

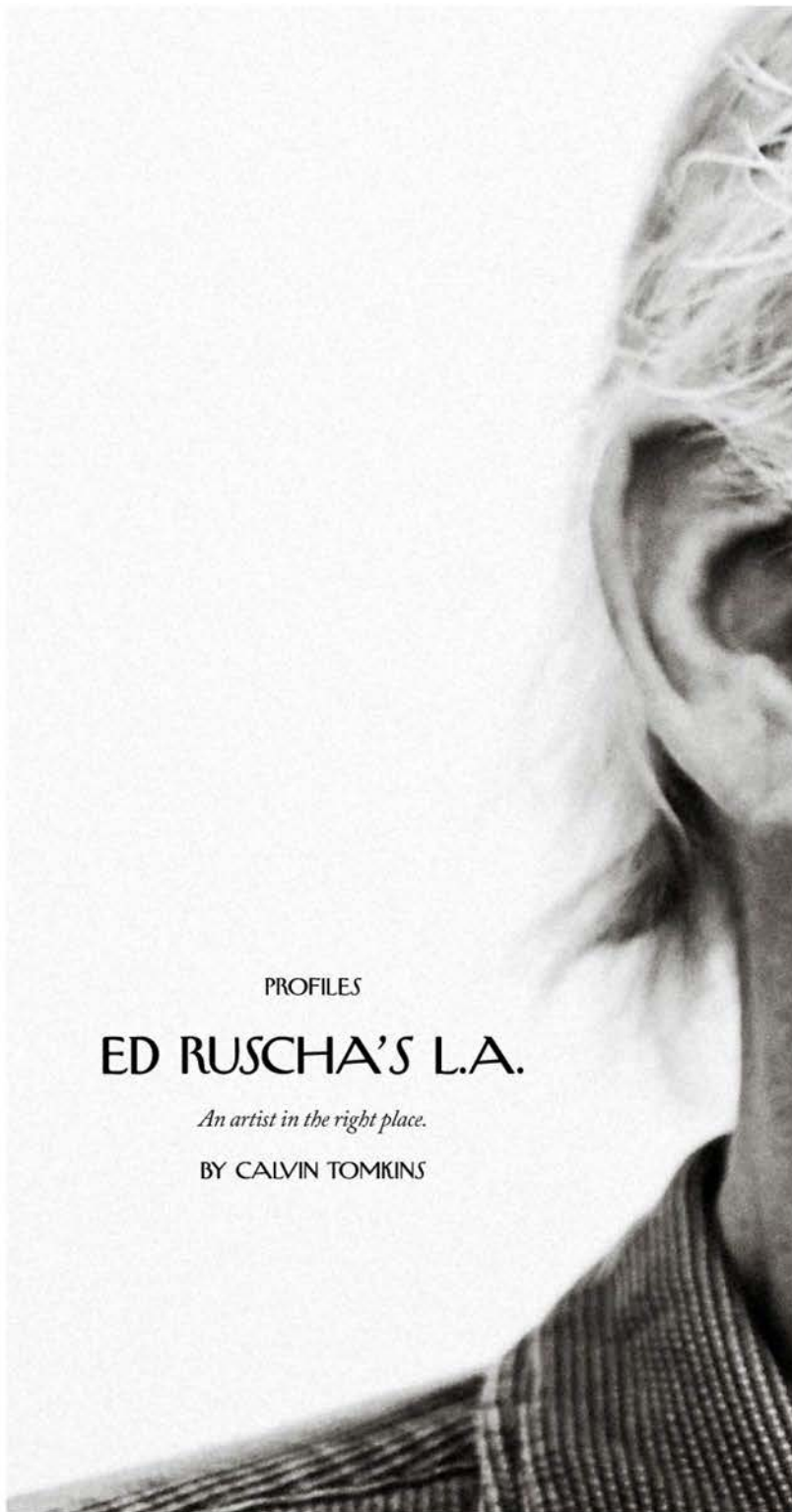
GAGOSIAN GALLERY



If you need cheering up, go to the Museum of Modern Art and look at a painting called “Oof,” by Edward Ruscha. The title and the subject are identical, just those three block letters, each one bigger than your head, in cadmium yellow on a background of cobalt blue. The six-foot-square canvas currently hangs in Gallery 19, on the fourth floor, along with Roy Lichtenstein’s “Girl with Ball,” Andy Warhol’s “Gold Marilyn Monroe” and “Orange Car Crash Fourteen Times,” and other Pop Art trailblazers of the early nineteen-sixties. “Oof” outdoes them all in its immediate, antic impact. This is not the kind of picture that reveals hidden depths on subsequent viewings. Everything is right there, every time, and it never fails to make me feel good.

Ruscha (pronounced Ru-SHAY) was twenty-six when he painted it, in 1963, three years out of art school, living in Los Angeles, and already hitting his stride. He had vetoed the spontaneous, loose-elbow, Abstract Expressionist style that still prevailed at the Chouinard Art Institute, where he studied in the late nineteen-fifties, shortly before it became the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts). “They would say, Face the canvas and let it happen, follow your own gestures, let the painting create itself,” he later recalled in an interview, but that didn’t pan out for him. Ruscha had seen, reproduced in the magazine *Print*, a Jasper Johns collage painting called “Target with Four Faces,” and it had opened up a new range of possibilities. He decided that whatever he was going to do in art would have to be “completely premeditated.”

He made a few Johns-influenced paintings. One showed a can of Spam rocketing through space; in another, a real box of Sun-Maid raisins was flattened on a canvas, above the partly painted-over place name “Vicksburg.” Very soon, he zeroed in on the Johnsian notion of painting words. “It was so simple, and something I could commit to,” he said last winter, when I visited him in Los Angeles. Ruscha, at seventy-five, is lean and fit, and his natural reserve is offset by an easygoing friendliness. We were sitting in the library and office space of his immense, warehouse-like studio in Culver City, which he moved into two years ago. Los Angeles was having a cold snap, the heat wasn’t working, and Ruscha had lent me a heavy-duty parka to wear. “I would settle on a word



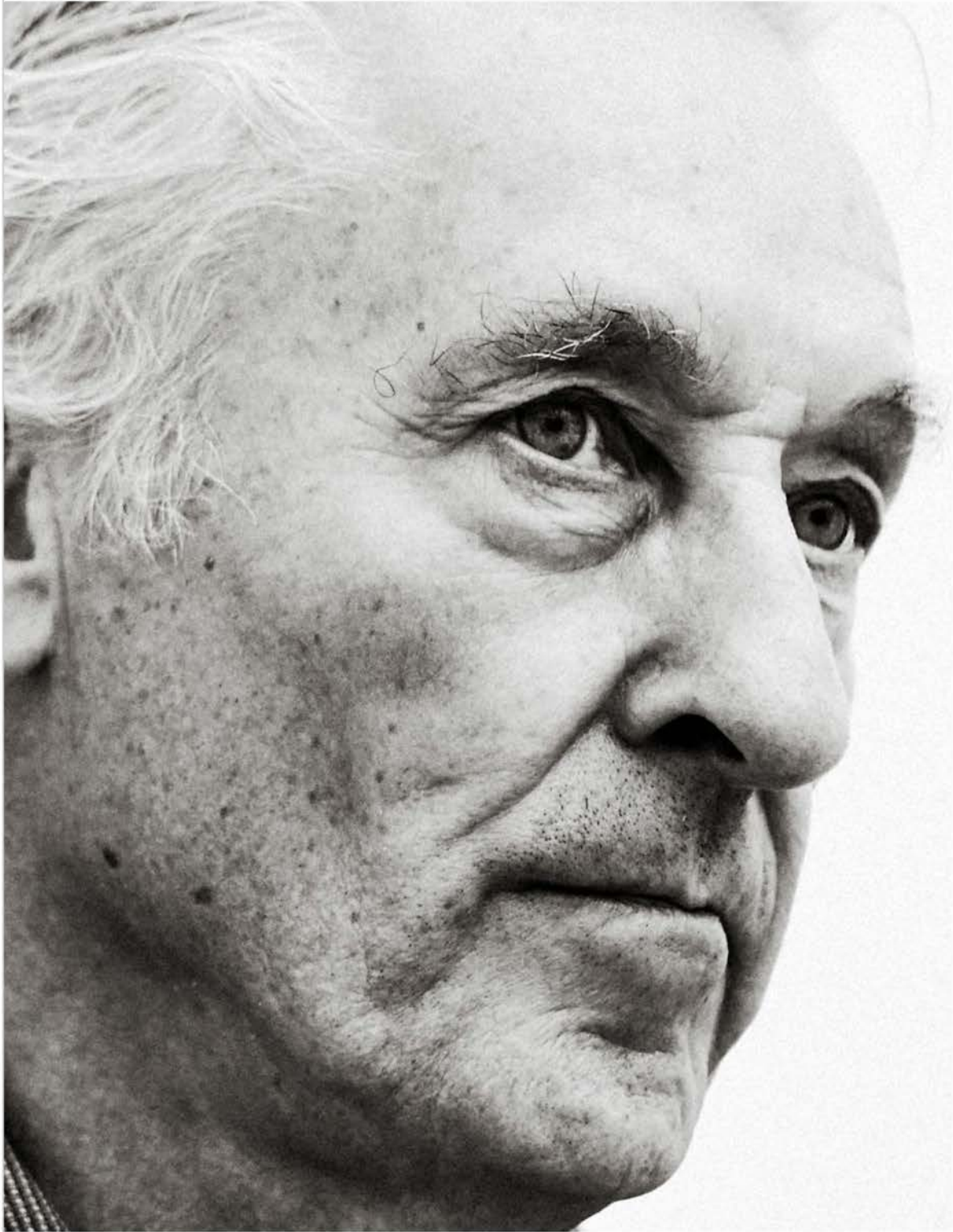
PROFILES

ED RUSCHA'S L.A.

An artist in the right place.

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

Nearly everything about Los Angeles appealed to Ruscha. He wanted to live there, and he



knew that the only thing he could be was an artist. "I could see I was just born for the job, born to watch paint dry," he said.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SOFIA SANCHEZ & MAURO MONGIELLO

like 'boss,'" he said. "That was a powerful word to me, and it meant various things—an employer, and a term for something cool. Also, a brand of work clothes." "Boss" appeared in 1961, black letters on a dark-brown background, and was followed, during the next three years, by "Honk," "Smash," "Noise," "Oof," "Won't," and other word paintings. He chose commonplace, one-syllable words that had what he described as "a certain comedic value." "Oof" was different—onomatopoeic, for one thing, and funnier. "It had one foot in the world of cartooning," he explained, speaking slowly and lingering over a word now and then, as though to savor its quiddity. "You get punched in the stomach, and that's 'Oof.' It was so obvious, and so much a part of my growing up in the U.S.A. I felt like it was almost a patriotic word." Ruscha, who was born in Omaha in 1937, and spent his childhood in Oklahoma City, may be the only living American who can discern patriotism in a grunt. Our conversation was interrupted at this point by Woody, a large, thirteen-year-old mixed-breed and somewhat arthritic dog, who was making plaintive noises; Ruscha got up and helped him out the back door.

"Oof" had an adventurous early life. Ruscha lent it to his childhood friend Mason Williams, and a few years later, when Williams was working as the head comedy writer for the Smothers Brothers, he let Tommy Smothers borrow it. The picture fell off a wall in Smothers's house and landed face down on a chessboard, whose sharp-tipped metal pieces punctured the canvas in several places. Ruscha took it back, got it repaired, did some repainting, and kept it until 1988, when a group of very wealthy donors bought it for the Museum of Modern Art.

Language has often invaded the visual arts during the past century, but no other artist uses it the way Ruscha does. His early paintings are not pictures *of* words but words treated as visual constructs. "I like the idea of a word becoming a picture, almost leaving its body, then coming back and becoming a word again," he once said. "I see myself working with two things that don't even ask to understand each other."

Los Angeles was largely oblivious of the visual arts in the early nineteen-sixties. Unlike San Francisco, which considered itself the cultural capital of the West, L.A. had no significant art museum, few

galleries, and only a handful of people who would even think of buying contemporary art. It did have a crop of obstreperous young artists, though, and in 1962 Walter Hopps, a former U.C.L.A. student who had just been named curator of the quaint, unassuming Pasadena Art Museum, put several of them in a group exhibition there called "New Painting of Common Objects." It was the first American museum show of what would soon be known as Pop Art, and it included, along with works by Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, and Jim Dine, three recent paintings by Ed Ruscha.

A year later, Ruscha had his first one-man show at the Ferus Gallery, which Hopps and the artist Edward Keinholtz had started in 1957, in the back room of an antique shop on North La Cienega Boulevard. In addition to his single-word images, the 1963 Ferus show included the more ambitious "Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights," an eleven-foot-wide view of the Twentieth Century Fox logo as a three-dimensional monolith, and "Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western," in which the word and the three objects, meticulously reproduced in their actual sizes, seemed to be trying to escape from the picture. The paintings were priced between a hundred and fifty and four hundred dollars, and six of them were sold—a remarkable debut. That same year, Ruscha finished "Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas," the first of his many paintings, drawings, and



prints of gas stations, whose dramatic, raked perspective came from an effect he had observed in old black-and-white films. "You know those movies where a train starts out in the lower-right corner and gradually fills the screen?" he asked. "The gas station is on a diagonal like that, from lower right to upper left. It also had something to do with teachings I picked up in art school, about dividing the picture plane. I didn't really know what I was up to then, or what direction to take.

I was just following these little urges. It was pure joy, to be able to do something like that."

In 1965, the opening of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in its Wilshire Boulevard location signalled a new era in the city's cultural development. Ruscha observed the event with another eleven-foot-wide painting that showed the museum complex in all its boxy, corporate-modern banality, but with smoke and flames shooting out of the Ahmanson Building, and not a single human being in sight. "Los Angeles County Museum of Art on Fire" and several other Ruscha paintings of burning buildings are sometimes cited as evidence of a "dark side" in his art, but they don't seem dark to me. My guess is that he really liked painting orange flames. The LACMA picture does give rise to thoughts about the city's expanding cultural pretensions, though, and I asked Ruscha whether this had been part of his intention. Not really, he said. "I went on a helicopter ride over L.A., and took some Polaroid pictures of the museum from the air, and it just sort of went on from there." But the fire? "Well, there's always a little room for questioning authorities." Joseph Hirshhorn, the uranium millionaire, bought the painting in 1968, and eventually gave it to the Hirshhorn Museum, in Washington, D.C. This is a source of undying regret to Michael Govan, the current director of the Los Angeles County Museum, who considers it a quintessential Los Angeles picture.

The engine of Los Angeles culture is Hollywood, but until quite recently there were few connections between the movie crowd and the Los Angeles art community. Film stars who collect art have been extremely rare, and LACMA and the other art institutions that have emerged since 1965 have had amazingly bad luck attracting the financial support of Hollywood moguls. One of the few people with ties to both camps is Ruscha. He has dated starlets, models (Lauren Hutton, Léon Bing), and at least one bona-fide movie star, Samantha Eggar, with whom he lived for several years during the nineteen-eighties. Ruscha made two short, 16-mm. films in the nineteen-seventies, applying traditional Hollywood methods to weird plots. In "Premium," a man takes a young woman

(Bing) to a seedy room, has her strip and lie down on a bed covered with freshly tossed salad, then goes to an expensive hotel room, alone, and eats Premium crackers. "Miracle," the second film, follows the lead actor's unexplained transformation, while repairing a carburetor, from a greasy auto mechanic to an immaculate lab technician.

Hollywood films and cinematic perspectives have influenced many of Ruscha's paintings, but the underlying subject of his work has always been Los Angeles itself. He saw the place for the first time when he was fourteen, on a car trip with his parents, and when he came back in 1956 to go to art school, driving from Oklahoma City with Mason Williams, there were no disappointments. Nearly everything about the city appealed to him—the endless sprawl, the two-story apartment houses with outdoor stairways, the hot rods, the jazz clubs, the billboards, the sunrises and sunsets, the boulevards that led to the ocean.

He roomed in a succession of boarding houses and cheap apartments in the Hollywood area, and took restaurant jobs to stay afloat. His parents were paying his tuition at Chouinard. Ruscha's father, a strict Catholic and a rigid disciplinarian whose parents came from Germany (where the family name was Rusiska), worked for thirty years as an auditor with the Hartford Insurance Company in Oklahoma City. He had been unhappy about his son's decision to go to art school, but he changed his mind after reading, in *The Saturday Evening Post*, that Chouinard was supported largely by Walt Disney, and that many of its students became well-paid animators for the Disney studio. During his second year at Chouinard, Ruscha lived with his former schoolmate Joe Goode and three other Oklahoma-born art students in a ramshackle house in East Hollywood, where the combined rent was sixty dollars a month. Several of them, including Ruscha, had live-in girlfriends. Ever since high school, girls had doted on Ruscha—they found him shy and laconic, but wickedly handsome, and cooler than Cary Grant.

After graduating from Chouinard, in 1960, Ruscha took a full-time job with the Carson/Roberts advertising agency. Although he (and his father) had assumed that he would become a commercial artist, he hated the work and quit

after a few months. In 1961, he went to Europe, with his mother and his younger brother, Paul. Their father had died two years earlier, and their older sister, Shelby, had married a Venezuelan engineer and was living in Caracas. Dorothy Ruscha, whose zest for music and books and art had helped to make life in Oklahoma City more bearable for the three children, decided it was time that she, too, saw more of the world. They started in Paris, where Dorothy bought a blue Citroën 2CV, and during the next four months they drove through France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Yugoslavia, Austria, Germany, and then Ireland (where her people came from), Scotland, and England. Paul left the tour early, to attend his high-school sweetheart's graduation. Dorothy flew home from London, and Ruscha, on his own, returned to Paris for a month. Although he made dutiful visits to museums, older art didn't interest him. He spent most of his time walking the streets and painting small pictures, with oil on paper, of signs (the Art Nouveau entrance to the Metro) and other local insignia.

Stopping off in New York City on his way back, he paid a call on Leo Castelli, whose gallery showed Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Frank Stella. No introduction, no calling beforehand—he just walked in with the Paris paintings under his arm. Castelli, all European charm and suavity, said that Ruscha's work looked interesting, and told him to stay in touch. Ruscha stayed in touch for twelve years, visiting the gallery on his occasional trips to New York, and in 1973 Castelli became his New York dealer. Ruscha never seriously considered moving East. "That was too big a decision, and too big a jump," he told me. "It just didn't feel like it was meant to be." He wanted to live in Los Angeles, and by the time he returned from Europe he knew that the only thing he could possibly be was an artist. "I could see I was just born for the job, born to watch paint dry," he said.

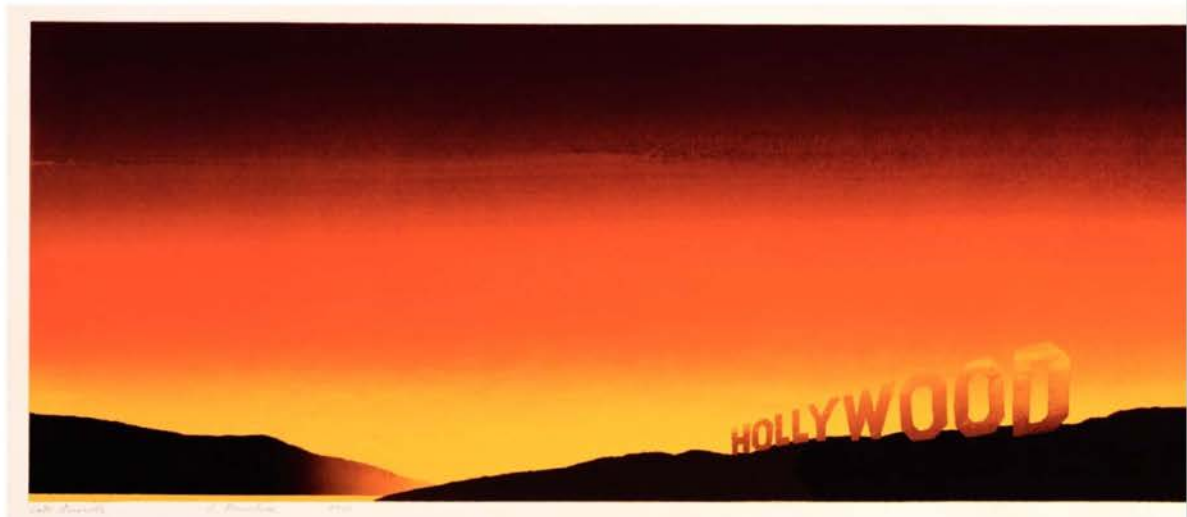
Steve Martin and his wife, Anne Stringfield, live near the top of a steep drive in Beverly Hills. Martin is one of the renegade Hollywood stars who love and collect art—early modern and

contemporary, although nothing as yet by Ruscha. I had dinner there one night, along with Ruscha and his wife, Danna, a vivacious woman with blond hair and a warm smile. Danna and Ed met in 1965, when Danna was working as an animator for the Hanna-Barbera studio, and they were married in 1967. Their son, Edward Joseph Ruscha, called Eddie, was born a year later. The marriage broke up in 1972, and Ruscha had a number of relationships with other women. His daughter, Sonny Bjornson, who is now in her twenties, works for the Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles, and is about to

walls, but only one, near the kitchen, was by Ruscha. Impressed by the twelve Kandinsky prints in the master bathroom, Martin asked whether we could watch Ed take a shower. A lot of barking came from the other end of the house, where Danna had put Woody and six other dogs she has adopted from rescue shelters. (She has found homes for around two hundred and fifty others.)

Oscar Wilde said that George Bernard Shaw had no enemies but his friends didn't like him. Ruscha seems to have no enemies and his friends like him, but even old friends, like the artist John

after 1950, a few more contemporary galleries had opened, and a California school of art and artists had emerged, with two main branches: Ferus artists such as Billy Al Bengston, Ed Moses, John Altoon, and Edward Kienholz, who applied Abstract Expressionist paint handling or Rauschenberg-inspired collage to their often scathing interpretations of popular culture; and the so-called "finish fetish" artists, including Larry Bell, Craig Kauffman, and Robert Irwin, whose pristine, obsessively worked forms became California's version of minimalism. Irving Blum, a boundlessly optimis-



"Hollywood" (1968). For twenty years, Ruscha kept a studio in East Hollywood. "If I could see the Hollywood sign, I'd know the weather

be married. Eddie Ruscha, a CalArts graduate who paints and composes music, helps out in his father's studio every Monday, filling in the backgrounds of some of the large-scale paintings. He and his wife, the artist Francesca Gabbiani, have two children. Ruscha is close to his children and grandchildren, and he has stayed friendly with many of his former girlfriends. He and Danna got together again in the nineteen-eighties, and they remarried in 1988, in Las Vegas, at the same chapel they used the first time.

After dinner, we all drove partway down the hill and stopped at the Ruschas' house. Its previous owner was the Hollywood agent Swifty Lazar, and nearly every room offered sweeping views of the city. There were paintings by modern and contemporary artists on the

Baldessari, sometimes feel that they don't know him very well. "You have to get through that veil," Baldessari told me. Many observers have pointed out that human beings almost never appear in Ruscha's work. During dinner, apropos of nothing, Martin had said, "I've known Ed for forty years, but I've only known him really well for the last fifteen minutes."

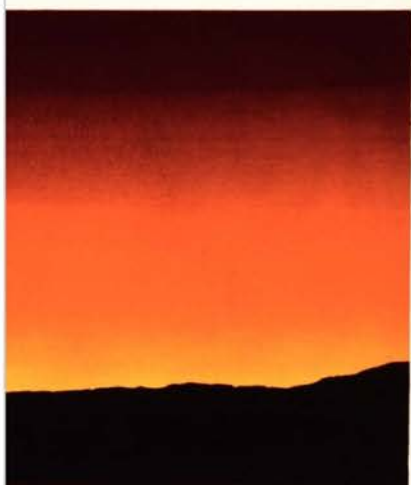
By the mid-nineteen-sixties, Los Angeles had supplanted San Francisco as the West Coast center for contemporary art. Its art schools drew ambitious students from around the country, and many of them, lulled by the climate and by the availability of inexpensive studio spaces, elected to stay there. Although the Los Angeles County Museum of Art paid scant attention to anything done

tic young entrepreneur who had moved from New York to Los Angeles with the idea of starting an art gallery there, bought out Ed Kienholz's share in the Ferus Gallery in 1958, and changed its focus, dropping many of the locals (but taking on Ruscha) and bringing in some of New York's emerging Pop artists. He gave Andy Warhol his first one-man show anywhere, at the Ferus in 1962. A year later, Walter Hopps filled the rapidly modernizing Pasadena Art Museum with works by Marcel Duchamp—his first retrospective. Ruscha saw the show and met Duchamp, whose readymades—common manufactured objects elevated to the status of art by his act of choosing them—had made a big impression on him when he was in art school.

Leo Castelli used to say, in the late sixties, that Los Angeles was poised to

ED RUSCHA, "HOLLYWOOD" (1968)

rival and maybe surpass New York as the new art mecca, but that didn't happen. The handful of West Coast collectors whom Hopps, Blum, Nicholas Wilder, and a few other dealers had worked so hard to develop were happy to look at contemporary art in L.A., but they preferred to buy it in New York. Blum had infuriated the Ferus group by showing New York artists at what they considered "their" gallery; he did this to keep the gallery afloat, and because he loved the work, but he could never sell enough of it. The Ferus closed in 1967. *Artforum*, the authoritative journal that had moved



wasn't too smoggy," he said.

from San Francisco to Los Angeles in 1965, pulled up stakes and moved to New York. Later, so did Blum. Hopps left to work for the Corcoran Gallery, in Washington, D.C. Norton Simon, the California food-services billionaire, took over the financially shaky Pasadena Museum in 1975, deemphasized its contemporary holdings, and filled the premises with his collection of Impressionists and Old Masters. In torching the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Ruscha was a more accurate prophet than Castelli. The fizzling of expectations, though, left many Los Angeles artists with a lingering resentment of New York and New York artists.

Some of the original Ferus people had doubts about Ruscha, who was never really part of their macho, highly contentious fraternity. (Mary Dean, who has

been his assistant and studio manager since 1998, told me that she has never seen him lose his temper.) "They thought he was too Pop-oriented," Blum said. "But then the big paintings started appearing—'Standard Station,' and the Twentieth Century Fox one—and they came around." There were certainly Pop elements in Ruscha's paintings, along with echoes of Surrealism and Dada, but his work had more in common with the conceptual word games being played by Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, and other language-based artists in New York. Ruscha's style and subject matter, however, and the deadpan humor with which he deployed them, set him apart from anyone else on either coast. Reviewers had trouble dealing with Ruscha because his work fell into none of the useful categories. It still doesn't, and this makes him something of a hero to younger artists who use video, film, live performance, photography, social interactions, and any other means at hand—including paint—to expand the definition of art. "Ed never seems to be speaking to grownups," Adam McEwen, the British-born, New York-based conceptualist, told me recently. "He's so unpretentious, so un-condescending. He actually does deal with great themes, but in an irreverent way."

In 1966, Ruscha did a painting called "Annie, Poured from Maple Syrup," which looked as though he had done exactly that, poured maple syrup on canvas to spell the word "Annie." It led to a three-year series of immensely skillful trompe-l'oeil word pictures, in which he made oil paint resemble any number of viscous fluids. He also did paintings of bowling balls, olives, marbles, amphetamine pills, and other unrelated items that seemed to hover just above the canvas, and drawings in which three-dimensional words appeared to rise up from the surface like paper cutouts. Some of the drawings were done in graphite and others in gunpowder, a medium that he found easier to control than graphite. "I was just making up these things after frustrations with other ways of painting words," he said. The frustrations, whatever they were, brought on what seems to have been the only crisis in Ruscha's professional career. "I can't bring myself to put paint on canvas," he told the critic David Bourdon in 1972. "I find no mes-

sage there anymore." When I asked Ruscha about this statement, he said, "Well, I don't have any deep recollections of what I was thinking when I said that. It wasn't any kind of life factor." Ruscha, as his mother sometimes pointed out, has always been "a master of evasion."

He didn't paint at all in 1970, but he continued to make drawings and prints. He also showed his work in New York for the first time, at the Alexandre Iolas Gallery, and he created a "Chocolate Room" at the 1970 Venice Biennale. Most of the other American artists invited to participate that year decided to boycott the Biennale in protest against the Vietnam War. "I was against the war, but I didn't see any purpose in the boycott," Ruscha told me. "I was never an activist in that respect." A month earlier, in London, he had made a set of prints using "organic substances" (syrup, axle grease, raw egg, beet juice) instead of ink—an experiment that he carried over into many of the paintings he did after his brief falling-out with oil paint. In Venice, he silkscreened Nestlé's chocolate paste on three hundred and sixty sheets of paper, and used them, shingle style, to cover all four walls of a room. To find the U.S. Pavilion, you could follow your nose.

The Getty Museum, in Los Angeles, does not show modern paintings. It shows photographs, though, and the museum currently has on view a sampling of archival prints from the sixteen photography books that Ruscha published between 1963 and 1972, and film strips from his "Streets of Los Angeles" project, which documents fifty years of what the Getty calls a "deep engagement with Los Angeles's vernacular architecture and the urban landscape." This is a lofty description of something that began, somewhat whimsically, with a forty-eight-page, paperbound booklet called "Twentysix Gasoline Stations."

"I had the title of the book in mind before I even took the photographs," Ruscha told me, on another chilly day in his Culver City studio. He used to drive back to Oklahoma City five or six times a year, to visit his parents, and the gas stations along Route 66 became, he said, "like a musical rhythm to me—cultural belches in the landscape." He started photographing them in 1962, with a



Yashica twin-lens reflex camera that he had used in his photography classes at Chouinard. He would stop the car, stand beside it, and shoot the filling station from across the road, deliberately avoiding any sort of composition or artful lighting. His snapshot non-style has been compared to the work of Robert Frank, the Swiss photographer whose seminal book, “The Americans,” came out in 1959. Although Ruscha has said that Frank’s work “hit me with a sledgehammer,” he added that it had no direct influence on his gas-station pictures. Ruscha didn’t believe in photography as an art form. He was just getting information and bringing it back, he said, to use in a book. “I just knew I had to make a book of some kind.”

A book of some kind. Not a *livre d’artiste*, one of those high-quality collaborations between an artist and a fine-art printer, and certainly not a coffee-table buster. What he had in mind was a small, cheap, mass-produced publication that looked like an instruction manual, but with no text. He photographed many more than twenty-six gas stations during his trips to Oklahoma and back, and edited them down to twenty-six. (One became the model for his painting of the Standard Station in Amarillo.) “I like the word ‘gasoline,’ and I like the specific quality of ‘twenty-six,’” he explained.

Ruscha had spent six months working for a printing firm while he was at Chouinard; he had learned how to set type and to use the photo-offset process, and he published the book himself, in an edition of four hundred copies, priced at three dollars apiece. A few years after the book came out, he realized that it had the “inexplicable thing” that he tries for in a lot of his work—“a kind of ‘huh?’” effect. “People would look at it and say, ‘Are you kidding or what? Why are you doing this?’ That’s what I was after—the head-scratching.” In 1970, he brought out a second edition of three thousand copies. The Library of Congress returned the copy Ruscha had sent, with a note saying that it did not wish to add the book to its collections. “Twentysix Gasoline Stations” has become a collector’s item, and a well-preserved, signed first edition can bring as much as twenty-five thousand dollars.

Next up was “Various Small Fires and Milk”—snapshots of people smoking, a Zippo lighter in action, a trash fire, and other mundane conflagrations—and, at the end, a cooling glass of milk. During the next nine years, fourteen more books appeared, among them “Some Los Angeles Apartments,” “Every Building on the Sunset Strip,” “Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass,” “Real Estate Opportunities” (vacant lots), and “Royal Road Test”—a photographic record of

what happened to Ruscha’s Royal Standard typewriter when Mason Williams threw it out the window of a car that was travelling ninety miles an hour, with Ruscha driving. Compared with his paintings, he said, “The books were easy for me. I didn’t have to struggle, and I felt like I was operating on blind faith more than on any kind of decisions. It was as though somebody else was designing them.” Ruscha’s books can be seen as a triumph of the “huh?” factor. “Wow, all the buildings on Sunset fucking Strip,” John Altoon, the Ferus artist, marvelled. The books’ appeal to other artists has been cumulative and worldwide. A recent exhibition that Bob Monk put together at the Gagolian Gallery featured self-published books in response to Ruscha by more than a hundred artists in the United States, Europe, Russia, and Japan, some done as recently as last year. Among the titles were “None of the Buildings on the Sunset Strip,” “Fiftytwo Shopping Trolleys,” “Every coffee I drank in January 2010,” “Eminent Erections,” “Vingt-Six Stations Service,” and “73 Häuser von Sinemoretz.”

As a boy in Oklahoma City, delivering newspapers on his bike every morning, Ruscha had thought about making a detailed model that showed all the houses along his route, something he “could study like an architect standing over a table and plotting a city.” He never did it, but the memory led to his Sunset Strip book. To photograph the approximately two-mile strip of Sunset Boulevard, Ruscha stood in the back of a pickup truck while a friend drove. They did it early in the morning, when there were no pedestrians and almost no traffic. Ruscha shot both sides of the street, and in the book the pages are joined to form an accordion-pleated panorama that unfolds to twenty-seven feet. In 1965, he photographed the entire twenty-two miles of Sunset Boulevard, which runs from downtown L.A., through Hollywood and Bel Air and Beverly Hills, to the Pacific Ocean.

“My intention was not to have a goal in mind, but just to record a street in a very faithful way,” he said. “Sometimes there are no storefronts and it’s just land, and I photograph that, too.” Ruscha was speaking in the present tense because he and his team, which includes Gary Register, a professional photographer who

is based in Colorado, and Paul Ruscha, re-photograph Sunset Boulevard every three years or so. Paul, who has worked for his brother since 1973, photographs and documents every piece of art Ruscha makes. After their father died, in 1959, he told me, "Ed became my dad, and he still is." In addition to Sunset, they have photographed Sepulveda, which is more than forty miles long, Melrose, Hollywood Boulevard, La Cienega, and a number of other arteries, including the Pacific Coast Highway. Until the current Getty exhibition, Ruscha had never shown any of this material. Two years ago, the entire backlog—hundreds of reels of still photographs, plus a few experiments with film and video—was acquired by the Getty Research Center, which has the facilities to archive and preserve it, including the updates he keeps sending. Nobody seems to know whether the vast project is an art work or a form of urban documentation, but the general feeling is that it is both.

Ruscha and I spent a day driving around Los Angeles. The weather had turned warm again, and before we set off he showed me his garden, behind the studio. It is more like a small orchard. "Blood oranges and grapefruits right here, and some mandarin tangerines, and three avocados over there," he said. "Lemon, kumquat, pomegranate, figs, cauliflower, lettuce, peppers, and looks like I also have a gopher." He pointed to a hole, and then to a withered stalk a few feet away. "That was the world's hottest pepper, called bhut jolokia, but it died." When one of the plants dies, he scratches its name and dates on a metal disk and adds it to others on a wood plank that he keeps in the studio. Near the garden is an outdoor painting studio, and a parking space for his 2000 black Lexus and a couple of antique cars he's reconditioned—a 1939 Ford and a 1933 Ford pickup. We got into the Lexus, and turned left onto Jefferson Boulevard.

Ruscha drives smoothly, both hands on the wheel, window open. We passed several boxlike warehouse buildings that looked like the ones in the "Course of Empire" paintings that he did in 2005. A little farther, he motioned toward a building on the left, and said he used to do freelance work there in the nineteen-sixties, for an outfit called Sunset House.

He was becoming known as an artist by then, but he wasn't earning much money, so for two weeks before Christmas he would hand-letter names on porcelain frogs and other gift items, including a receptacle for dentures called Ma and Pa Chopper Hopper. When we got to Western Avenue, in East Hollywood, he pointed out a low building where he'd had his studio for more than twenty years. "I would look out my window there, and if I could see the Hollywood sign I'd know the weather wasn't too smoggy," he said. The sign first appeared in Ruscha's work in 1968, in an eight-color screen print. He painted it in 1977, from behind, so that the letters are reversed, and silhouetted against one of the lurid sunsets that L.A. used to have, in the years when the smog was especially bad. Ruscha had returned to oil paint by this time, but he soon shifted to acrylics for the long, narrow landscapes-with-words that he was doing then. The format made you think of CinemaScope.

The words on his new paintings were phrases and sentences, which rarely had a discernible connection to the image: "Thermometers Should Last Forever"; "That Was Then This Is Now"; "Honey . . . I Twisted Through More Damn Traffic to Get Here." Some of the landscapes were more than thirteen feet long—he called them "grand horizontals," the French term for top-of-the-line courtesans, and the words on several of these do suggest male-female



relationships. Although Ruscha doesn't paint people, they make their presence felt through language. He uses things that he's overheard people say, or that he's picked up from popular songs, the radio, or the movies. "Brave Men Run in My Family," which appears as both image and title in several pictures, was a Bob Hope line in "The Paleface."

We drove through other neighborhoods where he had lived or once had studios—Echo Park, Laurel Canyon,

Silver Lake. "It was a different city then," he said. "Slower. The most important changes I see are these old neighborhoods that are gradually crumbling. Every time they tear down a bungalow-style house, they replace it with a three-story box for twelve families. They're like instant slums. Nevertheless, I like everything here. In some ways, the attraction is invisible. You can't think of one thing to explain it." In 1966, he had said to an interviewer, "Being in Los Angeles has had little or no effect on my work. I could have done it anywhere," but he doesn't say that anymore.

After driving for four hours, with a pause for lunch at Lucy's El Adobe Café, and a detour to see the house where the Black Dahlia murderer was supposed to have lived, and a longer detour to search for and find a hilltop property once owned by George Herriman, whose "Krazy Kat" comics Ruscha had loved when he was growing up, we went back to Culver City and looked at photographs of the small, concrete-block house that Ruscha has owned for forty years in the California High Desert, near Joshua Tree National Monument. He designed it himself, with blueprints provided by his friend Frank Gehry in 1976. "Danna doesn't go anymore," he said. "It's pretty remote—a three-hour drive, and the only other house out there is a mile away." The property has an outdoor painting studio, a wind-powered generator, solar panels for heating, and plenty of wildlife, including rattlesnakes. Ruscha tries to go there every week, alone, for two or three days; he paints, takes long walks, watches baseball on TV (the Dodgers or the Red Sox), does maintenance work on the house, and reads. When I was in L.A., he was halfway through "Moby-Dick," but he also reads a lot of nonfiction, mainly history and science. "I have periods when I feel frustrated living in Los Angeles, when the traffic bothers me and I hate the place," he said. "But then I feel differently and I want to come back."

Ruscha had his first retrospective in 1982, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. On the cover of the exhibition catalogue was his 1979 word drawing "I Don't Want No Retro Spec-tive." He was forty-five years old, and critics still couldn't define what he did. In

the catalogue, the writer Dave Hickey complained about the difficulty of summing up “a body of critical opinion which no one had been so bold as to venture.” The exhibition travelled to four other museums, including the Whitney and LACMA, and the reviews were generally favorable but noncommittal. Writing in the *Village Voice*, Roberta Smith found the show “an inspiring example of what it means for an artist to be original in a very specific, even limited way, and to be so true to his originality that he is able to try something of everything.” At that time, Ruscha was the only Los Angeles artist represented by Leo Castelli, the most powerful name in contemporary art, but even there his status was unclear. He lived in California, and his work could make you laugh, and for some New York artists and critics that meant you didn’t take it seriously. “I had no illusions about my position in the art world or at the Castelli gallery,” Ruscha told me. “I didn’t feel like one of his leading artists, but that didn’t bother me, because I could actually make a living from the stipend he was giving me.”

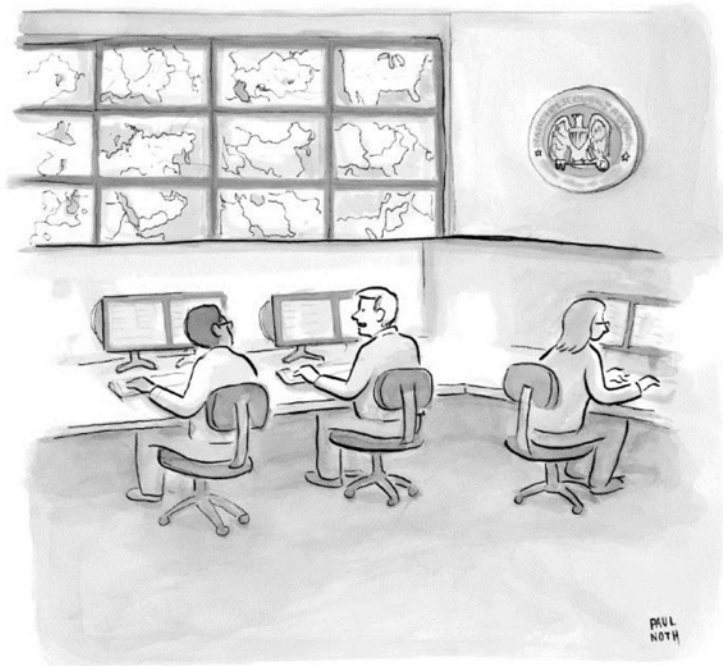
Castelli priced Ruscha’s paintings be-

tween three and four thousand dollars, a lot less than Jasper Johns was getting, but considerably more than Ruscha had earned before joining the gallery. After the retrospective, his prices went up, and his work gradually found a larger audience. In 1985, he was commissioned to do a series of murals for the Miami-Dade Public Library, in Florida. He needed more space, so he moved from Western Avenue to a bigger studio on Electric Avenue, in Venice, and began working on a larger scale. He did a series of “City Lights” pictures, which looked like nocturnal views of Los Angeles from above, with words overlaid in white paint. In many Ruscha pictures, you are looking down on something—an oblique viewpoint he has favored ever since he saw, on his first trip abroad, John Everett Millais’s painting of the drowned Ophelia at the Tate, in London. Paul Ruscha gave him a reproduction of this picture, and it rests on an easel in the studio—a talisman of Victorian sentiment, and one of the few examples of older art that Ruscha cites, without irony, as an influence. For his next series, of very large, dark “silhouette” paintings in black-and-white, he used an

airbrush to depict blurry images that echoed earlier times—a bison, a wagon train, a four-masted galleon. In the late nineteen-eighties, his work caught on with the new Japanese collectors whose avidity for contemporary Western art was driving auction prices to record highs. “That’s me, the twenty-five-year overnight sensation,” Ruscha joked. The worldwide recession in 1990 scared off the Japanese, and put an end to the eighties art boom. Ruscha’s prices slumped, and stayed down for the next dozen years.

Only in the past decade has he come to be looked upon, in New York and everywhere else, as a major artist. Since 1997, when Castelli retired, Ruscha has shown with Larry Gagosian, whose international network of thirteen galleries has apparently become an art empire too big to fail. Gagosian is Rome to Castelli’s Greece, and his most successful artists have proved impervious to the economic recession. Ruscha’s 1965–66 “Burning Gas Station” sold at Christie’s, in 2007, for just under seven million dollars, and the immense and startlingly kitsch “mountain paintings” that he has been doing since 1997 bring considerably more than a million dollars on the primary market. He borrows his snowcapped mountain landscapes from magazine illustrations or photographs, and uses them as “anonymous backdrops for words.” As he explained to me, “I’m not really painting mountains, but an idea of mountains. Maybe I faltered and started thinking it was acceptable to do a postcard-pretty picture.” We can assume that at some level he is also sending up the nineteenth-century tradition of nature as the American Sublime. His mountains are scenarios for word frolics, like “Tulsa Slut,” “Uh Oh,” and “Pay Nothing Until April.”

The ten large paintings in Ruscha’s “Course of Empire” suite, which premiered at the Venice Biennale in 2005 and came to the Whitney Museum a few months later, introduced a new and surprising element in his work, which looks suspiciously like social commentary. They were inspired by Thomas Cole’s allegorical cycle (1833–36) showing the birth, flowering, decline, and destruction of an imaginary city. Ruscha’s cool, minimalist treatment of the theme is quieter but more devastating. He took five of the black-and-white “Blue Collar” paintings of industrial sites that he had done in



“After we read every e-mail ever written, I’m gonna start on that new Dan Brown novel.”

1992—factories, a trade school, an isolated outdoor telephone booth—and painted five new ones of the same sites, in color, altered by time, circumstance, and his imagination. The trade school is shuttered, the telephone booth is gone, the “Tool and Die” insignia on a factory has given way to lettering in an indecipherable Asian language. A message is being delivered, and it’s hard not to think that it has to do with American decline. Donna De Salvo, the Whitney’s chief curator, cautioned me against specific readings. “I would never say Ed’s work is ‘about’ something,” she said. “The genius of it is that he takes something incredibly familiar and gives it this level of ambiguity.” Ruscha was gently dismissive when I brought up the subject of national decline. He said, “From the beginning, I’ve felt like America is the place where all this throbbing stuff is happening. I don’t see the American life style or American influence waning at all.” Ambiguity, De Salvo suggests, is his default mode. The (wordless) “Psycho-Spaghetti Western” paintings he showed at Gagosian in 2011 are gorgeous scenarios of waste and destruction—pileups of old mattresses, used lumber, shredded truck tires, and other debris, on desolate landscapes that run uphill on the familiar Ruscha diagonal.

Ruscha’s ascent to the upper echelons of art-world esteem has coincided with recurring assurances that Los Angeles is, once again, on the verge of becoming a major art center. Some people believe this has already happened. A great many internationally known artists now live in Los Angeles, including Charles Ray, Paul McCarthy, Chris Burden, Laura Owens, and Ryan Trecartin, and more and more artists are finding that L.A.’s relatively low rents, proliferating galleries, and unstressed openness to new ideas make it a viable alternative to New York. Three museums engage actively in contemporary art: LACMA, the Hammer Museum, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, or MOCA, which opened in 1983 and mobilized big-time support from artists (who gave important works) and billionaire collectors, such as Eli Broad and the late Marcia Weisman, Norton Simon’s sister. MOCA eventually built a collection of post-1940 art that comes close to rivalling that of the Museum of Modern Art, and some of its



“Ideally, I’d like a work environment that’s flip-flop friendly.”

thematic exhibitions have been bolder and more illuminating than anything being done in New York.

Support for contemporary art here is neither wide nor deep, however, as MOCA’s recent near-death experience makes clear. Having depleted its endowment from nearly forty million dollars in 2000 to five million in 2008, the museum’s board of trustees set off a tsunami of criticism last summer by parting company with their longtime chief curator, Paul Schimmel. All four of the artist-trustees, including Ruscha and Baldessari, quit the board in protest. “A lot of artists felt, man, MOCA is dead,” Ruscha told me. “The artists were not shaping its future anymore.” Proposals were floated for MOCA to merge or form a partnership with LACMA or the University of Southern California, but the threat of such dire measures quickly receded. Jeffrey Deitch, the former New York gallery owner who became MOCA’s director in 2010, has doubled attendance with several highly popular shows (“Art in the Streets,” “Naked Hollywood: Weegee in Los Angeles”), and he and the board have solicited commitments for a large chunk of the hundred million dollars needed to rebuild the endowment. Schimmel, meanwhile, has become a partner in the internationally powerful Swiss gallery Hauser & Wirth, which will open a Los Angeles branch—called Hauser, Wirth & Schimmel—in 2015.

Like most successful artists, Ruscha

would love to have a career-capping museum exhibition in New York. He has had discussions with the Metropolitan Museum (which did a Baldessari retrospective in 2010), and both the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney are said to be interested. Never much of a self-promoter, Ruscha is content to wait, and to continue doing whatever interests him. Last year, he was asked to put together an exhibition composed of works in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, in Vienna, whose collection stops at circa 1800. He got permission to bring in some material from the natural-history museum across the street, and when I was in his studio he showed me photographs of his finds—kidney stones (called “bezoars”) from ancient animals, a multipurpose knife made in 1610, a slab of bright-blue argonite—to go with the paintings and the drawings he selected by Brueghel, Bosch, Rubens, Arcimboldo, and other Old Masters.

“Bosch and Brueghel were ahead of their time,” he said. “They were fighting against enormous odds to make statements that might be seen as sinful. Looking at their pictures, I see these brown and red tones that seem to evoke history and madness at the same time, and I want to commend them for taking this plunge into madness. I think every artist wants to make a picture that opens the gates to Heaven.” Ruscha’s title for the Vienna show comes from a line in Mark Twain’s autobiography: “The Ancients Stole All Our Great Ideas.” ♦