



THE RADAR | ART

ART AND INFLUENCE The late Dennis Hopper photographed in 2006 at Ace Gallery in front of his billboard, Tom Paster (*Girl*), 2000.

The Rogue Warrior

On the eve of MOCA's Dennis Hopper retrospective, author Jessica Hundley shares revealing tales from the actor/artist's last in-depth interview

with Hopper, both interviewing him at his Gehry-designed Venice Beach home and digging through an enormous catalogue of his original photographic work, a staggering document of his life and his circle. It was a thrilling gig. Hopper, who died May 29 at the age of 74, possessed all the flair and swagger one might expect—but he was also charming, gentlemanly and incredibly humble about his own legacy. The result of these efforts was *Dennis Hopper: Photographs 1961-1967*, a collection of images from Taschen which will be no small part of MOCA's new exhibit, *Dennis Hopper Double Standard*, opening this month. Along with screenings of his films, there will be a massive display of Hopper's original paintings, assemblages, sculptures and photos, curated by his friend Julian Schnabel.

What follows are some vivid snapshots, sharp witticisms and sly asides—as told by Hopper himself—of his erratic, artistic and utterly unique life. —*Jessica Hundley*

Dennis Hopper had nine lives or more—in an industry that rarely grants one—from fresh-faced, James Dean protégé to Hollywood art-scene intellect, then on to bearded bearer of the '60s freak flag, spurned '70s expat outcast, and finally, the resurrected iconoclast.

For the last two years of his life, I was lucky enough to work

L.A. was always an inspiration, but not in the classic way.

There was something fascinating in the pavement, the palm trees. I was always interested in broken glass, graffiti—this urban decomposition that is all around in a city. These were the kind of images I was always trying to capture: Pop imagery that was everywhere along the streets, along the roads and freeways. I was totally intrigued by billboards, by signage, by the ways these images became abstracted with weather and time.

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MOVING PICTURES
Clockwise from left: Dennis Hopper, who had a small part in *Cool Hand Luke*, snapped Paul Newman on the set in 1964; *Double Standard*, 1961—Hopper's most famous photograph—was taken at the intersection of Doheny Drive, Santa Monica Boulevard and Melrose Avenue; Hopper recalled taking the photo *Fragmented Woman*, 1964, "at a billboard factory that I would visit all the time. I would bring artists there—wander around endlessly. I was obsessed with billboards"; Hopper's 1997 *ifachrome-on-metal work, Florence* (Yellow with silver spray paint).



in one hand. I thought that that was going to save me. I thought that World War III had started and I was going to walk down to the end of South America, raise an army, and come back. When they found me they put me on a plane and we landed in Los Angeles. I was taken straight to the Century City lockup. Then rehab. I had been living in Taos at the time. When I was still in rehab, the doctor suggested I leave Taos and come back to reality. I said, "Reality? In L.A.?"

...CONTINUED **I had met Andy [Warhol] in 1962, before he ever had a show in L.A.** I walked into the Ferus Gallery one day and [the owner] Irving Blum said, "I want to show you something." He showed me a cartoon by Roy Lichtenstein and a *Soup Can* by Warhol. Then he went out and showed me Jasper Johns' bronzed light bulb. I flipped out and started jumping up and down, saying, "That's it!" He said "What's it?" And I said, "That's the return to reality."

I got [one of Warhol's *Soup Can* screenprints] for \$75. I lost all of these things in my first divorce [from Brooke Hayward], a lot of my original collection. I remember being in Paris and picking up the *International Herald-Tribune*, and there was a big picture of *Sinking Sun* by Lichtenstein, which I had owned and paid \$780 for. It had sold for [\$15.69 million] at Sotheby's. The Warhol was sold for much more than that.

James Dean said I should get a camera and start practicing being a director. I was exploring

the art scene in L.A. at the time as well. It was a strange moment for contemporary art. Even Man Ray was sold in the back room of an exhibit in Los Angeles at this period of time. This is also when we had a Jackson Pollock at the L.A. County museum in 1963 and the Board of Trustees refused to hang it... because they thought it was Communist propaganda.

I got into a lot of trouble when I was young, from making two films with James Dean, watching him work and then him dying and thinking I could turn down work. There was a big difference: he was a star and I wasn't. So I got in a lot of trouble and was essentially banned from Hollywood. It wasn't exactly like they had to pass a hat around to figure out if they wanted to blackball Dennis Hopper. So anyway, I went back and studied with Strasberg, because I couldn't

work in film or get a job in film anymore. And I painted and I made assemblages and I took photographs.

[For my performance piece, *The Russian Suicide Chair*], it was a trick I had seen in a rodeo show as a kid. Basically, you put yourself inside a circle of dynamite, it goes off, and creates a vacuum, and if you're inside, nothing happens. It's like the eye of the storm. But if three of the sticks fail to go off, it doesn't work and you get blown to pieces. Luckily that didn't happen.

I was making a movie in Mexico [1979's *Las Flores del Vicio*]. I decided that I would escape in the middle of the night, when the guys that were watching me were asleep. I slipped out naked. For some reason I thought that if I was naked they wouldn't kill me. So I slipped out of this hotel into the jungle and when it became light I was walking down the highway and I had a rock

Nobody wanted to hire me in the early '80s, which was understandable. Not a lot of people thought sobriety would stick. But it did. What gave people faith was probably *Blue Velvet*, which is ironic of course, because I was playing a maniac. I knew exactly the kind of guy Frank was. His drug intake is a vital thing because he's warped out on a whole variety of pharmaceuticals. I remember I called David Lynch and I said, "I can not only play Frank, I AM Frank." I think that freaked him out, but he gave me the part. [And] I finally got an Oscar nomination with *Hoosiers*, which was also ironic because I was an ex-drunk playing a drunk.

Most actors only get one chance and I've had quite a few. I've been in some great films and some not-so-great films but I think I can say I gave my all to all of them. I've been pretty good about sticking with the idea I had when I was 18, of really living a cultural, artistic life. There's been ups and downs, but like I said, I've been pretty lucky. ☑



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