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Ed Ruscha's Foray Into Film

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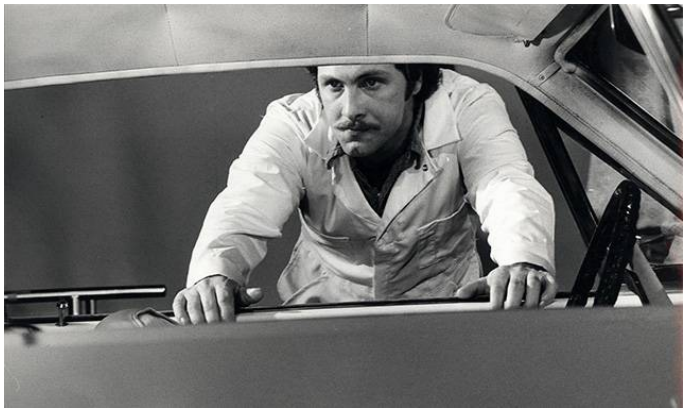

Jim Ganzer in Ruscha's 1975 short film, "Miracle." (© Ed Ruscha. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery)

The smog and golden hue of Hollywood have often permeated the work of artist Ed Ruscha. Sometimes, as in his paintings of the Hollywood sign ("Hollywood," 1968) or the 20th Century Fox logo ("Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights," 1962), literally; other times, as in his text-based work, the influence is less obvious. Bold and brightly colored, his earliest pop works display an affection for the surfaces of Los Angeles, the warm glove that surrounds Hollywoodland, with a hint of something rumbling just below — an undercurrent of sadness, even ambivalence. They are like episodes of "The Twilight Zone" on canvas, brimming with the sense that something is happening that you don't understand.

An Oklahoma transplant born in 1937, Ruscha was fascinated, but not completely hypnotized, by the allure of the movies. Like many of his contemporaries, Ruscha embraced the medium of film in the early 1970s, but with different concerns. "Premium" (1971) and "Miracle" (1975), two short films screening at New York's Anthology Film Archives on November 24 as part of the White Cube/Black Box series, couldn't be any different from the conceptual film exercises of contemporaries John Baldessari or Bruce Nauman. There is little formal or thematic experimentation, and if the films resemble anything, it's the early shorts comedian Albert Brooks made for "Saturday Night Live." Both hinge on surreal plot devices, but don't shy away from physical comedy of buffoonery.

As part of the program, Ruscha's films will screen alongside work by Kenneth Anger("Kustom Kar Kommandos"), Owen Land("No Sir, Orison!"), Bette Gordon ("An Erotic Film"), Hollis Frampton ("Lemon"), andMorgan Fischer ("Turning Over"), which expand on and illuminate the connections Ruscha draws between sex, food, and automobiles in his work.

“Premium,” the better of Ruscha’s two films, began its life as a short story by his best friend,Mason Williams, who would later serve as a writer on “The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour.” (Tommy Smothers appears in the film.) Ruscha would adapt the story into an early artist book called “Crackers” in 1969, and the film follows the story pretty closely: An unnamed man (played by artist Larry Bell) rents a dilapidated hotel room and decides to make a giant salad on the bed sheets. Then he picks up a date (model Leon Bing) in a limousine, brings her to the room, and convinces her, after much prodding, to get in the salad bed. After drenching her in dressing, he realizes he forgot crackers. Leaving her in the room, he runs to his limousine, drives to store to pick up crackers, and goes home, where he eats in solitary peace.

The film is not devoid of comedy. The premise is bizarre and awkwardly funny, but it’s little more than a single joke played out over 24 minutes. The same can be said of “Miracle,” which focuses on a car mechanic who, after becoming obsessed with repairing the engine of a red 1965 Ford Mustang, misses a date with a beautiful blonde (played by singer Michelle Phillips). Both films are kitschy, and resemble 1950’s entertainment turned on its head. But their absurd surfaces don’t signify depth. Unlike the painting that “Miracle” shares its title with, there isn’t an abyss of meaning to be found underneath.

This doesn’t make them bad, just different from Ruscha’s visual art. It’s a detour, and one worth looking at. But there’s a reason they are not discussed often in writings about his work. The films act as sketches for larger ideas, and seem relatively minor compared to his monumental body of work. And this, it seems, was part of the plan. Later in his career, the artist was honest about how his film work wasn’t meant to be bound by the restrictions of the white cube. “Some artists make films that are an end in themselves… they’re statements,” Ruscha said. “Mine’s not like that. I don’t want people to look at the film like it’s a deep statement on my part. It’s just an excuse, the story, to make a movie…. I don’t know where the movie fits in anywhere, and I can’t place it in my art at all.”