

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY



### Repainting, redrawing and rephotographing Los Angeles

Ed Ruscha has made images of Los Angeles's history that are now part of art history

By Michael Govan



Ruscha's *Hollywood*, 1968

It's rare when an artist can own a word or an image from popular culture so thoroughly. Andy Warhol may have shown his first Campbell's Soup cans here in Los Angeles, but for me, much more powerful is the sway Ed Ruscha's paintings hold over the Hollywood sign. "Hollywood"—a word, a picture, a fact of our city—is just one of the words that have become Ed's pictures. Words as pictures; pictures as words. Words like the big graphic titles of a film. Ed loves words. He says he's "guilty of linguistic kleptomania".

There's a little history of words and paintings. In the same year of the first Academy Awards, and around when sound was added to movies, the great Surrealist artist René Magritte added words to Modern paintings. His very famous *The Treachery of Images* hangs in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's (Lacma) galleries. It's of course an image of a pipe under which is painted: "This is not a pipe". Which it's not. It's a painting.

What if Ruscha dispensed with the picture part or even made words without paint? Like summing up a vampire movie, he once blocked out in large capital letters the word "EVIL"—in blood, on satin. Or one might imagine a Western when "dude" is drawn in gunpowder. There can be a whole story in a pictured word. Ed's *An Invasion of Privacy* was made with grass stains on canvas. *Cotton Puffs* was painted in egg white.

And for the restaurateurs Michael and Eva Chow, he made *Mr Chow LA*, where the “recipe” for colors is noted as egg yolk, oyster sauce, red cabbage, soy bean paste, red bean paste over coconut milk, red beet, and secret ingredients. Ed likes lists, obviously. He likes rhymes. Sometimes he paints words that look liquid, like “adios”. He surely has a great sense of humor in his art, but also a probing eye on words that can reveal deep and meaningful irony. Take, for example, the painting hanging in Lacma’s galleries for the exhibition “Ed Ruscha: Standard”, with big, yellow capital letters on two lines on blue: “WAR SURPLUS”.

The phrase “brave men run in my family” shows up in a few paintings. Ed was indeed a brave man when in 1956 he moved from Oklahoma to Los Angeles to pursue what was to become his life in art. In those days everyone knew that if you wanted to be an artist you needed to live in New York. But Ed stayed in Los Angeles and made the city’s particular landscape an impetus for his new kind of art that has inspired many other artists around the world.

So many beautiful sunsets in Los Angeles (even more in the 1960s when there was more smog) became backdrops for Ed’s paintings. In his compositions, Los Angeles is often depicted from that oblique aerial view from the Hollywood Hills. Ed made great use of that particular vantage point for a lot of his paintings. And there are his monochrome, ghost-like paintings and prints of oblique crossing lines that look like maps of the streets, many inspired by Los Angeles. Lacma owns a painting that includes nearby Melrose, Fairfax, and La Brea. But another picture simply crosses “lonely” with “easy”. We all know those streets.

Perhaps the most famous of his aerial view pictures is *The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire*, painted just after this museum first opened in 1965. Ed said: “I knew I was going to assault that building somehow.”

Ed has made images of Los Angeles’s history that are now part of art history, and certainly reflect the particular shape of our culture and our city. One of my favorite series of Ed’s is one of photographs of swimming pools. No one in the 1960s would glorify Los Angeles’s low streetscape as art. But Ed did. His most well-known photographic project is a long fold-out book (Ed loves and makes books as well as words) called *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*.

As he has aged, just a tiny little bit (by the way, just a few years ago he made GQ’s list of ten most stylish men in America), he has repainted, redrawn, and rephotographed an aging and changing Los Angeles. And Ed doesn’t just paint sunshine. He also paints “noir”. He obliterates words too. He paints things disintegrating. He paints dark shadows. In Ed’s paintings, like Lacma, Norm’s diner is also on fire.

The unusually wide aspect ratio of so many of Ed’s pictures have been described as Panavision. But it’s also the shape of the image in a car’s rear view mirror. Ed’s big

Hollywood billboard was painted in reverse so you could see it properly—as you drove by. Claude Monet looked out of his studio window onto the lily ponds of Giverny. It seems like, for Ed, the analogous view is out of the car window in Los Angeles. Monet painted cathedrals. Ed paints gas stations.

The great British art historian Reyner Banham thought this city presented a new paradigm of architecture and human civilisation. He used a lot of Ed's pictures in his 1971 masterpiece of a book about Los Angeles. In my own dog-eared copy of that book I had, ironically, decades ago, especially marked the page that had an illustration of the 1939 May Company department store—which became part of Lacma's campus in the 1990s, and which will become the new Academy Museum of Motion Pictures in the near future. At the time I didn't know that it was Ed's photograph, or that it was from his incredibly amazing series of pictures entitled "34 Parking Lots". But I did stare at the image, and got it, before I knew it was art. Built in 1939, the May Company was the first big department store built for the automobile, with a parking lot and and a big entrance at the back. I stared at the geometric composition of orderly white lines on dark asphalt. It did immediately remind me of a Modernist painting, by Piet Mondrian perhaps.

More Hollywood: Ed has even painted the frames of a film, as in "The End". Ed's pictures of words, of ordinary buildings, of fire, of shadows—out of the window of a car, or from up high—make you see things literally from a different angle, and metaphorically from a different point of view. JG Ballard said: "Ed Ruscha has the coolest gaze in American Art." Ed makes us slow down and see the potential art in everything around us.

*The writer is the chief executive and Wallis Annenberg director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. This article is based on a speech honoring Ruscha at the museum's second Art + Film Gala on 27 Octobe*