

DENNIS HOPPER

ICONS OF THE SIXTIES

PARIS PANTIN

21 Oct 2015 - 27 Feb 2016



OPENING: WEDNESDAY, 21 OCTOBER 2015, 7PM-9PM

Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac Paris Pantin is delighted to present Dennis Hopper's exhibition *Icons of the Sixties*, a selection of photographs and personal objects alongside an emblematic sculpture as well as an installation composed of two canvases and an experimental film.

The multitalented actor, director, photographer and painter Dennis Hopper (1936 – 2010) was known as an icon of the New Hollywood and of the artistic underground in California. In his early age he started as an actor alongside James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), working within the traditional Hollywood studio system, yet he felt driven to other artistic fields. Dean advised him to pick up a photo camera to investigate new creative territories. At this time Hopper painted a lot, "influenced by abstract expressionism and jazz" as he said, but after a fire devastated his house in Bel Air in 1961 and destroyed almost all his paintings, he stopped painting and turned more and more to photography. In the following years he always walked around with a camera, as a chronicler of his time, eager to capture the cultural and social seism that hit the American way of life specifically on the West coast – with its revolutionary wave of beat, pop and art.

At the centre of the exhibition in Paris Pantin we present a selection of hand-signed vintage photographic prints by Dennis Hopper where he experimented with an irregular black frame produced by the photo-emulsion. These black and white photographs were taken between 1962 and 1967 and shot only with natural light. "I had been taking photographs because I hoped to be able to direct movies. That's why I never cropped any of the photographs; they are all full frame." (Dennis Hopper)

The photographs in the exhibition reflect a condensed range of Hopper's multiple cultural interests, pictorial obsessions as well as friendships. They reflect an intensive creative period just before he co-wrote and directed his life-changing success *Easy Rider* (1969) and put his photographic work on hold for more than a decade.

The exhibition's pivotal centre is the artistic figure of **Andy Warhol**, who had a major influence on Hopper after they first met in the early 60s in New York and later in Los Angeles. Furthermore the photo series reveals Hopper's keen eye for fellow actors such as **Paul Newman**, **Peter Fonda** or his sister **Jane Fonda** and their powerful aura. As a witness of the groundbreaking changes in the society of his time, Hopper takes us on a ride through the art scene of pop - and counter-culture; portraying his established or outsider artist friends from the Beat Generation. With a fine eye for the right moment to capture the essence of his subject, he portrays pop artists from the East Coast such as **Robert Rauschenberg**, **Jasper Johns** or **James Rosenquist** and Californian assemblage artists like **Edward Kienholz**, **Wallace Berman** and **Bruce Conner** who inspired his aesthetics. His fast camera eye catches music idols such as **Ike and Tina Turner**, **The Byrds** and **Jefferson Airplane**, legendary music producer **Phil Spector**, new art forms as happenings and performances by **Allen Kaprow** or **Robert Rauschenberg** and reveals the self-staging of influent art dealers and curators such as **Irving Blum**, **Henry Geldzahler** or **Robert Fraser**.

Besides Hopper's curiosity for wide range subjects, his photographs also reveal his painterly aesthetics. Rudi Fuchs, who exhibited Hopper's work as a painter and a photographer at the Stedelijk Museum in 2001, wrote in his catalogue essay: "That these photographs are so different from other photography of that time – though the themes bear a superficial resemblance to the work of Walker Evans, Robert Frank or Gary Winogrand – is precisely due to the fact that they have been conceived with the eye of an assemblage-maker and painter. The background is often filled with additional motifs such as posters, inscriptions, ornaments, an abundance of *other things and marks* that come into view in the vicinity of the main motif."

In addition to the photographs, the exhibition includes the sculpture *Bomb Drop* as well as the installation *Life After on Canvas*. The original *Bomb Drop* built by Hopper in 1967 during the Vietnam War was left to rot for many years in his property in Taos in the New Mexican desert. For the exhibition in Pantin this iconic work of the sixties was entirely restored and the anti-war sculpture will occupy a central place in the exhibition space. Initially created for art patron Betty Freeman it was the last work that Hopper completed before suspending his artistic and photographic work for a long period. It is made out of plexiglass, neon and stainless steel, as a large scale replica of a World War II bomb drop switch, which Hopper inadvertently found while he was "junking out with Ed Kienholz". Dennis Hopper said: "I made it in a big plastic thing with lights inside and went through the primary colours - blue, yellow, red - and this big phallus with these big balls would go from arm to safe, arm to safe."

The inherent violence of the sculpture *Bomb Drop* is related to the film installation *Life After on Canvas* (1997), which is composed of a triptych of two digitized video stills on canvas as well as a film projector and the 16mm film of a 1983 performance at Houston Big H Speedway. Hopper had not painted in more than 18 years and he decided to start this new era with a performance: « I've got a way to introduce it and what I'm going to do is blow myself up and announce that I'm really serious about painting. I'd seen this as a kid at the rodeo in my hometown Dodge City, Kansas, where this guy called the « Human Stick of Dynamite » blew himself up. All you have to do - dynamite won't blow in on itself - you lay the dynamite in a circle and simply get inside. As long as they all go off simultaneously, it creates a vacuum and you just stay inside it. So that's what I did." (Dennis Hopper)

The exhibition also features a group of ephemera and memorabilia from Dennis Hopper's life, since the end of the sixties up to the beginning of the 21st century: passports, flight tickets, faxes, letters and postcards. These elements are intimately connected to the idea of a diversified network, comprised of artists, politicians, friends, suppliers or anonymous people. They unveil a different portrait of the iconic figure and invite us to explore

the more intimate aspects of Hopper's life.

The exhibition of photos, objects, sculptures and film installations gives us an insight of Hopper's multiple facets, fractions and contradictions, of his restless quest, of his radical approach of art and life and his obvious and secret connivances.