

ARTINFO

Ed Ruscha Honored at National Arts Awards

By **Andrew Russeth**

Published: October 6, 2009



PHOTO GALLERY

Ed Ruscha Honored at National Arts Awards

NEW YORK—Balls of fire fell on a dark, deserted lake in a video by [Kelly Richardson](#) projected on a screen at Cipriani 42nd Street last night. It was an eerie sight, though few seemed to mind: [Jeff Koons](#) and [Nancy Pelosi](#) were chatting and posing for photographs together, just one of the unexpected friendships that seemed to blossom at the **National Arts Awards**, which included an unusual mixture of representatives from the nation's art, business, and political intelligentsia.

The ceremony, organized by **Americans for the Arts**, honored individuals for their contributions to the nation's artistic life: [Robert Redford](#), [Salman Rushdie](#), philanthropist [Sidney Harman](#), Bank of America (accepted by Chief Marketing Officer [Anne Finucane](#)), and [Ed Ruscha](#), who seemed like an ideal — and definitively American — representative from the visual arts world.

Ruscha has wielded the American automobile as an artistic tool, making art from gas stations photographed on trips across the West and images snapped while cruising the Sunset Strip on a Sunday morning. His contributions to the 2005 [Venice Biennale](#) showed the exteriors of corporate office buildings and factories, the anonymous workshops of American capitalism.

According to philanthropist [Eli Broad](#), who is a major collector of the artist's work, Ruscha's distinctly American sensibility is imbued in his painted words as well. "The words he writes reflects the time we live in," Broad told ARTINFO. "He's right on."

Broad declined to pick a favorite phrase or painting, saying, "There are lots of favorite Ruschas we have," but [New Museum](#) Director [Lisa Phillips](#) was game. She picked "trust," "juice," "scream," "spam," and "space," among others, to highlight the "simple, beautiful, funny words that in his hands evoke entire worlds."

She explained, "He's a rare combination of an Old Master and an emerging artist" and noted that his residence in Los Angeles has sometimes made it hard for him to compete. A 1982 retrospective at the **Whitney Museum of American Art**, where she formerly worked, "didn't really make an impact. It was a little bit ahead of its time. ... New York can be very provincial sometimes and slow to acknowledge artists from other places."

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Phillips's point was a reminder that success once seemed deeply unlikely for many of the powers assembled in the banquet hall. Koons was holding court just a few blocks from the Museum of Modern Art, where he once made ends meet by selling memberships. Rushdie was alive and well, the fatwa once levied against him having been lifted. Articulating his mood, he quoted a **Kingsley Amis** speech: "I always thought the Booker Prize was complete shit, but I have just completely changed my mind."

Dennis Hopper was there with his dealer and friend Tony Shafrazi, a man who has cheated death countless times, such as when he almost boarded the plane that carried artist Robert Smithson on the day it crashed, killing him. Shafrazi was optimistic about the future and the health of the art market. "I think things are better. Things have picked up a little bit," he said. "It's all making us work harder. I'm working harder."

Shafrazi spoke reverentially of Ruscha. "He's such an American icon," Shafrazi explained. "His use of sounds and imagery is so original and so unique. His sense of humor is very pithy. Besides that, he's the most adorable, most handsome artist there is."

Author James Frey, who commissioned from Ruscha a work that reads "Public Stoning" after being dragged through the media for his stretching of the truth in his memoir *A Million Little Pieces*, was similarly affectionate in a video tribute to the artist. "Ed Ruscha is the king of California!" he exclaimed. "Ed Ruscha is the coolest guy in the world."

For his part, Ruscha seemed pleasantly bemused about the plaudits he was receiving. Handed his award, he pretended to struggle with its weight. "I think it's a little ironic to pick someone who makes images using colored goo swabbed on with animal fur connected to a piece of wooden stick," he told the crowd. "It boggles the mind."

The artist credited the other winners, for whom he had ambitious plans. "I have this idea that the five of us could collaborate on something. We could make a movie of *The Satanic Verses*. Robert could direct it, Salman could do the screenplay, Anne and Sidney could bankroll it, and I could design the titles. Also, I could art-direct the wanted poster for the five of us."