

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

41

Monster Children
Magazine

Ed Ruscha
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ED

RUSCHA



FEW PEOPLE HAVE MADE MORE OF AN IMPACT ON LOS ANGELES THAN ARTIST ED RUSCHA. OVER THE LAST HALF-CENTURY HIS WORK AS A PAINTER, ILLUSTRATOR, FILMMAKER, PRINTMAKER AND PHOTOGRAPHER HAS HELPED DEFINE THE POP ART MOVEMENT AND ELEVATE LA'S STATUS AS A KEY PLAYER IN THE WORLD OF CONTEMPORARY ART. HIS LACONIC REPRESENTATIONS OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA OFFER A DEADPAN COMMENTARY ON THE SOCIAL CURRENTS DRIVING AMERICAN CULTURE.

INFUSED IN ALL THINGS RUSCHA IS AN ENDURING LOVE FOR A CITY WHOSE IDENTITY SEEMS TO CHANGE WITH EVERY PASSING FAD, A REPUTED DEFICIENCY RUSCHA HAS TURNED INTO VIRTUE. FOR OVER 50 YEARS, THE OKLAHOMA CITY NATIVE'S DEEP EXPLORATION OF SOCIETAL EVOLUTION, BOTH LITERARILY AND VISUALLY, REMAINS AS AFFABLE AS IT IS PROFOUND. WHETHER HE'S EFFECTING IT ON THE BOARD OF THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, OR CONTEMPLATING IT ON THE STREET NEAR HIS STUDIO IN CULVER CITY, RUSCHA'S INTERPRETATIONS OF CHANGE CONTINUE TO PUSH LOS ANGELES TOWARDS MUCH-NEEDED SELF-REFLECTION AND LIGHTEARTEDNESS. IN RETURN HE HAS BECOME LA'S POSTER-FATHER OF CIVIC PRIDE.

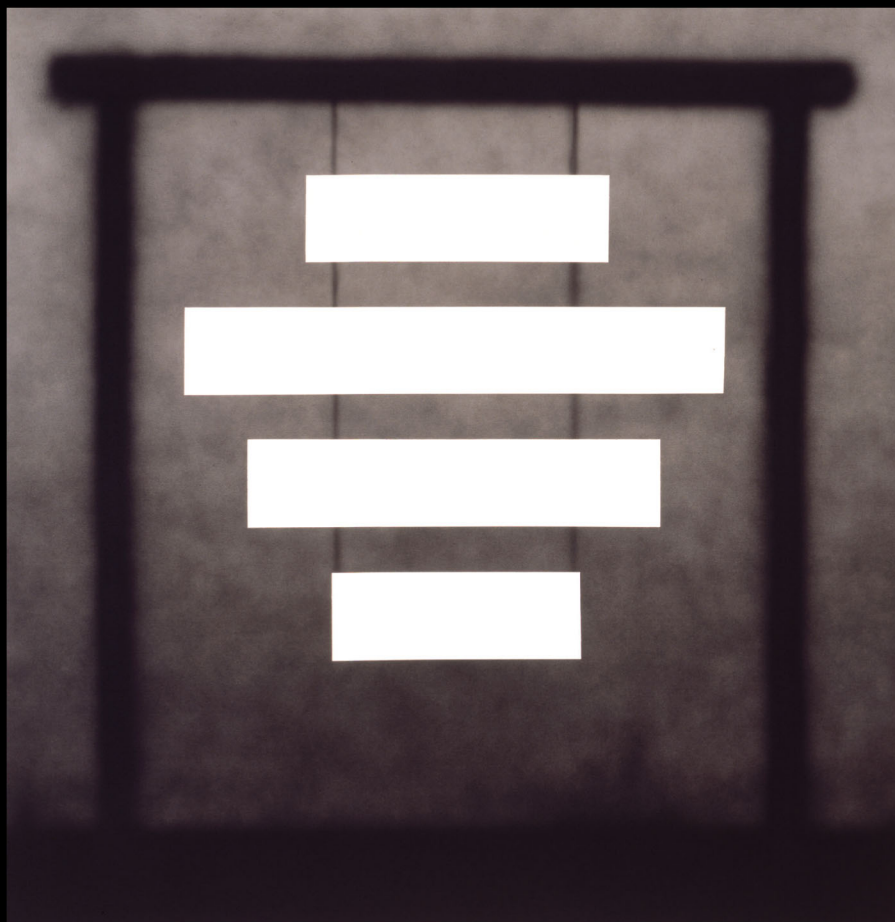
EARLIER THIS MONTH, THE NOTABLY TERSE MR RUSCHA GRANTED ME AN AUDIENCE TO DISCUSS THE FINER POINTS OF LIFE, LOVE AND THE ART OF FISTFIGHTING.

Brave Men, 1986
Oil and acrylic on canvas



MEN

BRAVE



Ed: Where do we start, what do we do? **Jordan: Well, I've written about 33 questions.** That sounds like a lot. **How 'bout I cherrypick 12 or so...** Sure, that's fine. So you live in LA? **Yes. I'm fourth-generation Angeleno.** Really? Hey, that's unusual. I remember when I came out here in the '50s there were very few people who were born in California. Most people came here. It's a different state now. **My great-great-uncle was the deputy chief of police for Los Angeles.** What year was that? **1920-something.** Back when this place was a paradise. **It's what they say. So I read in an interview, you said you were born to watch paint dry. What did you mean?** Oh boy. Well I like the poetry of the statement to begin with. But I remember seeing that before so maybe it's part of my linguistic kleptomania. I'm a kleptomaniac for words and phrases. But I think really what I meant was that I like to look at art and sometimes I spend long periods of time looking at paintings. Sometimes I'll spend a good ten minutes looking at a single work. And all the while of course it's drying more and more. **Do you spend that much time looking at work that isn't your own?** Yes, though I don't go to galleries so much, I go more to museums. Usually I don't see much art in LA because I'm always at my studio. I've got a number of galleries in my neighborhood and rarely get to them. But I know there's a lot going on out there and there's no end to new statements by younger artists and older artists too. **Are there any specific artists at the moment who are exciting to you?** I follow Neil Jenney, who is an artist who lives in New York. I have a soft spot for his work. I've got some friends who I think are really pretty damn good, like Joe Goode, and Ed Moses. And Tom Sachs, he's also in New York. But I keep my eyes open, not exactly on purpose but just by accident. You know, things come my way and I read the newspapers and I see things that are going on in the art world and man they happen so fast. **What characteristics are you drawn to in other people's work?** Their independent vision and their own peculiarities. There are some pretty idiosyncratic artists that just sort of have their own voice. I like these people who have their own voices, people who are at the wild edges of things. Those kinds of artists appeal to me. **Who were your heroes growing up?** Right off it was Ted Williams, the baseball player. And another one was Kid Gavilán, who was a Cuban boxer. Later on it was people like Robert Frank, the photographer, and Jack Kerouac and of course Muhammad Ali, who's a hero of heroes. **Sounds like you're a fan of true individualists, which is interesting to me considering so few humans appear in your work. Why do you think that is?** When I was in art school it seemed like the accent was on seeing and believing in the human anatomy. It seems like human anatomy has been pushed on artists throughout history. It's like you're not a true artist unless

you've respected physical anatomy and I just never believed in that. So humans don't really appear in my work that much, and when they do it's in the form of words, so it's a back-door idea. **How did you originally get out of Oklahoma City?** I felt like there was not much room in Oklahoma for poets or artists. When I was a kid in school, the emphasis in Oklahoma was on the oil business. It seemed like everyone was aiming to be a petroleum engineer and I just didn't see any hope in that. I wanted to go somewhere where the emphasis was on art. I considered migrating to California, where I had been before. Chicago was too cold. There were some other options, like New York City, but then I landed on Los Angeles and started making plans. **Many people credit you for turning LA into the epicenter of the West Coast contemporary art world. Do you accept that compliment?** Well, I'll take it as a compliment, but I just feel like there are too many independent artists that are just kinda like, I don't know, pounding out their own visions, and there are so many people here who are independent from my thought. I never... I'm not one of those people that can say they represent LA better or worse than someone else. Sometimes LA doesn't come out in the work, sometimes it does. **Why do you think your mother referred to you as the master of evasion?** *(laughs)* I think that was a flippant statement of hers, but she had thought that I avoided responsibility at all costs. We had a great relationship. I got a lot from my mother. **How does a typical day go for you?** Get up 6am, read the newspaper and go on with the day. Be at my studio. Spend almost all day at my studio. Sometimes it's unproductive, but it doesn't seem to matter because it's all part of the process.

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90% Devil but 10% Angel, 1982
Oil on canvas



So even when you're not working you're working? Yeah, yeah and I could be shuffling paperclips and yet somehow those paperclips matter. **What is the most frustrating part of your creative process?** If I commit to working on something then it's frustration free. There might be technical things that have to be overcome from one thing to another, but I generally don't face frustration. **Your work possesses a strong degree of playfulness and yet you're known for being reserved and understated. I wonder if art is a haven for you to express yourself in a way you're not comfortable sharing personally.** Huh, well, I generally find myself trying to get into the subconscious of whatever I'm about and what I'm about to make, and I like to get into that subconscious without being self-conscious so, you know, it's a matter of coaxing the subconscious out and sometimes just simply reacting at a snap decision. Sometimes I base my work on blind faith, which can seem kind of temporary or seem kind of flippant, but that's the way it happens for me. **Do you remember the first work of art you were fascinated with?** Oh gosh, yeah. It was at the Imperial War museum in London in 1961. I came across a little figure inside a Plexiglas box and I looked at it for a while and I realized it was the shape of a human face. I believe it was titled *The Endless Mussolini* by the Italian artist Bertelli. He created a circular profile of Mussolini using a potter's wheel so that as you look around the sculpture all you can see is the face of Mussolini,

round and round and round, all these infinite levels of roundness. That seemed to be fairly profound to me. It never entered my work in any way and I never imitated it really, but I always... I love that work of art. **What are you working on right now?** Umm, I'm sort of bouncing from one thing to another. I've been working on a series of paintings called *Psycho Spaghetti Westerns* and it's basically—I've got photographs off the streets of LA, mostly in Hollywood, of abandoned crap on the street, you know, just like sofas and mattresses and oil cans and things like that, that just kind of have age and decay to them. It's like the pity of failure, you know? And making compositions out of them, and so that's, you know, sort of—I woke up to the idea of cast-off items. I love the Valley. It's like a dreamy history of orange groves and horse ranches and things like that. Now it's much more accelerated and much more populated, but still the Valley has an appeal to me because I like the way you can drive over there, you can go somewhere, park out front of a store and walk in the front door. You know, instead of going down into some subterranean parking structure. So the valley still is sitting on top the ground—it hasn't gone underground yet, but you know, that's soon to come, when they'll start doing subterranean parking and skyscrapers. **Is LA still the city you fell in love with?** Sometimes I hate it and sometimes I love it. I always liked that thing that artist Harry Gamboa said—he said something like, 'LA is a desert with mirages and a thing happens and then,



'I WAS BORN AND RAISED CATHOLIC AND MY FOLKS WERE ALWAYS NERVOUS THAT I MIGHT SKIP THE CHURCH, YOU KNOW, WHICH I DID ON PERFECT CONSCIENCE. AND SO I JUST FEEL LIKE I CAN EMBRACE ATHEISM AND IT SUITS ME FINE.'



HOLLYWOOD

poof, it's gone!' I always liked that, that's true, but when I look back on why I came here, first thing that comes to mind is vegetation. I love palm trees and we certainly didn't have those in Oklahoma. And also there was this kind of swank lifestyle that occurred here in the mid-1950s and that included custom cars, houses, people—it was like a hangover from World War II and I went for the whole thing. You know, I bought into every part of it. **Why the Sunset Strip?** Well it's kind of a mythical place in a way, and it's just a road full of history, and maybe it's the words. Words seem to get to me, and I felt like documenting it so I first started photographing all the buildings and all the acreage of Sunset Strip. I've watched it change over the years and somehow it's a little wiggly part of the LA map that I still feel is vital, and where it'll go from here, I don't know. **You recently resigned from the board of MOCA after the ousting of Paul Shimmel. What was your feeling at the time of your resignation? And what is your feeling now, now that Jeffrey Deitch has announced his resignation?** Yeah, well first of all, I like Jeffrey Deitch and I liked what he represented. Of course, what he was able to perform, that's questionable, but I was for his hiring. At the same time I was also very saddened to see that Paul Shimmel was gone because I felt like he was a backbone, sort of like a flashlight in the dark in that institution and then I was traveling in Europe and I got the news that all my fellow artists on the board there were resigning and I decided to do the same, partly in solidarity and also because I felt I had fulfilled my role as being on that board. You know, being on a board, it's all about money. And I felt like, well, how much do I have to contribute to this thing? The idea of

programming and what you're gonna do with the public and what you're gonna exhibit in the museum is the most important thing about all of it. And at the same time, when I resigned, I just felt like I don't mind being the last little calf that's running behind the wagon train, way behind, you know? I was actually sad to see Deitch leave. **How come?** I felt he needed a little more time to do a few more things but gradually he lost support. He was a mystery man in a way because he very seldom said anything and he didn't make statements. Maybe that was by design, maybe he did that on purpose, but I felt like he could have spoken out more. I think MOCA still has great potential whatever happens. **How come you never went into teaching, Ed? It occurs to me that you would've been a very good teacher.** Not so much. I did teach for like six months, filled in for somebody's sabbatical at UCLA in 1970. It was fun to cook up assignments for students but as far as having an appetite for teaching people about art, I was sort of out to lunch, and I felt like the only people I connected with, I believe, were the skeptics—people who were doubting what I was saying really ended up being the best students and that was ironic to me. But I still feel like it's an art to be able to teach art. And it's a true talent—some people have it and some don't. You don't have to be a good artist to teach art. And I don't feel like I had the aptitude to do it; besides, I was always regretting not being able to spend that time in my studio. **Where did the idea behind *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* come from?** I did a lot of driving over US 66 between Oklahoma and California and I just—somehow my attention focused on these gas stations and they seemed to be some kind of... They were like profound, triumphant

structures. And I almost thought, 'God I could live in one of those things.' You know, it has the little overhang to keep the sun off your car. Go inside, live inside one of those places. It sort of was the bridge between architecture and art for me. And so I began to see gas stations as boxes with words on them and somehow that worked into my idea with photography and I came to a point in my life where I knew I had to make a book about something so hey, why not gas stations. **But you didn't limit it to 26—you ultimately photographed many more.** Yeah I did, I took many more but somehow I came down to 26, which was, I don't know, preordained, I don't know where that came from. That's what I mean by blind faith: 'Hey it's gotta be 26, something told me.' It's gotta be 26, so that's where it was. **Now for a few non-sequiturs: do 'brave men run in your family'? Oh, hardly. I think that's all Hollywood talk. Yeah, brave men RUN in my family. Or as it goes, you know, 'Are you brave?' 'Yeah, brave men RUN in my family.' Have you ever been in a fistfight?** Yeah, I boxed a little bit when I was in high school but I was in a fistfight once on 52nd and Vermont, down there in the ghetto. I was waiting for a girlfriend to meet me to go to this Mexican restaurant and I got jumped by a bunch of young kids. I got a busted finger out of the deal. **When was the last time you were afraid?** How about 52nd and Vermont. **Was it a long time ago?** Yeah, it was probably 1963. Yeah, 50 years ago. 50 years ago, fistfight. **Have you ever been surfing?** Yeah, I went surfing once and didn't like it so much because I didn't like to paddle. So I'll leave that up to my son and my grandsons. **What role does music play in your life?** Quite a bit, actually. I mean I grew up in kind of a Jim Crow era where blacks were meant to go

to the back of the bus, that was all Oklahoma at the time. Colored drinking fountains, white drinking fountains, I grew up in that and it's so great to see that gone. And yet at the same time there was an underground music scene, which was rhythm and blues, and 'race music' they called it then. Lou Richards, Chuck Berry, people like that, Clyde McPhatter. So I listened to a lot of music then that was like du-wop music and rhythm and blues, so I really got into that, and it speaks to me. I still listen to it all the time. **Do you believe in God?** No but yes but no. I'm a good atheist but when I came to California I felt like I was kind of unlearning things that I had learned before. That was the best thing, that I learned to unlearn things I'd learned before. I was born and raised Catholic and my folks were always nervous that I might skip the church, you know, which I did on perfect conscience. And so I just feel like I can embrace atheism and it suits me fine. **How would you define love?** Boy that's like the hot griddle, trying to describe that. But maybe like, well, it's an engine that works, and maybe you could apply that to almost any facet of your life—if it's an engine that works and gives you great return, then that's love. **What are you currently excited about?** Well I get excited about a lot of different things and I go to the desert a lot and sometimes it's just to go out there and splash water on the ground—I've got plants growing out there. And that seems to be such a microscopic endeavor in world importance but I do it and I have great excitement about growing things. I just feel like I'm a 75-year-old storehouse of blurred notions that likes plants. **Thanks Ed. Appreciate the time. Hope to see you on the street.** Tap my shoulder. ✖

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Ave of Disgust, 1989
Acrylic on canvas

