

ED MOSES: GREEN/BRONZE

CHARLOTTE JACKSON FINE ART
554 SOUTH GUADALUPE STREET, SANTA FE

ED MOSES IS A HARD GUY TO WRITE SOMETHING NEWLY PROFOUND ABOUT

because so much has been said about him already. Without adding to the blather, I present the following précis of Moses for your edification:

- 1) He's the most famous artist in Los Angeles you may never have heard of.
- 2) He is a serious and prolific painter.
- 3) His paintings, often flat and highly abstracted, do not reflect emotional states—they are the results of his practice of Buddhism within the phenomenal world, a world he readily admits terrifies him.
- 4) He detests being called an artist, insisting that he does not impose his will upon the making of the object but directs it, a skilled factory worker on the line.

For a frightened Buddhist, this guy's having a hell of a lot of fun. And why shouldn't he? He's made it, after all, into his late eighties and gained a healthy amount of recognition as a painter's painter in the doing.

Although he's yet to attain the fame of an Ed Ruscha, Moses has been a key figure in Southern California's modern art history from the mid-twentieth-century to today. Having emerged, in the late 1950s, from the "Cool School" of Ferus Gallery, Moses kept company with Larry Bell, Wallace Berman, Frank Gehry, Dennis Hopper, Robert

Irwin, and Ruscha, among numerous equally prominent names. Despite his art-world renown—or maybe because he dotes on the attention—Moses remains an approachable, everyday kind of guy whose anecdotes are an art unto themselves. Although those tales are not necessary to "getting" his work, they add the right note of hilarity to the oeuvre of an artist who could, if he were so inclined, take himself far too seriously.

Moses strung a necklace of narratives back-to-back with his personal take on art theory one afternoon in late August during a dialogue with Rani Singh at Charlotte Jackson's gallery. Singh, senior research associate in the Department of Contemporary Programs at the Getty Research Institute, was one of the curators of the globally respected *Pacific Standard Time: Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture*, a broad-spectrum initiative of exhibitions that took place throughout South Cali in 2011, and just about single-handedly convinced the New York art crowd that they had to pay attention to the West Coast's post-War art history. If not for the likes of Moses, that would certainly not be the case, and we'd probably still be awash in Abstract Expressionism. No Finish Fetish, no clay, no light, no latex, no fun. Yes, this is hyperbolic, but you get the point.

A young Moses lived in New York for a year beginning in 1957, where his neighbors included Agnes Martin and Ellsworth

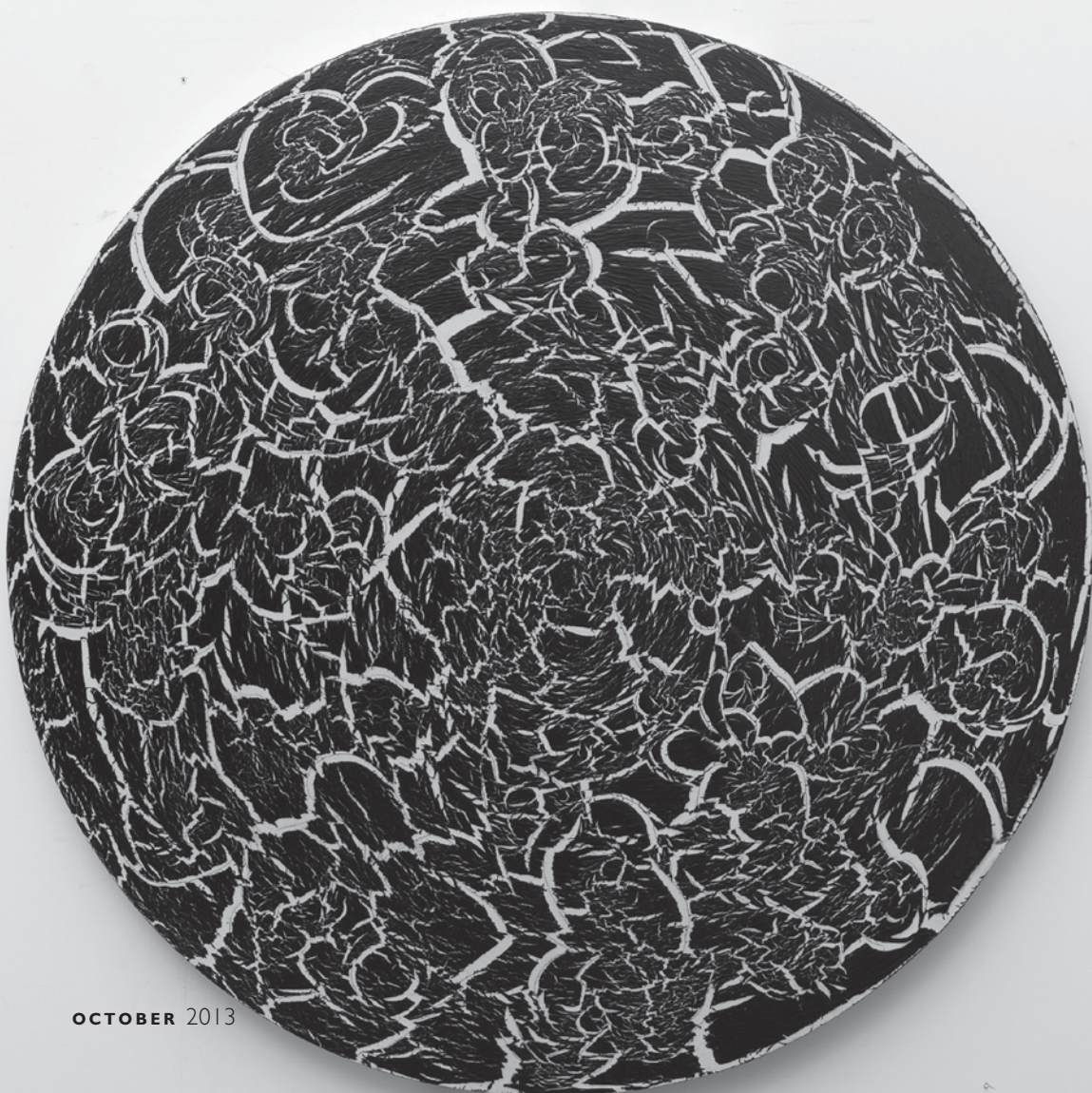
Kelly. By then, he was already a seasoned artist, having shown with the inimitable Walter Hopps at Ferus Gallery. In Manhattan, Moses hung around the Cedar Tavern, and got to know Ad Reinhardt, Franz Kline, and Mark Rothko.

By this time, Moses had moved into the arena that would come to be his unfailing *modus operandi* as a painter: art as a process underpinned onto a purely non-objective surface. He is the laborer, working outdoors daily at his Venice studio. He allows the work to direct him, maintaining that "One thing leads to another. They mutate.... I don't change my mind; I respond.... I don't express myself." Rather, he sets himself an art problem and proceeds to follow his curiosity through the process he has chosen. If something makes noises at him from a corner of the studio, he takes note, but continues working on the task at hand. If "it barks enough times, then I say, 'Ok, let's see what it is you are barking about.' There is the shift." Many of his paintings are what he calls "losers," because he is willing to take the risk to discover what might happen when he adds glitter, or in the case of this exhibition, his "secret sauce."

The most recent body of work, *Green/Bronze*, on exhibition at Charlotte Jackson Fine Art, comprised a series of "crackle" paintings. Moses's tale of how they came about is as free-flowing as any of his yarns. The way he tells it, he was getting into looking at and experimenting with van Gogh's paintings. While investigating the late-nineteenth-century post-Impressionist, Moses noted what art historians call *craquelure*, wherein the medium and/or pigments begin to crack apart with age. Having been to Jack-in-the-Box many times with his kids, Moses was familiar with their glue-like secret sauce. He came up with his own concoction (hold the pickles?) and, in a three-part process, began making crackle paintings. First, a layer of pigment goes down onto the prepared canvas. Next, secret sauce is slathered on and left to dry to tautness. Moses helps the crackling process along with a few punches and, one is tempted to guess, karate kicks. Finally, the third layer, a new pigment, is applied and left to dry. The results are surprisingly tender, linking the delicacy of drawings with the organic and solid authenticity of thousand-year-old tree trunks. When Singh brought up that the crackle paintings reveal both chance and control, Moses was quick to assert that he "never wants to be in control." He prefers what he calls "being in tune." How does he know which paintings are winners and which losers? "Great paintings have a presence," he said, launching into a story about visiting the Tate in London and hearing the de Koonings and Rothkos growl at him like mighty lions.

After answering a few questions from the audience, and generally haranguing them, Moses closed the dialogue with "Hasn't this been fun? I've had the best time." And with that, we all put our shoes and socks back on, having sat zazen with one of Buddha's beloved jesters.

—KATHRYN M DAVIS



Ed Moses, *B/W*, mixed media on canvas, 48" diameter, 2013