with two roads diverting towards infinity and the route behind in the rear-view mirror. Even Ruscha has done nothing that better sums this city of unending cars and streets.

Also remarkable are the visual records of Hopper’s own house, 1712 North Crescent Heights Boulevard, in the hills above Sunset Strip. It obviously contained a series of quintessentially ’60s interiors, including works by Lichtenstein, Warhol, and co., along with Tiffany lamps, circus posters, a giant Coca Cola bottle, and — on one occasion — Ike and Tina Turner performing in person at the piano.

Even so, as an exhibition this is at once too large and too little. There are too many exhibits, each individually small in scale, strung out along the walls of the huge, grand, and slightly god-forsaken rooms of the Royal Academy galleries at 6 Burlington Gardens. A tighter selection in a more intimate space would have made for a much stronger display. Nonetheless, this is enough to show that Hopper was the exception: a movie star who really was a gifted visual artist.