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ART & DESIGN

‘Double Standard,’ at Alden Projects, Takes a Photographic Trip to the Past

By KEN JOHNSON
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Images from “Sunflower,” part of the “Double Standard” exhibit at Alden Projects.
Credit Courtesy of the artist and Alden Projects, New York

A life-size, black-and-white photographic silk-screen depicting a Greyhound bus graces most of one long wall at Alden Projects. A wonderfully deadpan homage to the American road, this 36-foot-long picture was created in 1967 by [Mason Williams](#), who, the following year, would win three Grammy Awards for his guitar instrumental “[Classical Gas](#).” During that time Mr. Williams also was writing for and performing on “[The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour](#),” one of the great television shows of all time.

What’s not so widely known about Mr. Williams is that he and Ed Ruscha have been friends since they were fourth-grade classmates in Oklahoma City, and that they collaborated on numerous zany conceptual projects during the ’60s. Along with copious archival materials, the photographs, books, prints and drawings in this gallery’s first exhibition — “[Double Standard: Ed Ruscha and Mason Williams, 1956-1971](#)” — reveal a mutually inciting relationship comparable in some ways to that between Picasso and Braque in pre-World War I Paris.

A book called “Royal Road Test,” from 1967, documents a collaborative Dada-like action. While Mr. Ruscha drove a car at high speed along a desert highway, Mr. Williams threw a Royal typewriter out of his window. It was said to have been the same model Jack Kerouac used to write “On the Road.” Another passenger, Patrick Blackwell, then photographed the parts of the disintegrated machine.

A series of 14 vintage photographs never before exhibited documents Mr. Williams’s 1967 effort to create what he conceived of as the world’s largest drawing: an image of a sunflower limned in smoke by a skywriting biplane. The same year, Mr. Ruscha used an airplane to create his celebrated book of aerial photographs, “34 Parking Lots.” That’s an interesting coincidence — both artists using airplanes to make artworks in the same year — and there are others in this revelatory show.

‘Double Standard:

Ed Ruscha and Mason Williams, 1956–1971’

Alden Projects

34 Orchard Street

Lower East Side

Through Oct. 18

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