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Los Angeles Times

Q&A: Ed Ruscha on 'Psycho Spaghetti Westerns'

The artist discusses his new show of paintings, on view at Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills.



Artist Ed Ruscha's "Psycho Spaghetti Westerns" is at Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills. (Kirk McKoy / Los Angeles Times, Kirk McKoy / Los Angeles Times / February 26, 2011)

By Jori Finkel, Los Angeles Times

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Ed Ruscha's new paintings, the subject of a Gagosian Gallery show that opened Friday in Beverly Hills, look like they are haunted by the ghost of Pop Art. The canvases are filled with images of assorted objects, many branded: a tire, a Perrier bottle, a Bud Light carton.

But instead of bright, shiny images à la Warhol, the objects here are in various stages of disarray or decay. The tire is blown; the bottle is discarded; the carton is crumpled. And the dominant colors are muted earth tones.

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Ruscha calls the series of 10 paintings "Psycho Spaghetti Westerns," and Gagosian bills it as the artist's "first painting exhibition in Los Angeles in 12 years." Not that anyone should worry about the 73-year-old artist's productivity. He recently major shows of paintings elsewhere and photographs here, with retrospectives abroad, and represented the U.S. in the 2005 Venice Biennale with a series called "Course of Empire."

The Times asked the Los Angeles artist to represent himself — and talk about his new work.

"Psycho Spaghetti Westerns" is a fabulous title. You also used "psycho" in some earlier work: "Metro, Petro, Neuro, Psycho." Is there something about the word "psycho" that you like?

It's supercharged, and I like that. There are no direct references to those words in any of the new paintings, except it sort of fits like a glove. I was faced with this thought of having to have a title, and that just came out of the sky. I thought, "How perfect for these paintings." There are no references to Italian movies from the '60s here, although I do like those movies, but "Spaghetti Westerns" says it all: tangled up messes like spaghetti, and we're living out here in the West, and we're all psycho.

Your new work has various objects in states of decay or disarray — blown tires, discarded mattresses, a broken construction sign. Are these objects you've been collecting in your imagination, or physically as well?

I see them when I drive. I started seeing so much debris and so many castaways, that set me thinking. And I was stopping on the highways to pick up these things. I collected this detritus. I thought they were perfect little things for paintings, and each one has its own personality. I found some debris right in Hollywood, on the small side streets. A lot of these things I found off the highways in the desert. I like to go out there — I've had a place there for 30-something years. Believe it or not, I like the nature out there. I don't like the manmade things in the desert. So many of them have been shot at for some reason.

Do you feel that the new series is specific to American wastefulness?

The whole world is so homogenous that at this point trash found in Russia or France could end up here or being from here. And I don't really make the paintings to be reflections of man's wasteful nature. These are just objects; they could be looked at as if they are brand new. They are not sad things — maybe they are brighter than they appear.

So many of your paintings and also photographs and prints, from the Standard stations and Hollywood signs (of the 1960s) to your more recent landscapes, have strong diagonal lines. What does a diagonal give you that a more horizontal image doesn't?

All of my life, I've responded to the megaphone effect: You start off small and then blast out words. The megaphone always takes the form of a diagonal. It's like a train in the distance that gets huge as it approaches. I like something that starts small and ends up larger. I guess that I really like diagonals.

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With "Psycho Spaghetti Westerns," are all of the paintings done in acrylic on canvas?

All except for one, the one that shows what a truck driver would call a "gator" — the retreads that fall off of trucks. The mattress in that picture is painted partly with used motor oil. Somehow, motor oil and mattresses go together — either oil or blood. You always see it on the streets. They throw oil on the mattresses to finish them off.

Your "Course of Empire" work shown at the Venice Biennale took its title from the American landscape painter Thomas Cole, who did a series about the rise and fall of civilization. Was there an artist, or historical point of reference, you were thinking about with your new series?

These paintings lack a prior life. They don't follow "Course of Empire" exactly, but they do point toward age and time spent and waste. Most of my work is based on this idea of waste and retrieval: using wasted, overlooked or forgotten things.

Are the new paintings about your own aging at all? Are they self-portraits, by any stretch of the imagination?

I look at these things [in my paintings] in terms of geology, and that's a good way to think about aging. You know, how mountains are actually moving all the time. My friend Robert Smithson says that one pebble moving one inch in a million years is exciting enough for him, and I agree. [But] no, the works are no comment whatsoever on my advancing age.

You once said something about art that I heard Steve Martin quote at a talk not so long ago. A bad work of art makes you go, "Wow. Huh?" A good work of art makes you go, "Huh? Wow." Do you ever have a "huh" response to your own work?

Sometimes I look at my own work and I'm abandoned at sea. I wonder what it's all about. I look at every work I make as an isolated event. I don't always know where it fits.

Do you see your paintings differently now that they're so beautifully installed in the gallery here and not in your own studio?

In the studio, they're surrounded by trash — all the trash in the paintings. I knew they would look stark here. It's usually a plus for anyone. To put a picture on a nice, clean wall dramatizes it.

Are you doing anything for the Academy Awards?

I feel the Academy Awards are overblown in some ways: How many awards can you bestow on people? There are so many smaller great movies that don't get seen because people are so interested in all the hoopla. But I am going to this Vanity Fair event, a screening. I saw a few of the movies [nominated]. "The King's Speech," that was an honorable movie. "True Grit" didn't knock my socks off but the cinematography was really interesting. There are so many artists out there in the film industry who are shaping the way we see things. There are not enough awards for those people.

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