

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Ed Ruscha's great subject

By Jackie Wullschlager

Published: September 18 2009 23:14 |

Last updated: September 18 2009
23:14

In 1952, when he was 14 years old, Ed Ruscha hitchhiked nearly 2,000 kilometres east from his home town of Oklahoma to Miami. A few years later, he hit the road again, travelling the same distance west to Los Angeles, to enrol at the Disney-sponsored Chouinard Art Institute.



US painter Ed Ruscha's 'Talk Radio' (1988)

“The west coast sucked me in: big skies, open spaces. When New York seemed to be the centre of the world, Los Angeles was an easier place. I could have been chewed up and spat out in New York if I'd spent time there. A longer shelf life was what I was after: quieter but longer.”

Coolly elegant in striped yellow shirt, sunglasses, slacks and trainers, grey-haired Ruscha delivers this self-appraisal in a slow, careful southern drawl. His manner is as sober, deliberate yet laid-back as his paintings; like them he offers accessibility and distance in equal, courteous balance. His broad, low canvases depicting lonely petrol

stations (“Standard Station”) or factories (“Blue Collar Trade School”) marooned in bleak expanses off the highway are instantly recognisable, witty versions of American dystopia.

“Being on the highway is an important thing. In America everything is left to right. I’m drawn to the horizontal sweep. I think it has to do with driving – looking out on flat landscapes.” His sublime panoramas are as unsettling: interrupted by odd phrases in bold fonts – “Not A Bad World Is It?”, “American Tool Supply” – where text and image “do not even ask to understand each other”, they feature letters dissipating into clouds or snowy peaks like credits vanishing across the mountain logo of a Paramount movie.

It is characteristic of Ruscha’s modest, concentrated approach that he has chosen to meet over a glass of bottled water in an empty room at Gagosian’s premises in London’s Mayfair. His latest work, “On The Road”, an artist’s book of Jack Kerouac’s classic novel, opens here on October, to coincide with a major European retrospective of 50 years’ work at the Hayward Gallery. This will reveal how Ruscha got his long shelf-life, and why we must all now catch up with his prescient, pertinent vision.

Cinema – its flat, word-inscribed screens, receding spaces, glossy celluloid colour – is to Ruscha’s canvases what photographs were to Andy Warhol or cartoons to Roy Lichtenstein: mass media assimilated to inject everyday banality into the high art of painting. Thus American pop art was born, with Ruscha its tortoise, working slowly and steadily out of the international limelight through the 1950s and 60s, when Los Angeles was “deeply away from the rest of the world: an isolated location”. Top New York gallerist Leo Castelli gave him his first show in 1973 but, according to another dealer, “Ruscha was always at the bottom of Castelli’s stable – simply because he was working in LA.”

But Los Angeles, its roads and its movies, determined Ruscha’s laconic aesthetic. “I loved the way the movies went from a boxy format to something more stretched out. I’m not emulating the movies but they became a trigger to what I’m doing.” Depicting the west coast’s long, sign-filled streets spewing out words, images, screens, he fixed on

canvas not only Hollywood but the cacophonous cultural landscape of all our imaginations, invaded by too much information and relentless visual noise.

Ruscha calls himself “an abstract artist who deals with subject matter”. He rejected art school’s abstract expressionist training as academic by the late 1950s, and describes his “atomic bomb” moment as his encounter with Jasper Johns’ “Target with Four Faces”, which exploded the pieties around abstraction and collapsed its gap with figurative painting.

Ruscha’s own great subject was, from the start, words. “Boss” (1961), a highlight of the Hayward’s opening room, spells out the word in velvety black capitals, the “O” leaning pertly to the left, against an impastoed muddy rectangle enclosed between strips of darker brown. The rich surface acknowledges gestural abstraction, connotations of authority are an Oedipal nod to Johns, but the mix of letters, painterly beauty – Ruscha found the curving round word “almost beautiful like a tulip would be beautiful” – and droll pop allusion (Boss is a clothing brand) is fresh and original.

In loud colour, “Noise”, “Scream” and “OOF” – evoking the exclamation of someone being punched in the stomach – continued his experiments with single words as a painting’s subject. He saw early how language would be challenged by the ubiquitous image overload of modern life. The monumental, crisply graphic “Trademark with Eight Spotlights”, in which the Twentieth Century Fox logo is stacked and squeezed into the left-hand corner of the canvas under a halo of yellow spotlights, plays on language refashioned as landscape, and on pop art’s jokes about secular transcendence and commercial icons.

“If you look at Twentieth Century Fox, you get this feeling of concrete immortality,” Ruscha says. Brought up “a little fish out of water as a Catholic in Bible Belt country – I’m still a Catholic, not practising” – he grimaces that “there is imagery that creeps in there from religion I guess – like beams of light. There’s holiness in a landscape and a sunset.” With “Back of Hollywood”, where reversal of the giant letters against a flaming

sunset defamiliarises them, he continues his emphasis on Hollywood as landscape of fantasy.

Such works anticipate today's media-scape, but their visual slapstick and absurdity also look back – to Dada, Picabia ("Very Rare Picture on the Earth", which "looks like some kind of industrial design plumbing features", and an Arcimboldo face, are the two paintings Ruscha would most like to own) and to Duchamp. "Pasadena [Art Museum] director Walter Hopps gave Duchamp his first solo show in 1963," he recalls: a coup for a small Californian institution.

What was Duchamp like? "He was a suit and tie kind of person – well, not just suit and tie, suit, tie and cigar: sort of aristocratic where the prevailing style was scruffy, chain-smoking, splashing paint on canvas. I liked his thinking man's approach to making art: some kind of strange imagery that he concocted drew me in. It wasn't an intellectual thing; his creations were simple – but as complex as you ever wanted to make them. He had a way of questioning things – simple images that were so unorthodox and didn't follow the rules of how to make pictures."

How do his own images and ideas arrive? "Maybe I've seen something and then maybe hearing something. Sometimes they come about in dreams. A lot of things irritate me – unsettled thoughts about things that are never completed, understood. Maybe that's where they should be, residing in a world of the unknown." He is not, he says, "someone who creates art out of feelings of despair", but an undertow of malaise in his work, achieved with the lightest touch, places him with his countryman Cy Twombly as America's leading chroniclers of western material decay.

In "Olds", the divided name Oldsmobile is caught in headlights against a night background, "Old" floating over darkness and "smobile" buried behind weeds like a deserted vehicle: memorial to Detroit's automobile industry. At the Hayward too is part of "Course of Empire": long skinny 1990s renderings of boxed buildings against empty skies, paired with more recent canvases revealing "an accelerated aged version of the same urban landscapes" – a Tool and Die building engraved with Asian calligraphy; a

trade school shut behind a chain fence – in disenchanting smog blue, acid green, burning red. Shown at the Venice biennale in 2005, these were the most masterly, relevant, conceptually clear, open-minded paintings in town.

Hayward director Ralph Rugoff notes that while question marks, commas, quotation marks and ellipses appear in his paintings, there are no full stops. “Some people say everything’s been done but it’s not true at all. I see art as very open-ended. I’m inspired by all these groups of young artists,” 73-year-old Ruscha says. As for his own work, “it’s not done, it’s not finished, it hasn’t completely resolved itself. Do I know what I’m doing? That’s when that funny wiggle shape of a question mark comes in. It’s like having a higher level of dissatisfaction – but it feels good.”

‘Ed Ruscha: 50 Years of Painting’, Hayward Gallery, London, October 14- January 10; www.haywardgallery.org.uk Then Haus der Kunst, Munich, February 12-May 2 2010; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, May 29-September 5 2010

‘Ed Ruscha: On the Road’, Gagosian Gallery, London, October 12-November 28
www.gagosian.com