

# Argonaut ONLINE

## Art, Unexpected

By Christina Campodonico | January 20, 2016



Edward Goldman (center) has curated an exhibition of artist portraits by photographer Jim McHugh (far left) at the El Segundo Museum of Art, founded by Brian and Eva Sweeney (behind Goldman) with curator Bernhard Zunkeler (far right)  
Photo by Ted Soqui

When Brian and Eva Sweeney started intensively collecting art about six years ago, they weren't thinking their part-time passion would evolve into a serious art museum near the edge of the Chevron oil refinery in El Segundo.

Since opening in 2013, the nonprofit El Segundo Museum of Art (ESMoA) has sent ripples through the L.A. art scene and beyond. In 2014, Artnet named ESMoA one of

the top ten private museums in the U.S., and Artinfo's William Poundstone placed it among his top ten as well.

Locally, KCRW "Art Talk" host Edward Goldman has thrown his clout behind the museum, too. He's even stepped in to curate ESMoA's current offering. Called "TOUCH," the voluminous exhibit is an ambitious pairing of works by acclaimed Los Angeles artists with portraits of those artists by veteran magazine photographer Jim McHugh.

While The Broad Museum's recent entrance into L.A.'s contemporary art scene was greeted with fanfare when it opened its doors in downtown Los Angeles, ESMoA's more off-the-radar debut has left it a hidden gem waiting to be discovered mere minutes away from Playa del Rey and Westchester.

"It wasn't planned in advance, more by chance," says Brian Sweeney, a real estate developer and investor from Manhattan Beach.

Sweeney, 54, and his wife Eva, an architect, were looking for storage space in El Segundo to house their growing art collection, which he says ranges from "works made in 2500 B.C. to made yesterday."

But during the process, former El Segundo Mayor Eric Busch planted an intriguing idea in their heads: "He said, 'Could you open it up to the public? We don't have any art at all in our city. We'd love to have citizens exposed,'" Sweeney recalls of his meeting with the mayor.

From there, a quest for storage space morphed into founding a public-focused museum — what the Sweeneys prefer to call an "art laboratory" — featuring rotating exhibits (called "experiences") of their collection and other artworks on temporary loan. ESMoA quickly expanded from there to offer free educational programming for local schools, in-house artist residencies and collaborations with other institutions such as the Getty Research Institute.

To build ESMoA from the ground up on what was once an alleyway between a post office and a taco shop, Eva Sweeney tapped her architectural training to create a building with sustainable design principles and then brought her brother Bernhard Zunkeler to serve as ESMoA's curator

"The most exciting thing about this place is that it's a laboratory. There's nothing right or wrong," Zunkeler told DIGS magazine.

That spirit of experimentation influences the layout of ESMoA and how visitors encounter the artwork it displays. There are no explanatory labels on the walls, only

numbers assigned to each work, which visitors can look up in ESMoA's "Virtual Gallery" online via smartphone (the space has free Wi-Fi) or an iPad at the front of the gallery. On the website, users are invited to respond to a question prompted by the artwork or leave a comment.

Education, as well as experimentation, drive ESMoA's mission.

On weekdays, ESMoA hosts field trips and educational art classes for students from El Segundo schools and others in Hawthorne, Inglewood and Compton. All programming is free, and ESMoA offers transportation for schoolchildren visiting from farther away on class fieldtrips. ESMoA also hosts free lectures, live events and other educational programming for adults and teens throughout the year.

Admission to ESMoA is also free. Open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays as well as by appointments Mondays through Thursdays, the museum's curatorial calendar excites KCRW's Goldman.

"It's always very non-linear, non-academic — a very adventurous presentation of art," says Goldman.

The art critic and radio host was inspired to curate "TOUCH" after visiting McHugh's house and seeing dozens of photographs of famed and emerging L.A. artists on the walls.

Goldman wanted to talk about the experience on "Art Talk," but since the photographs were in a private home he couldn't. Not giving up on the subject, Goldman talked with the Sweeneys, who had been part of his seminar on art collecting at Otis College of Art and Design, and McHugh about putting together a show at ESMoA. Goldman wanted to complement McHugh's portraits with artwork by the artists he photographed, so they worked to secure loans of key artworks directly from artists, galleries and collectors.

In curating "TOUCH," Goldman also took an unconventional approach. In ESMoA's long rectangular gallery space with uncommonly high walls, he hung the artist's portraits on one side and their corresponding artworks on the other, stacking the works up so high on the walls that the works stretch from floor to ceiling.

Goldman says he wanted to recapture the experience he had entering McHugh's house — the feeling of going inside an artist's studio and witnessing the creative process from an intimate behind-the-scenes perspective.

Or, in his words: "... As if you have the privilege not only to be in a wonderful restaurant, but allowing you to go to the kitchen, where everything is bubbling and

boiling and steaming. I wanted people to have this glimpse, taste, smell of the inventive and one-of-a-kind atmosphere of Los Angeles.”

Having worked as a photographer for People Magazine, Architectural Digest and other high-profile magazines, McHugh has spent his 30-year career documenting Los Angeles’s art scene through his camera lens. From emerging talents to big names, he’s photographed artists whose creativity put L.A. art on the map. Some of his subjects include Ed Moses, James Turrell, Billy Al Bengston and Eric Orr of the Westside-based light, space and pop art experimenting Cool School. There’s also David Hockney, whose McHugh portrait in this exhibit also dons the cover of Hockney’s critically acclaimed autobiography, “That’s the Way I See It.”

In McHugh’s image, Hockney — wearing a red pinstripe shirt, a tie and his trademark owl-eyed glasses — stands next to a self-portrait and nonchalantly holds a cigarette. Against the mostly white backdrop, he looks a little sheepish yet also exposed, like a “Where’s Waldo?” character extradited from his habit of overcrowded cities, beaches and carnivals and caught without his distractive camouflage.

Like many of the portraits on view in “TOUCH,” that picture has a story. McHugh recalls calling up Hockney one day about arranging a time to take his photograph. The artist proposed that McHugh come up that same day for a photoshoot. McHugh, a young photographer at the time, at first declined. He wasn’t ready to photograph the famed artist, came up with some excuses and hung up the phone.

“And then I thought, ‘Are you crazy?!’ So I called him back and I raced up to his house and got it all together,” McHugh recalls.

The photo he took ended up being one of the most recognized pictures of Hockney and one of McHugh’s most famous photographs.

Other iconic and eye-catching McHugh photographs in “TOUCH” include a portrait of a sailor-suit-clad Mike Kelly dressed in yellow from head to toe and a sepia-toned headshot of a bright-eyed Robert Irwin.

There’s also another portrait of Hockney, this time at work painting a portrait of McHugh and his daughter. In Goldman’s hands at ESMoA, the painting itself (titled “The Photographer and his Daughter” and soon headed to London for a Hockney retrospective at the Tate) hangs on the opposite wall instead of next to the photograph.

Goldman says ESMoA is a welcome addition not only to the Westside’s art scene, but also to L.A.’s art scene at large.

“Not many small or medium-sized cities could say that they have a museum — and a good museum. ESMoA would be welcome in any city because it’s not just a private museum saying, ‘Look at us, look at our private collection.’ They have such a challenging and smart educational program,” he says.

“It’s only 10, 15 minutes driving from Otis College or from Marina del Rey or from Santa Monica,” says Goldman. “I bring all my guests to see this museum — to surprise people.”

*“TOUCH” is on view from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays (and on weekdays by appointment) through Jan. 31 at the El Segundo Museum of Art, 208 Main St., El Segundo. Call (424) 277-1020 or visit [esmoa.org](http://esmoa.org).*

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