

McArthur Binion, *DNA: Black Painting I*, 2015, oil-paint stick, graphite, and paper on board, 84 x 84".

Pages from Binion's address book form the underpinning ("under-matter" or "under-content") in a second category of work, while a third, the series "MAB: 1971"—Binion's initials—features a photograph of the artist taken on the year of the title, when he was twenty-five. This series involves a smaller square—15 x 15 inches—with the photographic self-portrait sometimes almost completely hidden, and with a wide range of color. Usually brighter and more startling, these works seem to erupt in your face.

Binion is clearly a master abstract painter, successfully integrating abstraction's geometric and gestural extremes—the grid and the painterly "signature." But he is not a purist; that is, he uses line and color not for their own sake but in the service of personal memory and history. His birth certificate and the pages from his address book are like accretions of Proustian madeleines, not remembrances of things past, but catalogues of their mnemonic traces.

—Donald Kuspit

"Double Standard: Ed Ruscha & Mason Williams, 1956–1971 (Part 1)"

ALDEN PROJECTS

Legend has it that in 1956 an eighteen-year-old Ed Ruscha set out solo from Oklahoma City in a customized Ford, taking the fabled Route 66 to Los Angeles (passing twenty-six gasoline stations along the way), where he would study at the Chouinard Art Institute (now CalArts) en route to elevating urban graphic vernaculars to the status of art. It's a tidy account of a no doubt messy affair. Of course, the factual distillations and narrative compressions enabling such myths of origin are, necessarily, founded on omission. Case in point: Riding alongside Ruscha on his move to LA was childhood friend Mason Williams, with whom Ruscha collaborated, on and off, over the next decade and a half. Together they talked up and produced some seminal pieces of West Coast Conceptual Pop, including several key works in Ruscha's early oeuvre, until Williams, also a musician, composer, and comedy writer, veered off the art track into the realm of entertainment.

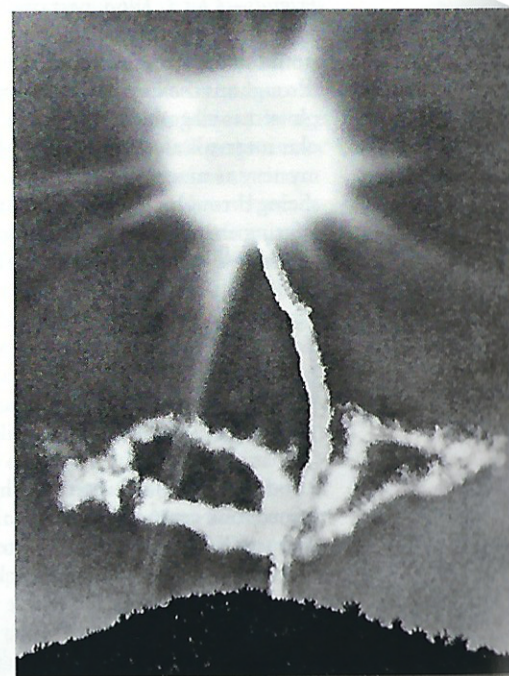
"Double Standard: Ed Ruscha & Mason Williams, 1956–1971 (Part 1)," the inaugural exhibition at Alden Projects' new Lower East Side location, brought together individually and coauthored artworks,

studies, and ephemera pertaining to the reciprocal relationship between the two budding artists. Williams, it seems, kept everything, hoarding a rich trove of his and Ruscha's art and related memorabilia, from which gallerist and art historian Todd Alden has, for the most part, assembled this show. Elegant evidential displays made the case for Williams's sustained presence and generative input at the dawn of Ruscha's career. Working through the exhibits, we learned, among other such things, that the Las Vegas road trip that produced the famous *Royal Road Test*, 1967 (it was Williams who pitched the typewriter out the window), also spawned an artist's book by Williams, *The Night I Lost My Baby*, for which Ruscha did the endpapers and layout; that the telegram-style invitation to Ruscha's 1968 show at Irving Blum Gallery was presaged by a collection of similarly formatted poems published in Williams's 1967 book of writings *Boneless Roast*; that Ruscha's landmark print *Double Standard*, 1969, began as a collaboration with Williams. Every document and object—and there were many—carries a story of artistic kinship and creative exchange, of reaching and experimenting, of young guys kicking ideas around and having fun.

But there were also works here by Williams that hold their own as canon-worthy instances of offbeat, contextual transposition. Stealing the show, and occupying almost half the available wall space, was *Bus*, 1967, a life-size composite screen print of a 1960s Greyhound coach that folds up and fits into a cardboard box. It's a visual knockout, especially in this gallery's gun barrel of a space, but it's also an intensely potent signifier (think: Hollywood hopefuls, Kerouac, *Midnight Cowboy*) and, perhaps, a humorous rejoinder to Ruscha's famous concertina-format publication *Every Building on Sunset Strip*, released just a year prior. Also especially noteworthy were vintage photographs documenting the 1967 production of *Sunflower*, a film project for which Williams engaged the services of a renowned skywriter to draw a gigantic stem and leaves under the sun to create the titular form. The film was never completed, but the photographic documentation represents a prescient entry in the now-fulsome catalogue of evanescent artworks.

Yet, as compelling and original as Williams's artistic output was, he obviously harbored other, more mainstream cultural ambitions, many of which were spectacularly realized. Starting out as a folksinger, he wrote dozens of songs for radio and TV, was awarded an Emmy for his role as head writer for the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, and, in his greatest claim to fame, penned and performed "Classical Gas" (gasoline being a leitmotif of this story), a propulsive classical-pop guitar instrumental from 1968 that has allegedly garnered more radio plays than any instrumental composition ever and for which he was awarded three Grammys. Although remaining friends with Ruscha to this day, Williams effectively signed off from art in the early '70s, while, as we know, Ruscha kept on down that road. Both found great success, though their paths eventually ran in opposite directions—Ruscha crafting classics from common culture and Williams crafting common culture from classics.

—Jeff Gibson



Mason Williams, *Sunflower*, 1967. Production still for an unfinished film.