

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



In Ed Ruscha's Work, A City Sits For Its Portrait

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*Ed Ruscha's first artist book *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* featured simple black-and-white snapshots of gas stations that he photographed along Route 66 on his road trips from Los Angeles to Oklahoma City. The book would go on to influence a generation of artists with its industrial style and casual look. Ed Ruscha/Courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles*

For a seminal work of art, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* doesn't look like much. It's a small, thin paperback book resembling an old industrial manual — just 26 black-and-white photos of gas stations that Los Angeles artist Ed Ruscha self-published 50 years ago, when he was 26.

"If I showed the book to somebody who worked in a gas station, they might be genuinely interested in it, saying, 'Oh yeah, I remember that place out on the highway.' "

The intellectual establishment, however, wasn't convinced. One critic described the book as "doomed to oblivion." The Library of Congress refused to put it in its stacks.

"People who were in the art world, like, 'What is this you're doing? Are you putting us on?' " Ruscha recalls with a laugh.

Ruscha made his name in the 1960s by taking pictures of the city's most run-of-the-mill non-landmarks: gas stations, apartment houses, vacant lots. As photographs, they may seem unremarkable. Yet they became some of the 20th century's most enduring images. Those photos

have since been shown in museums around the world, and they are now on view at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

"At that time, the idea of an artist book was a meticulously crafted, limited edition, expensive work," says Virginia Heckert, who helped organize the exhibition "In Focus: Ed Ruscha."

Ruscha, however, got a commercial printer to mass produce 400 copies — which he sold at \$3 a pop. Heckert says the crude, almost anonymous quality of Ruscha's pictures represented a shift from the highly personalized art of the 1940s and '50s.

"They're all reactions to the sort of, chest-thumping, soul-baring Abstract Expressionists, and the drama and emotion of creating paintings that are very physical," Heckert says.

But the photos nonetheless provide a glimpse into where the artist was coming from. The son of an insurance auditor, Ruscha was raised in Oklahoma City, but moved to L.A. in 1956. The gas stations he photographed all sat on Route 66, the highway he rode on his regular visits home.

"I just had a personal connection to that span of mileage between Oklahoma and California," Ruscha explains. "It just, it kind of spoke to me."

So did the stark black-and-white cinematography of John Ford's 1940 film adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath*, which told the story of Oklahoma migrants fleeing the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. They traveled Route 66, too.

wentysix Gasoline Stations was also pioneering in the way that it captured an essential aspect of modern American life: the car. Ruscha is a gear head. He keeps a mint-condition 1933 Ford pickup behind his sprawling L.A. studio.

Car culture makes its way into another of Ruscha's seminal photographic works: *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. In the '60s, the Strip — a commercial stretch of Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood — was *the* place to hang out in L.A. Ruscha saw The Doors play at the Whiskey a Go Go and he dug the street's flamboyant signage.

"It just had a wavy, windy sort of look to it that I liked," he says. "And I just said, 'Well, I'll start here.'"

What he started was another reinvention of the artist book. Published in 1966, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* is an accordion pamphlet consisting of a 25-foot-long panorama of the entire two-mile Strip. Reading it feels like cruising Sunset in third gear.

Ruscha's books have been widely influential among artists, who have adopted their disaffected look. But their influence also extends to architects: Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi and Frank Gehry, who has known Ruscha since the 1960s.

"I love the guy," Gehry says. "He's been a great inspiration to me."

As a young designer, Gehry was obsessed with ordinary materials such as corrugated steel and chain-link fence. He felt a deep kinship to Ruscha's unromantic view of L.A.

"I thought it was so real," Gehry says. "So laid back, so not in your face, so just: I'm just exploring things and this is how I explore things. I'm fascinated with the streetscape, so I take pictures of every building on the street and look at it."

At 75, Ruscha hasn't stopped looking. But what he sees has changed.

"Buildings are still standing, but the names are gone. They've gone back to something quieter. What's happening? What's happening to our city? Let's worry!" he says with a laugh. When asked if he'd like the L.A. to be a little jazzier he says, "Nah, it can go any way it wants and I'll still be here."

And as long as Ed Ruscha is around, L.A. will get its picture taken.