

# Dennis Hopper, easy artist

Actor dedicated himself to collecting, collaborating and creating

By Jessica Hundley

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It was a year ago, late on a June Venice, Calif., afternoon, when I last sat down with Dennis Hopper. We had been working for more than 18 months on a publication of his photographs for Taschen Books. It was our last meeting before the book went to print and he was reading, with a mix of curiosity and bemusement, a biography I had written for the publication.

Dennis, thankfully, had a sense of humor — particularly about himself. His

only comment to me concerning the bio was, “Do you really think anyone will want to read about me?” to which my answer was a definitive “yes.”



Hopper

Dennis was as crazy and as colorful a character as any he portrayed on screen, and his own life — a rich, fertile and freethinking adventure — was his greatest role.

Throughout the countless meetings and extensive interviews over nearly two years of creating the Taschen book, Hopper was full of wit, intelligence and colorful reminiscences, and had a surprisingly sharp recollection of his past.

Hopper had gotten sober at age 50, but the prior years of experimentation and self-abuse had affected neither his memory nor his attitude. Hopper loved art,

music and life with a gusto that had grown over the years rather than waned. He told me he was well aware of his good fortune — and made sure to use his circumstances to live as fully and passionately as he could.

“I’ve always tried to lead a sensual life,” he said, “to take risks and be ballsy and continue to be curious about the world around me.” Hopper’s charisma is not easy to define. For some, he was the hell-raising bearded weirdo who summarily dismissed the ’60s dream while simultaneously embodying it. He was an Easy Rider and an Apocalyptic lunatic. He was a charlatan, a charmer, a warped genius. But he was also the gentleman badass — an aging American Dreamer who found a ninth life as a gray-haired outlaw of the movies.

Perhaps his most surprising persona was Hopper as dedicated visual artist, passionate and curious about the world around him. Hopper was an important figure of the late 20th century art world — a creator, collaborator and avid collector who helped to form the foundation of the pop art movement.

This is the Hopper who is being celebrated in a career retrospective at Los Angeles’ Museum of Contemporary Art, the first full-scale exhibition under the leadership of the museum’s new director, Jeffrey Deitch. Hopper helped plan the show before he died of complications from prostate cancer May 29.

Deitch, an influential New York gallerist and dealer before his MOCA appointment, has faced

some criticism for the Hopper show — snide asides that he’s pandering to the Hollywood elite by glorifying one of their own. But he and the show’s guest curator, artist (and longtime Hopper pal) Julian Schnabel, are confident these rumblings will be silenced by the show itself.

“Dennis is just a seminal figure in the artists’ landscape, particularly in Los Angeles since pop art’s inception,” says Schnabel.

His 1960s photography, which I documented, is a testament not only to a sharp and thoughtful eye but to a man who lived through one of the most vital eras in American history. Intimate images of Warhol, impossibly young and unguarded, appear alongside those of Kennedy’s funeral and the civil rights march on Selma, Ala. Hopper documented Phippen of the Grateful Dead with the same tenderness and respect as his images of Martin Luther King Jr.

“It was pretty obvious there was something going on that should be captured and remembered,” Hopper told me. “I knew these people and these moments would have some value histori-



ROBYN BECK/GETTY-AFP PHOTO  
Museumgoers look at a portrait of Andy Warhol.

cally, that they deserved to be documented, so I just carried my camera with me everywhere I went. I took images of what was around me and was lucky enough to have some incredible things happen and some incredible people in front of my lens."

Hopper was experimenting with abstract art photography, assemblages and traditional painting techniques. Then there are the films he directed —

among them "Easy Rider," "The Last Movie" and the little-known "Out of the Blue."

Hopper, even in his darkest moments, was continually creating. And collecting.

Over his lifetime Hopper amassed a formidable array of 20th and 21st century art, including many of Schnabel's works (such as a shattered-plate portrait of Hopper).

Despite Hopper's renown as a collector, however, Schnabel and

Deitch were adamant that the MOCA show focus on works by the actor.

"These will be powerful works the city is going to see," says Schnabel. "And it will change, I think, how many people see Dennis."

*Jessica Hundley was a contributing author to "Dennis Hopper: Photographs 1961-1967," from Taschen Books.*



ROBYN BECK/GETTY-AFP PHOTO

"Dennis (Hopper) is just a seminal figure in the artists' landscape," says artist/curator Julian Schnabel. Hopper is being celebrated in a retrospective at Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art.



COURTESY OF THE ESTATE OF DENNIS HOPPER

The exhibit focuses on Hopper's work, such as this photo he took of artist Ed Ruscha.