

“Touch” – Photographs of artists by Jim McHugh at ESMoA

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Artist David Hockney with Chloe McHugh and Jim McHugh, and Hockney's 2005 portrait of them. All Photos in this story are by Jim McHugh, unless noted.

The Big Picture

ESMoA features the artist portraits of photographer Jim McHugh

by Bondo Wyszpolski

It's a big job, massive in fact and never ending, but someone's got to do it. Someone's got to photograph the visual artists who have made Los Angeles a tier one contender for Art Capital of the World, and right now it seems the person with the mop and broom is Jim McHugh. Curated by KCRW's Edward Goldman, McHugh's work, as well as several pieces by some of the artists he's photographed, is on view through January at ESMoA in El Segundo.

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Los Angeles is McHugh's stomping ground and milieu. His tunesmith grandfather Jimmy McHugh co-wrote "I'm In the Mood For Love" and "I Can't Give You Anything But Love," among many

others, including "South American Way" made famous by Carmen Miranda. His father was a theatrical agent, representing, for example, most of the cast of "The Beverly Hillbillies." His mother, who came to L.A. from Minnesota in the 1940s, was a Hollywood-based actress, and her claim to fame, as such, was as the native princess (Athena) opposite Johnny Weissmuller in "Tarzan and the Amazons" (1945).



John Baldessari

McHugh's interest in photography goes back to his childhood. Later, while attending UCLA film school he began taking pictures for a friend who wrote for English newspapers. After that, he says, well, "It just sort of took off. I started working for *Women's Wear* and *Newsweek*," and for *People Magazine* when it was still in its infancy.

How did that happen? It was, McHugh says, "one of those Friday afternoons at 5 o'clock when they couldn't get all the other people. I had been in the office and they called me and—if you do good on that first assignment, well, there you are. If you don't, well, good-bye. I wound up working for them for 25 years.

"I've shot hundreds of covers and thousands of stories and been all over the world for them. I was also on the masthead of *Architectural Digest* for 25 years. I shot many, many covers and interiors. So I have a very deep, professional editorial magazine background."

Shooting for commercial magazines enabled McHugh to hone his technical skills, but all of these publications have photo editors and an editorial slant and, as McHugh points out, you have to wear many different hats. They may not always be the hats you'd pick for yourself, but if you're freelancing or simply don't want the next job to go to someone else, you'll put on whatever hat is called for. But when a photographer embarks on a project of their own, well, the hats are now of his or her own choosing, aren't they?



Ed Moses

LEARNING FROM OTHERS

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LEARNING FROM OTHERS

“Touch”—that’s the name of the show at ESMoA—is a cornucopia of artist portraits taken over the past 30 something years. It’s hard to highlight some without leaving out others just as highly praised, but among the dozens and dozens one finds James Turrell, Ed Ruscha, Raymond Pettibon, John Baldessari, Betye Saar, Robbie Conal, De Wain Valentine, Ed Moses, Dennis Hopper, Mike Kelley, Richard Serra, Sam Francis...

“These artist pieces began as a personal project,” McHugh says. Inspired by Arnold Newman (who photographed Stravinsky and Giacometti and other legends of an earlier generation), McHugh bought a 4×5 camera. For *People* and other magazines he’d been using a 35mm camera, ideal for the quick, spontaneous shot. But what McHugh was now interested in was the kind of subtle but powerful image one might also associate with Yousuf Karsh, whose pictures of Ernest Hemingway and Winston Churchill are very well known.

Over the years McHugh had photographed several artists, Beatrice Wood and Lita Albuquerque and so on, as well as Billy Al Bengston who, looking over the work, told him, “These are really good; you should do this, you should really focus on this.”

McHugh briefly pauses. “Billy Al Bengston changed everything.” Bengston introduced him to Jim Corcoran, owner of the prestigious James Corcoran Gallery, and McHugh was given names of artists he should go out and shoot: “(Richard) Diebenkorn and Sam Francis, very famous people who, at the time, I had no idea who they were; and Billy got me phone numbers and”—well, one artist then recommended another, and that’s how it snowballed.



Billy Al Bengston

“You could only do it if you had no idea who they were,” McHugh says with a laugh. “But I was pretty good at photographing people and moving people around because of the commercial work.”

One of the photographs for which McHugh is best known is of David Hockney. The painter Don Bachardy had brought the two together, and McHugh relates an anecdote about his first phone call to the esteemed artist:

“The thing about David is that if you ask him something, he will probably want to do it now, like *now*. But I didn’t know that at the time.” So, after getting Hockney on the line, introducing himself and saying he’d like to do a portrait photograph, this is pretty much what McHugh heard: “Fine. Why don’t you come up now.”

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as a portrait photograph, this is pretty much what McHugh heard. “Fine. Why don’t you come up now.”

Well, McHugh wasn’t prepared for *that* response, didn’t have his equipment ready or his assistant with him, and told Hockney no, let me call you back, we’ll set up another time. “And I hung up. And then I thought, Are you *crazy*? If you have to take *the gardener* with you to help you, you have to go there.”

Finding someone to go along (presumably *not* the gardener), McHugh drove up to Hockney’s residence, “and we took this picture of David, which is probably the most famous picture I have,” the one of Hockney in his pink-striped shirt.



David Hockney

But it almost didn’t happen. “It seemed like such an obvious picture, and he kept going over there and I’m, Oh, no; I was really young and I had my own ideas and everything. And then finally at the end of the day I thought, Well, okay, let’s just do this. Of course, it became this very famous picture.

“So now I listen to people. You’ll be photographing somewhere and the janitor will say, Oh, you know, there’s this great thing in the backyard... And now it’s like, Oh? *What’s* in the backyard?—because people will have a good idea.”

McHugh and Hockney have now been friends for over 30 years, and that’s how it started, but those little anecdotes also contain useful bits of wisdom for any aspiring photographer.

Shortly thereafter, McHugh was given a show at the James Corcoran Gallery and that’s a feather anyone would happily put in their cap.



Jim McHugh. Photo by Bondo Wyszpolski



Jim McHugh. Photo by Bondo Wyszpolski

THINKING ON THE RUN

Looking at the portraits on the walls of ESMoA, one notes that the pictures differ in many ways, from size and tonality to texture, and evidently many types of cameras and film were used. It appears that McHugh must have established a rapport with each artist before deciding how best to photograph them and bring out their inner sensibility.

"I'd love to say, Oh, that's true," he replies. "I think about it—but I don't think about it so much: I have a sense of where things are."

For example, he mentions how he photographed Robert Irwin, of whom he knew little, only his having been granted a MacArthur "Genius" Award.

"Because he was in this little apartment in Westwood, not in a big studio, I didn't know what to do," McHugh says. "But maybe this is where thinking on one's feet comes in. 'We hung this white sheet on the window outside and fired a light through it, and just did this headshot, this kind of glowing headshot of Bob with this white burning from behind him, like a light table burning, like that's what Light and Space art was. But we had no idea; we just did that.'"



De Wain Valentine

When you're on your own like that, McHugh says, you can wing it. Be spontaneous, intuitive. But if you're shooting for someone else and trying to guess what *they* want, "you're kind of there, but you're also going through this laundry list of 'Should I get his wife?' 'Should I get the dog to jump on the table?' all these little things. So you're not actually really there."

Doing it for oneself, thrown back on one's own inner resources, one can step away from the norm or the expected, and perhaps something unique will pop into or out of the viewfinder.

PASSING THROUGH TIME

Portrait photography may be the focus of "Touch" (which you can only do with your eyes, by the way), but Jim McHugh has also been photographing landmark buildings and other structures throughout Los Angeles.

"I like architecture a lot," he says. "I started doing that awhile ago, like 20 years ago, really because work



"I like architecture a lot," he says. "I started doing that awhile ago, like 20 years ago, really because work started slowing down and I had time on my hands."

McHugh points out that at the time people in general weren't paying much attention to the changing areas of Hollywood and downtown L.A.

Structures that should have been spared, usually weren't. He realized

long ago that his daughter, Chloe, who's now 25, was never going to see the same Los Angeles that he grew up seeing: "So I wanted to photograph the city."



Betye Saar

McHugh, naturally, photographs buildings as differently as he does people, but in another sense he photographs them the same way, bringing out their substance and character. Personally I'm drawn to his rich, color-saturated night shots of L.A. and Hollywood Hotels (The DuBarry, the Hotel Roosevelt) and theaters (the Orpheum). There's a feel to many of them that's sensuous with a kind of fin de siècle noir mixed in.

Some of these images, a small percentage since McHugh has roughly 4,000 shots of Los Angeles, have been published in book form, and also can be seen online.

"I just sort of got into this L.A. thing. I really understood the city was changing drastically."

ONE BIG VISUAL SWIRL

The genesis of "Touch" came about during one of Edward Goldman's studio visits, which he often organizes for a small group of people interested in art and in observing artists in their daily environment. He'd met McHugh through a mutual friend, and was invited to visit him at his house in Hancock Park to see his portfolio.



Curator and radio host Edward Goldman

"I went there with a group of adventurous Angelenos, who are part of my Fine Art of Art Collecting Class," Goldman says. "Jim gave us a presentation, which blew our minds. His house is jam-packed with hundreds of his photo portraits of Los Angeles artists in their studios

Fine Art of Art Collecting Class,” Goldman says. “Jim gave us a presentation, which blew our minds. His house is jam-packed with hundreds of his photo portraits of Los Angeles artists in their studios, plus dozens of original artworks by some of these artists. I remember telling him that it felt like a unique and privileged glimpse into the very essence of the Los Angeles art scene over the last few decades. Among the participants of this visit were Eva and Brian Sweeney, founders of ESMoA.

“Over the following weeks and months,” he continues, “we had a conversation about how intriguing it would be to organize an exhibition in their museum which would have a similar mixture of Jim’s photography and original artworks. We ended up with an exhibition which gives a ‘touch,’ or glimpse, of the Los Angeles art scene. It’s definitely not your traditional, academic, linear storytelling.”

Bernhard Zuenkeler soon became an active participant as well, since he’s organized (and curated) virtually all of ESMoA’s shows since day one—day one now being Jan 27, 2013.

Goldman, who appears on KCRW’s “Art Talk” each Tuesday evening, is thoroughly steeped in art both local and international, so clearly he was the best person around to be handed the curatorial reins. Zuenkeler, meanwhile, has shown time and again that when it comes to visualizing art show installations he’s a man who takes chances.



Don Bachardy

Initially, McHugh was skeptical about how Zuenkeler wanted the show to hang. “But when we were done I realized that it was just brilliant. I would never have conceived of that. And I see people come in, and they really like it.”

What Zuenkeler and Goldman have created is a show that travels around the room like a wave, weaving in images small and large, and essentially giving them equal weight. In some ways it retains the feel of an artist’s studio, with images pinned up here and there, almost haphazardly. Even so, “Touch” was a year in

the making, and there were many more images that could have been included. And then, of course, there’s the added bonus of adding numerous pieces by the artists themselves, including Alison Saar’s “En



then, of course, there's the added bonus of adding numerous pieces by the artists themselves, including Alison Saar's "En Pointe" and Hockney's double portrait of McHugh and his daughter, painted in 2005.

"I don't think anybody's ever done this sort of photography-artwork (mix) before,"

McHugh says, and it's evident, as we crisscross the gallery, that he's immensely pleased with how it all turned out. As well he should be, because it's a smart exhibition, and one that seems to dance before our very eyes.



Sam Francis

TOUCH is on view through January 31 at ESMoA, 208 Main Street, El Segundo. General opening hours, Friday to Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. (424) 277-1020 or go to esmoa.org. **ER**