

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTWRIT

Ed Ruscha at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles

by Sandra Sears
September 2011

Ruscha's interpretation of the American landscape has always relied on images seized from roadside scenery. The exhibition at the Hammer combines Ruscha's fixation with the open road and his keen ability to construct empty landscapes using *only* words. Instead of stripping text of its semantic worth—often the case with his renowned word paintings—*On the Road* has inspired Ruscha to eulogize specific phrases from Kerouac's famed novel that embody the transient spirit of the American Dream. This particular exhibition was spawned by Ruscha's collaboration with the Gagosian Gallery in creating a limited-edition artist's book that revamps Kerouac's poetic and glorified rendition of American culture, *On the Road*. Each copy of Ruscha's edition is leather-bound, signed and numbered by the artist. The book is comprised of over two hundred pages of text and accompanying images that are found, commissioned or created by Ruscha himself.

The black-and-white illustrations are immaculate. They elegantly accompany the wild and rough quality of Kerouac's text, as if providing a scenic relief through a car window. Many of the images are derived from photographs taken by Ruscha, but several found and commissioned works are added into the bargain. Upon close observation the images quietly relate to the author's detailed course of words, but to the untrained eye they appear a haphazard mishmash of roadside junk—car parts, tire burns and sandwich stacks hover curiously alongside the narrative. As shapes they are enticing, but these objects are habitually seen and often overlooked. Ruscha manages to imbue them with a captivating magnetism that keeps us coming back for more.

Perhaps the same can be said of his very first artist's book *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* which contains a series of photographs that pays tribute to the icon of classic American gas stations and to our relationship to the rural landscape. In his own youth Ruscha felt the urge to get out of Oklahoma, his home state, and head west on an adventure along route 66. It goes without saying that Ruscha certainly had an ongoing love affair with the open road. What emerged from the book was a new vision of the Western landscape that hadn't existed before. This series exemplifies the austere and meticulous rigidity of Ruscha's craftsmanship, as well as his tendency to gravitate towards symptoms and subjects of everyday life as the foundation of his artworks.

Ruscha has a similar approach in the production of the ten landscape paintings that supplement the Hammer's display of pages from the artist's book. For this series Ruscha has extracted an assortment of sensational phrases from throughout Kerouac's novel and paired each with a monumental landscape of mountaintops. These works push beyond Ruscha's previous word paintings, which examine the shape and texture of words, their emotional gravity and their physical shape in one's mouth. As a previous student of industrial art and sign painting, he tends to treat language as a transparent medium in these works. While the paintings inspired by *On the Road* draw upon related themes, they are devoted to an entirely different concern. Across each canvas Ruscha brazenly exclaims carefully selected phrases from *On the Road* in order to investigate the pure aesthetic and gravitas of the language itself.

IN CALIFORNIA YOU CHEW JUICE OUT OF GRAPES AND SPIT THE SKIN AWAY, A REAL LUXURY

The stenciled phrases are executed in a deadpan style that is severely mechanical, almost lifeless; however, the striking images and sounds elicited by each fragment from the novel exude that seductive mystique that made Kerouac's novel so alluring in the first place.

SURE, BABY, MAÑANA, IT WAS ALWAYS MAÑANA. FOR THE NEXT WEEK THAT WAS ALL I HEARD—MAÑANA, A LOVELY WORD AND ONE THAT PROBABLY MEANS HEAVEN.

Ruscha observes that the words in his text-landscapes have the robustness of the “sound of bacon slapped on the counter.” Suffused with charisma and mystery, each word begs for scrupulous attention from the viewer.

WETTING THEIR EYEBROWS WITH HINCTY FINGERTIP

What is it he wants to reveal to us?

“ARE YOU FROM TEXAS?”

“NO SIR, I’M FROM GREEN-VELL MUZZ-SIPPY.”
AND THAT WAS THE WAY HE SAID IT.

Juxtaposed with Ruscha's signature mountaintops, these phrases become even more convoluted. The image of text combined with a picturesque view of the horizon brings to mind, once more, the notion of roadside imagery. Ruscha's large canvases frame Kerouac's linguistic starbursts as they collide with nameless summits that we've seen time and again through our very own car windows. What emerges is a landscape composition reminiscent of a billboard, but that operates conversely. Instead of whirring past the road sign before formulating a coherent thought, we are invited to contemplate the intrinsic relationship between language and images in the collective experience of our surroundings.

Ed Ruscha: *On the Road*
4 June—2 October 2011
Hammer Museum
10899 Wilshire Blvd, Los Angeles