

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



ED RUSCHA: THE GOLDEN STATE

by bob monk 10/7/11

LOS ANGELES *Known for his precisionist, Pop-inflected paintings that often incorporate text, as well as for a series of tightly focused photo books centered on the environs of Los Angeles, California-based painter Ed Ruscha has achieved an international reputation. A high point in his career came in 2005, when he was the U.S. representative at the Venice Biennale. His exhibition there was enthusiastically received by the public and the press.*

During the course of a decade, while working for Leo Castelli Gallery in New York (1974–84), curator and gallery director Bob Monk got to know some of the most prominent artists of the day—including the young Ruscha, whom he met in 1974.

Ruscha and Monk sustained their friendship through the years. Currently director of Gagosian Gallery in New York, Monk recently sat down with Ruscha to discuss the artist's aims and endeavors past, present and future.

BOB MONK What do you think about “Pacific Standard Time”? All these Los Angeles institutions coming together to celebrate the city’s cultural history?

ED RUSCHA I was skeptical when I first heard about it, and I wondered, well, what’s the use or the real purpose of doing this? But I’ve come to appreciate the focus on art from this region. Maybe in the future an exhibition could be done about the entire West Coast—Oregon, Washington—since so much great work was made in those areas too.

MONK What work of yours will be included? I hear a lot of it is photographic.

RUSCHA I think so, yes. And they also have some newspaper publications that I edited in art school, which were comprised of bits of statements, drawings and collages by students and passed out free to anyone interested.

MONK You’ve lived in Los Angeles since 1956. What role has this environment played in your work?

RUSCHA The desert vegetation of L.A.—that, say, a palm tree might lurk invisibly behind a gas station—has had a real impact on my work. Early on, I took notice of vacant lots in the city. Now they all seem to be gone. The good old buildings of L.A. are held hostage by commerce. Hard to say where this will lead me.

MONK You had your first two shows in 1963 and 1964 at Ferus Gallery. The paintings that were in those exhibitions are now mostly in museum collections.

RUSCHA I sold only one work from those two shows, but I considered them successful and idealistic. I did the works primarily as a way to get my message to other artists. The possibility of making a living off my art was very remote and didn't matter. John Altoon tried to get [Ferus director] Irving Blum to not open my first show because he thought my work was not art. Later, he and I became good friends.

MONK You had met Leo Castelli before you began showing at Ferus. In 1961, you went to his gallery and introduced yourself. You had some of your works under your arm that you had done in Europe that year. Can you talk a bit about that?

RUSCHA I knew about Leo when I was going to school. It seemed like the people at Chouinard Art Institute [now Cal Arts] in L.A.—all the fine artists at least—were very aware of the center of the art world, which was New York City. Leo's gallery was considered the gold standard. He was not only in the past world of Abstract Expressionism but was also into something a step toward the future. He was championing people like John Chamberlain and Lee Bontecou as well as established Abstract Expressionists like de Kooning and Franz Kline. So that aspect appealed to me, and really made him the top interest in my mind as somebody to meet or speak to or have represent you.

MONK We met in '74. I'd started working at Castelli, and Leo had just received a shipment of your drawings. We were standing in the gallery looking at *Three Darvons and Two Valiums* and he said to you, "Oh, Ed, I wouldn't want to take that."

RUSCHA Yeah. *[both laugh]*

MONK After you met Leo, you drove back to L.A. You met Walter Hopps, who put you in the famous exhibition "New Painting of Common Objects" at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1962. Then you had those two shows at Ferus. But even though your career started in Los Angeles, did you always keep the possibility of showing with Leo Castelli in the back of your mind?

RUSCHA Yes.

MONK In your collection of writings, *Leave Any Information at the Signal*, you say that in the early years of the L.A. art-gallery scene, artists were often treated like second-class citizens and that there were scuffles over payment, stuff like that.

RUSCHA Most artists who had payment problems with galleries kept either bad records or no records of their work. Besides, the gallery world in L.A. early on in the 1960s was minuscule.

MONK I want to talk about your most recent show in L.A., "Psycho Spaghetti Westerns," at Gagosian. What is so interesting about those 10 paintings is that they all depict trash. The springboard for them seemed to be the 10 paintings from the 2005 Venice Biennale, "Course of Empire"—almost as though one went to the big-box stores and bought all this crap, and then in the new paintings it's all being thrown out.

RUSCHA Well, whatever I do, I'm having a dialogue with myself. That's the impetus for it all. So these two types of work might be different in some ways, but they have a little silver thread between them—there are questions of the passage of time and an interest in the residue of a society. Many artists respond to the disorder of trash. You might take a crumpled-up package of cigarettes and smash it against a flat surface and you've got some art going on there. And I just happen to paint a picture of the smashed cigarette pack instead of using it as a readymade three-dimensional work. So I'm doing it in a different way—kind of pumping in atmosphere. But the general idea runs throughout 20th- and 21st-century art. You could start with the Ashcan School.

MONK Even the name, right?

RUSCHA Yes. And then look at Kurt Schwitters—that he picked these things up off the street. Artists generally gravitate toward things that are overlooked, forgotten or rejected. What I'm looking at, mostly as I'm driving, are rejects. When I was driving out to the desert, I would pass these things called gators, which are retreads that have fallen off truck tires. Most people consider them unnecessary things that need to be picked up and put in a dump, but I started thinking of them as something else. I began seeing the obvious beauty in them.

The passage of time is also a vital germ in whatever I do. I might photograph something that I photographed in 1966 and 1972 and 1978. Who's the photographer who's taken pictures of that same family over many—

MONK Nicholas Nixon?

RUSCHA Yes. He is somebody who reflects on the passage of time. I'm almost doing the same thing. I'm commenting on these things, but without any kind of social agenda. I don't have any direct message for an audience.

MONK You're having a dialogue with yourself.

RUSCHA And I think that's where artists have to stay.

MONK But like the American trompe l'oeil painters John Frederick Peto and William Harnett, did you bring some of those objects into the studio? I saw that lamp you had in the studio.

RUSCHA I had that lamp for four months knowing I would do something to it, and finally I just stomped on it outside in the front yard. Then that became what it was; I made something of it. So these things were almost like tabletop setups, and I photographed them and then utilized them in that way. But it still came back to the issue of painting. I'm still puzzled about my own work when it comes to painting—whether it's really that necessary to believe in this great ideal of the painter's painter and the idea of spreading paint on a canvas. I question all of that. I just feel like anything an artist wants to do and wants to call art, that's art. And there's a big, gray area. Sometimes I wonder whether I'm painting pictures of words or painting pictures with words.

MONK I'd like to discuss *On the Road*, the book you created with publisher Gerhard Steidl which was just on view at the Hammer Museum in a wonderful exhibition curated by Douglas Fogle. It's a completely handmade edition of Kerouac's book. How did you get the idea?

RUSCHA Well, obviously I felt an affinity to *On the Road*, which was published in 1957—that these renegade ruffians would start traveling on the highways and sort of wing it with this very noble idealism. I identified especially with the idea of hitchhiking. I hitchhiked a lot myself, cross-country several times. So the notion of being out on the highways and experiencing America through that mode and then reflecting on it and sort of dancing with it held great appeal to me.

MONK The book is so beautifully made. It's printed in letterpress, and the photographs are printed in a lab, cut out and placed in embossed wells. Did you think about how the photographs and the embossing and debossing would work together from one spread to the next?

RUSCHA Yes, I wanted those things to line up. And they actually had to line up.

MONK When you turn the page, you're seeing the ghost image of the page before and then you're seeing the new photograph. You've also created stippled drawings and seven beautiful paintings that all incorporate text from Kerouac. One of my favorite paintings reads, "Greatest seventy-yard passer . . .

RUSCHA . . . in the history of New Mexico State Reformatory.”

MONK [*laughs*] Speaking of books, a collector from Zurich showed me on his iPhone an assortment of over 37 books he'd compiled that were imitations of your own—by everyone from Japanese artists to Jonathan Monk. Did you realize that there are so many books paying homage to you?

RUSCHA Maybe I should do a collection of them—*Twentysix Abandoned Gasoline Stations*, that sort of thing. Lawrence Weiner and I did the book called *Hard Light*, and damned if some people in a little town in Russia didn't re-create that thing.

MONK I saw that book. The women looked almost exactly like the—

RUSCHA Yes, posed the same way and everything.

MONK Is it true that imitation is the best form of flattery?

RUSCHA There have been takeoffs and reflections on my books that are in a strange way flattering. I don't know what mileage can be gotten from something like that, but it is interesting.

MONK They're very respectful. None of them are putting down your books. But some of the artists have a really good sense of humor.

RUSCHA There's a kind of official recording, or an interest—especially among young people who come to America from Europe—in following that route I took on U.S. 66 and finding those gasoline stations. I actually did an interview with a man from Paris who followed the book *The Americans* by Robert Frank. And he found all the sites that Frank had photographed, including the hotel window in Butte, Montana, with the curtain flowing out of it. He was just on this madman mission to find every one of those locations. He made a study of it. And there are people who have followed my gas stations and parking lots. A good many of my books have been documented and recorded or chased after.

MONK You've always been really happy living and working in Los Angeles, and I know that on your way to Europe in 1961 you were in New York and found it cold and impersonal. But it seems to me that you are more comfortable now when you visit New York, and you enjoy it.

RUSCHA Stop the presses! He enjoys New York!

**“Ed Ruscha: Psycho Spaghetti Westerns” was at Gagosian Gallery, Beverly Hills [Feb. 25–Apr. 9].
“Ed Ruscha: On the Road” was at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles [June 4–Oct. 2].**

BOB MONK is a director of Gagosian Gallery.