C Magazine
Fall 2014

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

cmagazine

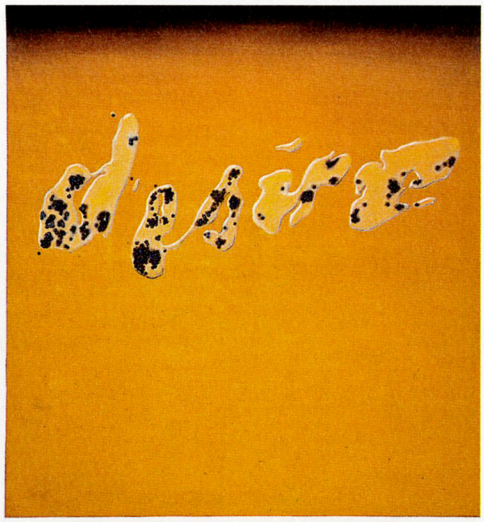
Ed Ruscha: The Liquid Paintings

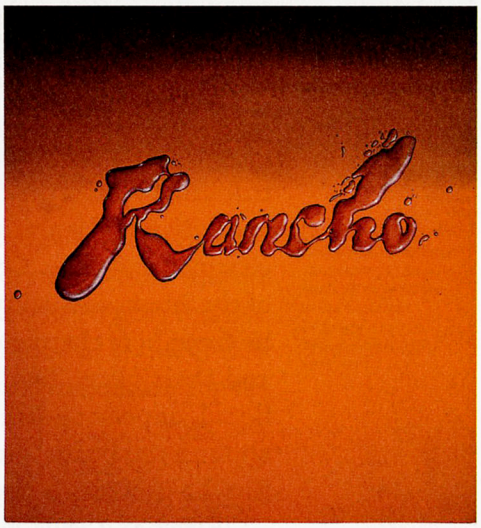
by Jen Hutton

By a long shot, Ed Ruscha has been my top celebrity sighting since I moved to Los Angeles three years ago. There is nothing remarkable about the encounter: I was invited to a posh art opening at the Getty Center, and while I watched a looped video in a nearly dark screening room, Ruscha walked in and stood beside me. He was so close I could have reached out and touched the sleeve of his jacket. After a few minutes I wordlessly slipped out of the room, completely elated.

I'm aware this story is terribly disappointing but I share it not as proof of my paralyzing shyness in public spaces but as a testament to my devotion to Ruscha and his work. The thing is I had deeply considered reaching out to touch Ruscha's sleeve, like a disciple flailing to grasp the robes of his radical but nearly canonized prophet, or a hopeful girl fingering the white pleather arms of the homecoming king's varsity jacket.

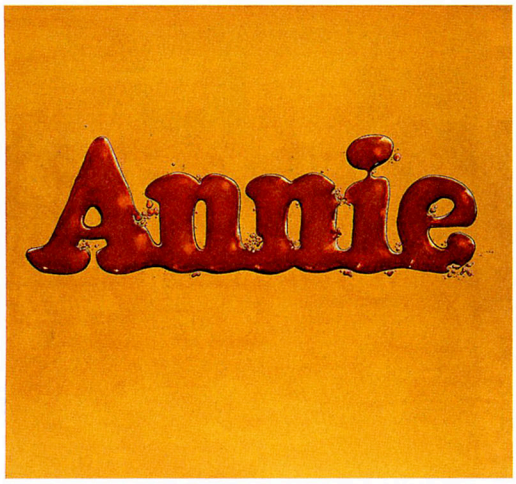
In some regard it is silly to call Ruscha a celebrity at all, but I find his way with words—under the umbrella of Pop, Conceptualism, Neo-Dada, or all of the above—utterly magnetic. And though in my mind he is the quintessential Los Angeles artist, I connect with him as an outsider: lured from Oklahoma by Hollywood's glitz at the age of 19, he has been living and working here ever since. His best-known photographic and book works depict the landscape of Los Angeles as nearly wordless narratives: the bleached-out Sunset Strip, its Googie-style gas stations, and dingbat apartment buildings that repeatedly aspire to some other version of Shangri-La. Conversely, his paintings, drawings, and prints cull and depict only the street's "visual noise": its signage, advertisements, and overheard vernacular. And while they do not point to any definite source or metonymic referent to Ruscha's long-time home base, for me the wordy subjects of Ruscha's *Liquid Paintings* connote La La Land just as effectively as his postcard depictions of place. In these paintings, words fly solo across ombré voids; I imagine them following the sweep of a director's hand suggesting a starlet's name immortalized in a theater marquee. Each word is rendered as a smear: Ruscha paints the letterforms as convincing spills on the verge of morphing and breaking apart in the air.





TOP:
Ed Ruscha, *Desire*, 1969, oil on canvas, 152.4 cm x 139.7 cm
IMAGE © ED RUSCHA; IMAGE COURTESY OF ARTIST AND THE GAGOSIAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

BOTTOM:
Ed Ruscha, *Rancho*, 1968, oil on canvas, 152.4 cm x 137.2 cm
IMAGE © ED RUSCHA; IMAGE COURTESY OF ARTIST AND THE GAGOSIAN GALLERY, NEW YORK



Ed Ruscha, *Annie, Poured from Maple Syrup*, 1966, oil on canvas, 139.7 cm x 149.9 cm
IMAGE © ED RUSCHA; IMAGE COURTESY OF ARTIST AND THE GAGOSIAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

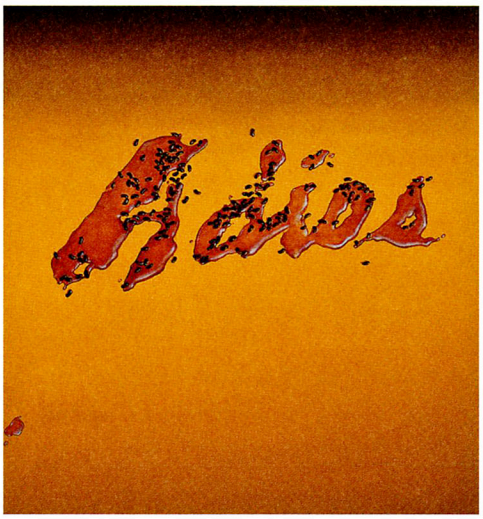
Ruscha's "romance with liquids" period began in 1966 and was a deliberate deviation from conventional ways of expressing text, or as he says, "an alternative from the rigid, hard-edge painting of words that had to respect some typographical design." The liquid words too are self-reflexive: they are painted words at times painted to look like paint itself. Such slick surfaces may have cemented an affinity with his peers in Los Angeles' so-called "finish fetish" school of the late 1960s—among them, artists like John McCracken, Ken Price, and Larry Bell. Like the work of these peers, Ruscha's *trompe l'oeil* effects in these paintings and lithographs are easy on the eyes. They glide into our vision, and conjure a sexy dream of Southern California: water beading on the hood of a hot rod, sweat on an upper lip, or ejaculate trickling over an evenly tanned stomach. Too, the work seems like the kind of meticulous project appropriate for an artist wanting to hone his commercial illustration chops. In various sketchbook studies from 1966 Ruscha scrutinized the qualities of syrup pooling on flat surfaces: the colour of its highlights, the particular curve of its meniscus. *Annie, Poured from Maple Syrup*, painted that same year, is the first painting in the series. On a flat, yellow ground, Ruscha cheekily marries the iconic logo of America's favourite orphan to an overly saccharine substance. The result is uncanny but more demonstrative: *Annie* is void of the latent sensuality of the work that is to come. *Adios* (1967) is a close second to *Annie*: here the angled script of the word is spelled out with a spill of red *frijoles* and their juice. The kidney-shaped beans are dark scattered spots over the liquid, appearing like flies on honey. The kick is, as Dave Hickey points out, "spilling the beans" here does not divulge any semantic meaning beyond what Ruscha presents at face value.[2]

Ruscha's *Liquid Paintings* led to a short stint of experimentation with food as a painting or printing medium. For his *Chocolate Room*, 1970, first presented at the Biennale in Venice that same year, Ruscha silkscreened a thick, powdery layer of chocolate onto sheets of paper and tacked them, from floor to ceiling, on the gallery walls. His 1969 *Stains* portfolio is a typology of smears of everyday substances—from ketchup (Heinz) to beer (Coors) to tap water (Los Angeles)—on squares of rag paper. A portfolio of six silkscreen prints titled *News, Mews, Pews, Brews, Stews and Dues*, 1970, printed the titular words in a fat Gothic type using inks blended from Bolognese sauce, chocolate syrup, and egg. Like his strategy of elevating street vernacular to hallowed status in his paintings,

1 Patricia Failing, "Ed Ruscha, Young Artist: Dead Serious About Being Nonsensical," *ARTnews* 81, 1982. Reprinted in *Leave Any Information at the Signal: writings, interviews, bits, pages*, Ed Ruscha and Alexandra Schwartz, eds. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002, 231.

2 Dave Hickey, "Wacky Molière Lines: A Listener's Guide to Ed-Werd Rew-Shay," *Parkett* 18 (1988), 32.

Ruscha's use of food and other organic material in his work leaned towards a disruption in the assigned castes of valued art objects and dabbled in the emergent conceptual thinking of the period. Ruscha's *Chocolate Room* was his earthwork, and the *Stains* portfolio seems to be a not-so-subtle jab at the heroic marks of abstract expressionism.[3] Without surprise, none of Ruscha's food-based projects are archivally sound—legions of ants reportedly swarmed *Chocolate Room* when it was on view in Venice, and most of the stains in *Stains* have faded over time. His simulated spills, stabilized in oil paint, have better staying power. But more importantly, compared to the shiny effects depicted in the *Liquid Paintings*, the projects using organic materials are inherently dry, or in Bois' words, "savorless".[4]



Ed Ruscha, *Adios*, 1967, oil on canvas, 151.1 cm x 137.5 cm
IMAGE © ED RUSCHA; IMAGE COURTESY OF ARTIST AND THE GAGOSIAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

Wetness then, or a simulation of it, is a cool identifier. Among the *Liquid Paintings* produced between 1966 and 1969, of the words Ruscha painted more than once there are plenty of "wet" ones: *oily*, *jelly*, and *ripe*. *Lisp*, the slurred enunciation of any sibilant, overcomes its awkwardness with Ruscha's slick visual concatenation of its form. And *Mint* shifts meanings depending on its colour: on one canvas the word is an icy cool flavour in a semi-transparent light green; on another, in red, it connotes a new thing's pristine finish, not unlike the uninterrupted gleam of a pool of syrup. Ruscha has commented that what attracts him to certain words is their "temperature," adding: "Sometimes I have a dream that if a word gets too hot and too appealing, it will boil apart, and I won't be able to read or think of it."[5] The *Liquid Paintings* seem to depict words on the cusp of their maximum appeal, at that melting point right before they dissipate into the air.

And yet the words Ruscha chooses have nothing to do with poetics or logophilia: they have no size or scale, and with innumerable stylistic variations applied to the 26-odd letters of the English alphabet, their meaning can be shifted in any number of ways. As Ruscha says, "There were no rules about how a letter had to be formed. It was my sandbox to play in. I could make an 'o' stupid or I could make it hopeless or any way I wanted to and it would still be an 'o.'"[6] Yanked from their context, and customarily re-presented on wide, amorphous fields of colour, understanding the meaning of the words Ruscha chooses is secondary, if not irrelevant, to the mood or feeling they connote.

In his essay "Wacky Molière Lines: A Listener's Guide to Ed-Werd Rew-Shay," Dave Hickey proposes that the nonsensicals and non sequiturs Ruscha cribs from the visual noise of the street actually comprise an "audible" world of

6 Failing, 232.

3 Yve-Alain Bois, "Thermometers Should Last Forever," *Edward Ruscha: Romance with Liquids, Paintings 1966-1969*. New York: Rizzoli, 1993. Ruscha's discarding of abstract expressionism is the crux of Bois' argument.

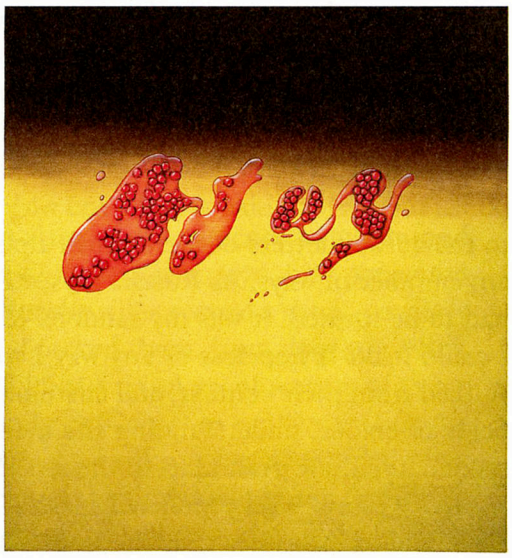
4 Bois' essay is the most comprehensive survey of the body of Ruscha's *Liquid* works, and the adjectives he uses for them—"chubby," "pneumatic," and "goo," for example—in my mind deserve to be "Ruscha-fied".

5 Howardena Pindell, "Words with Ruscha," The Print Collector's Newsletter, vol. III, no. 6 (January-February 1973), 126. Quoted in Bois, 20.

alliterative cues and rhyming sequences.[7] In Ruscha's work, words are spoken, not spelled. I have no doubt the rhyming cadence of "news, mews, pews, brews, stews and dues" is meant to elicit a certain delight, but the reason why I find the *Liquid Paintings* to be the most superlative or most savoury of all of Ruscha's work is that they are not entirely about surface but substance too. They posit language as a physical material, not just churned up from the social architecture, but chewed up and spit out. Here the words roll more slowly off the tongue, like syrup: *oily, jelly, mint, ripe*. Language is liquid, a thing pervious to change, but it is also connected to the mouth: consumed with raspberry jam, syrup, and beans, and expectorated with spit, phlegm, and vomit. And it is with these base materials that some semblance of meaning, fixed or unfixed, can emerge from a splatter or spill.

For me, each of the *Liquid Paintings* conjures its own voice of L.A. *Hey*, 1968-69, dotted with what appears to be pomegranate seeds, floats by like an afterthought, and sounds like a blasé greeting tossed over a starlet's shoulder. *U*, 1968, is *Hey*'s counterpoint: a single letterform comprised of an errant cluster of spit bubbles, as if freshly dispensed from small raspberry lips. *Desire*, 1969, composed of what appears to be black caviar and cum, hits every aspirated syllable. Finally, *Rancho*, 1968, smoldering with a honey amber glow, slows the word to a crawl with its off-kilter, distended script. This one is Ruscha himself: I can only imagine it delivered by his own Oklahoma-flavoured drawl.

Jen Hutton is an artist and writer. She lives in Los Angeles.



Ed Ruscha, *Hey*, 1968-69, oil on canvas, 152.4 cm x 139.7 cm
IMAGE © ED RUSCHA; IMAGE COURTESY OF ARTIST
AND THE GAGOSIAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

7 Hickey, 29.