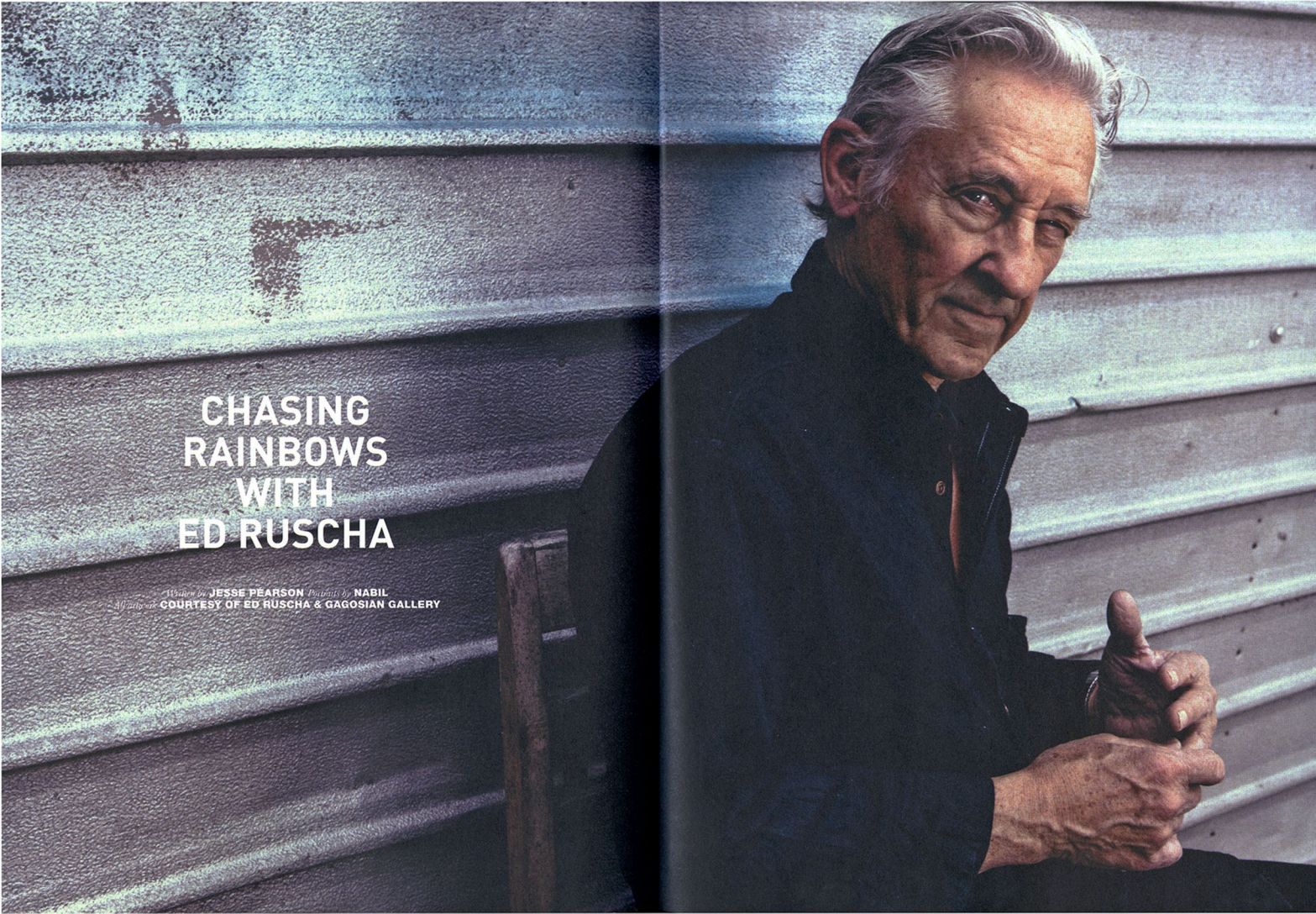


GAGOSIAN GALLERY

MALIBU



CHASING
RAINBOWS
WITH
ED RUSCHA

Interview by JESSE PEARSON Photographs by NABIL
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ED RUSCHA IS A LOS ANGELEAN ARTIST, A CALIFORNIAN ARTIST, AND A WESTERN ARTIST.

But what he is more than anything else — and he'll tell you this himself — is an American artist. He deals in American broadness and blackness, and within him is a veritable menagerie of masculine types of the United States. He's the cowboy with his laconic wit and economy of words; he's the gearhead with his attraction to fire, gas and speed; he's the wandering seeker with his restless back-and-forth across the country; and he's the punk with his nihilism and love for disturbance.

A rare and truly influential artist's work emanates outward like a widening series of circles. Imagine Ed Ruscha as the planet Saturn. The smallest and closest ring to him is made up of his immediate peers — a capable group that, while they may not wield the unique power of his work, gleans inspiration from him. The next ring is the next generation of artists. They take Ruscha's influence — along with that of his buddies — and filter it through their own hands. This continues for a couple of artistic generations (which, keep in mind, are shorter than human generations). Then there comes a ring where things get nicely perverted. This is where other types of artists broadcast a Ruscha message to the world via their particular medium, like when Sonic Youth named a 1985 song "Brave Men Run" after a 1983 Ruscha painting. The ring after that one is composed of kids — like me at age 14 — hearing that song before I knew anything about Ed Ruscha and thereby being influenced by him via one degree of remove. And so it goes on — a thread of Ruscha that reaches from the core to the outer orbit, acquiring embellishments, misreading and new contexts along the way until, even at the end, when it bears no resemblance in either aesthetic or ethos to the original work, there's still a faint whiff of Ed in its essence.

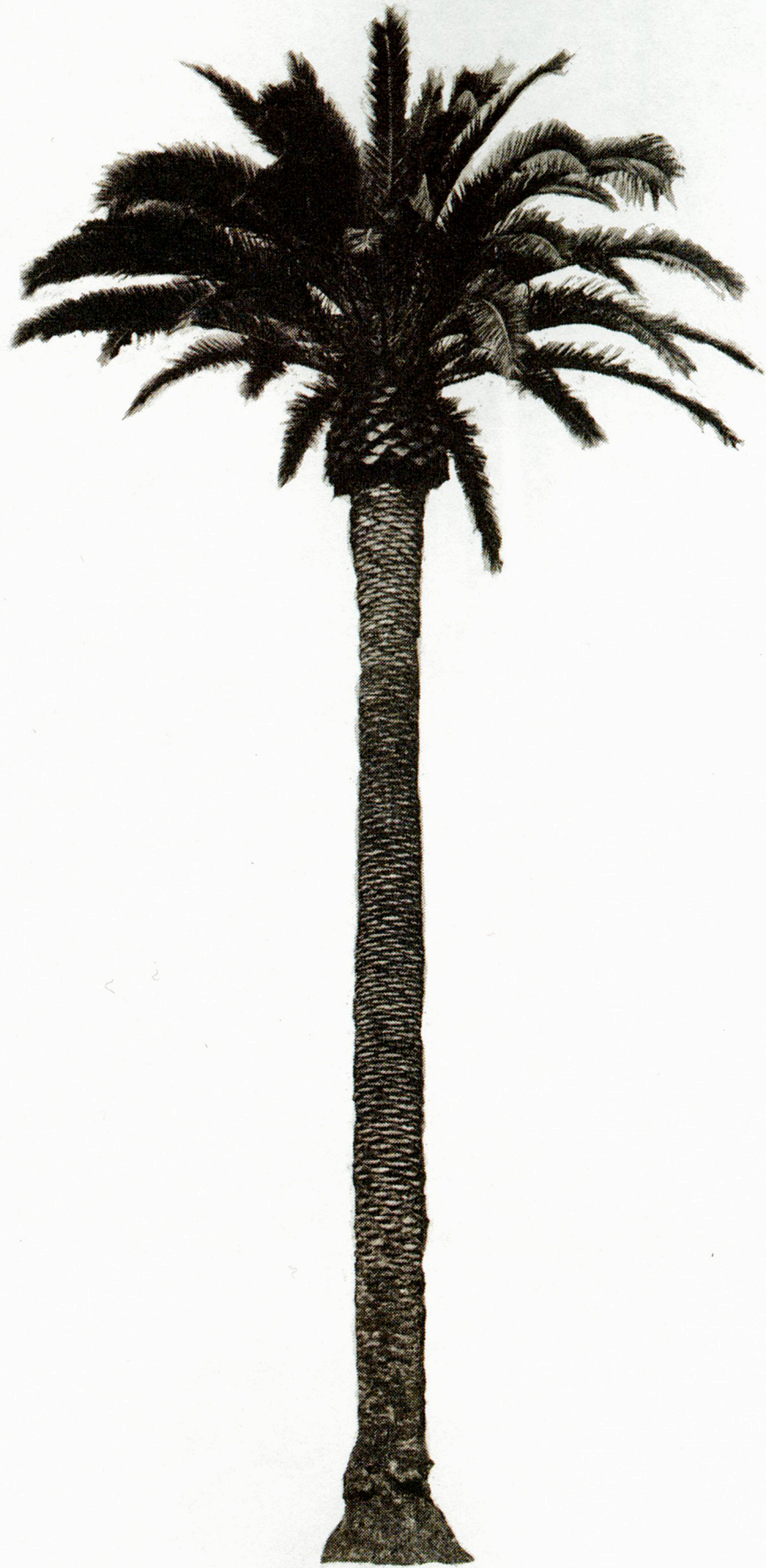
The CliffNotes version of the above paragraph, if you're a reader who'd prefer it, goes like this: Ed Ruscha's influence on other artists of all stripes — and thereby on culture in general — is so vast that it's almost invisible at times. Ruscha's work and ideas are just as embedded in our media DNA as Andy Warhol's are. You know Ruscha's vibe even if you don't know that you know Ruscha's vibe.

At 76, Ruscha has had many discrete eras in his work. Like geological formations, we can see epochs and accumulation as we trace the years through his early one-word paintings to his heartbreaking photos of gas stations — and his serenely apocalyptic painting of one gas station aflame — to his rich and lurid abstractions that suggest sunrises and sunsets to his majestic mountains fronted with enigmatic texts. But, as he told me when I recently spoke with him on the phone from his Venice Beach studio, he sees all of his art as saying similar things in many different ways. Like America itself, Ruscha's body of work is massive, mysterious and beautiful.



UNTITLED, 1986 *Oil and enamel on canvas, 64 x 64 inches*

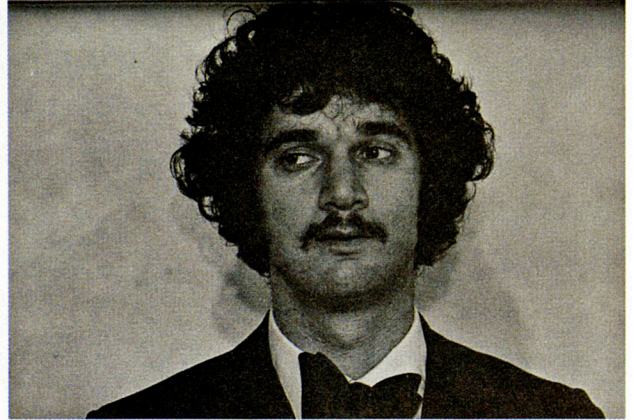
N.W. corner of Doheny Dr. & Elevado Ave.







"Crackers!"



**"AS AGGRAVATING AS IT
CAN BE OR AS NEGATIVE AS
IT CAN BE, AS ARTISTS WE
LOOK FOR CONFLICT."**





BRAVE

MEN

RUN

IN MY

FAMILY

When you were only 14 years old, you hitchhiked from your home in Oklahoma City to Miami and back.

I was in junior high school. It was like a ticket to adventure. I was so insulated in this little community out there in Oklahoma.

And when you were 18, you moved by car from Oklahoma to L.A.

When it came time to decide what I was going to do after high school, I thought California would be the place. I didn't want to go to New York; it just seemed too cold. So, I kind of centered on coming out here, and that started a series of trips. It seemed like everything twinkled and sparkled. It was just so swank.

What did your family think of these youthful trips of yours?

They were a little nervous at first. They said, "Now, you can call us collect." [Laughs.] So, I would do that occasionally, and they would say, "Send postcards," so I would write postcards to them. I've always been big into postcards.

If a 16-year-old from a respectable Catholic background today told his mother he was going to take off for an indeterminate amount of time to hitchhike the roads, I think she'd say, "No way."

I think it's almost impossible to hitchhike today. Although John Waters — I was talking to him about it — he recently hitchhiked all across the country. I think he even carried a promo package to prove who he was. He had this little brochure. But I think it's actually illegal to hitchhike now. I rarely see it at all inside the city, where there used to be more hitchhikers — people just going from Santa Monica to Silver Lake.

It seems that there was a special excitement and freedom to L.A. when you first arrived. A real sense of possibility.

I remember I had been reading this article in *Look*, which was a magazine back then. They described how L.A. was growing at a rate of 1,000 people, net gain, a day. I couldn't believe there was so much action and so much attraction to this megalopolis, that it was growing so fast. It stunned me. Recently, I looked into it and saw that now, in 2014, there are 15,000 people a day coming here. And I thought 1,000 was a lot. [Laughs.]

What do you remember of your first physical impressions of the place?

The air was brown with smog. It was a serious thing. It's much better today since they've stopped burning lead in gasoline. You could barely see across the city to the Hollywood sign. It was really rough on your sinuses. I remember our eyes would tear over and we had to go to the pharmacy to get some kind of ointment. It was that bad.

But still it was where you wanted to be.

L.A. to me was some magical new place.

Driving seems kind of central to the early mythology of you as an artist. You would drive to Oklahoma and back a lot, right?

I would go back and forth to see friends in Oklahoma. The drive became pretty interesting in itself, with the constant rollover and seeing the landscapes. I started focusing on gas stations as I was driving along. They began as stopping points — I'd have to fill up. Then I saw them as possible subject matter.

Are you still a big driver?

I drive a lot, but I haven't made the Oklahoma trip for a while.

It's quite a haul.

Yes, it is. Like, 1,200 hundred miles. Still, I like to drive.

How have you seen road culture change since those days?

I did a lot of hitchhiking then. I hitched from L.A. to New York. All of the highways went right through the main streets of towns like Columbus, Ohio — places like that. Nowadays, every city is bypassed by freeways.

What do you think of the state of L.A. today? Are you turned off by the way it's developing?

I am when I see people coming and making little cities within the city here. That disturbs me, especially when you consider traffic and the number of cars that are coming into a given area like the Sunset Strip. It's staggering to think about what it's going to be like to try to navigate that. Spots across the city are being set aside for major development and skyscrapers.

The shape of L.A. has always been about lateral growth, like a sprawl.

Yes. And now the sprawl has reached its limits, and we're going up.

How do you feel about that?

I see the inevitable there. A single-story house will come down, and in its place will be a three-story box for 12 families. A few years from now, they'll regret having not built that building taller. It's a blossoming sort of thing that there's no stopping.

Maybe we're finally seeing the birth of the Blade Runner-style dystopian city.

The people that made that movie, I guess they maybe had a sense that they were onto some truth. And certainly enough, it's beginning to happen. Nonetheless, there are all kinds of things for an artist to mine from all of this. I mean there's some substance to it. As aggravating as it can be or as negative as it can be, as artists we look for conflict.

That's interesting — the thought of artists looking for conflict.

I think disturbing things are food for thought and food for art — disturbing, contrary things. All we're doing is kind of chasing rainbows anyway. We're not looking for bouquets of flowers to rapture over; it's the ugly side of life, sometimes, that can motivate us. Like myself — I'm currently painting some pictures of retreats, you know, that you find by the highway. Those are kind of tortured subjects.

What do you mean by retreats?

People also call them "gators." They're those retread tires that fall off trucks.

Oh, right. They look like armadillo skins.

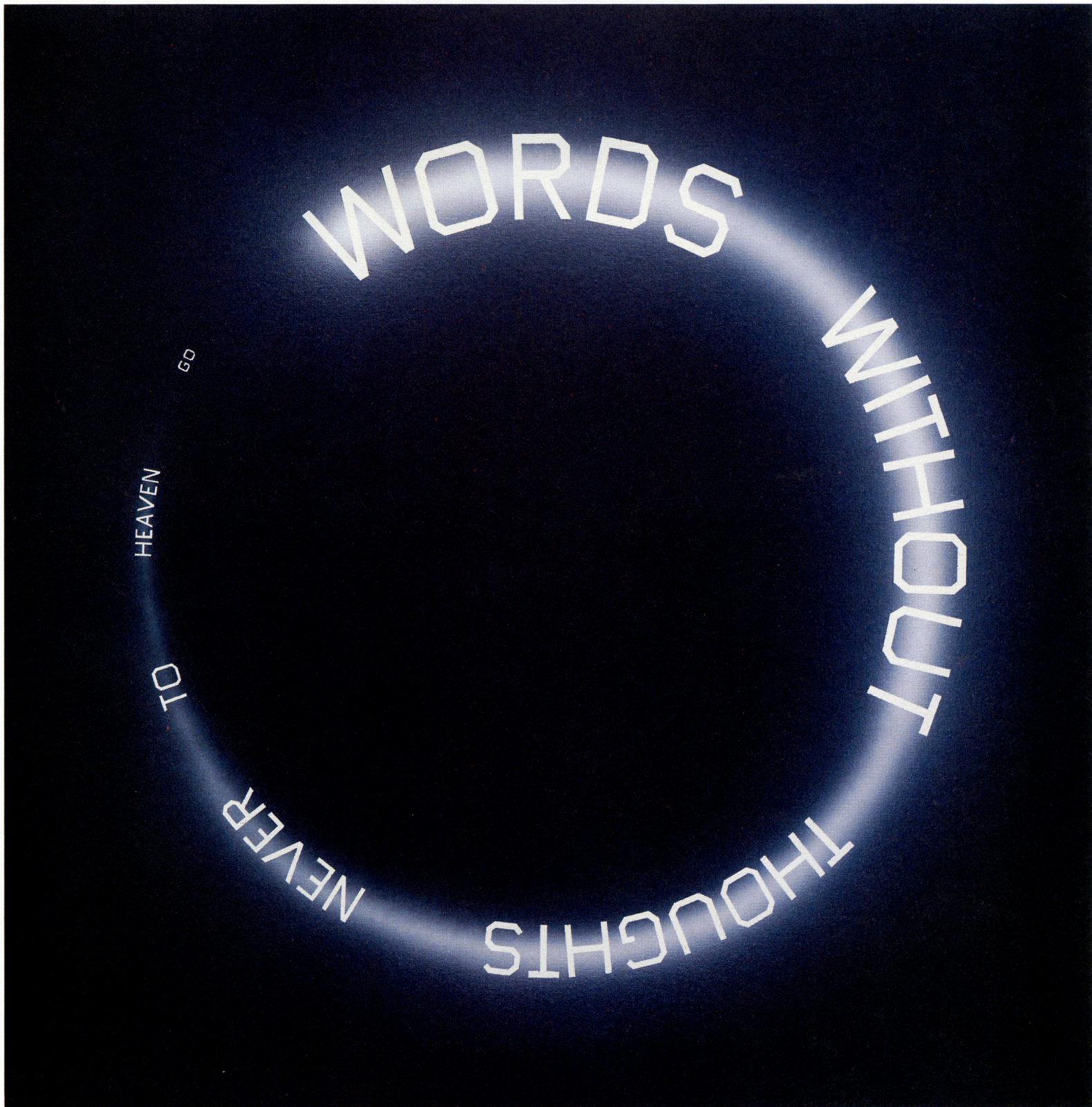
They do. They're a product of mechanical mistakes. I find them kind of inspiring.

As I was preparing to talk with you, I was thinking that I would try to avoid the subject of L.A. since you're asked about your relationship to the city so much. But right at the start, it came up naturally. Do you ever feel fettered by being so associated with one certain place as an artist?

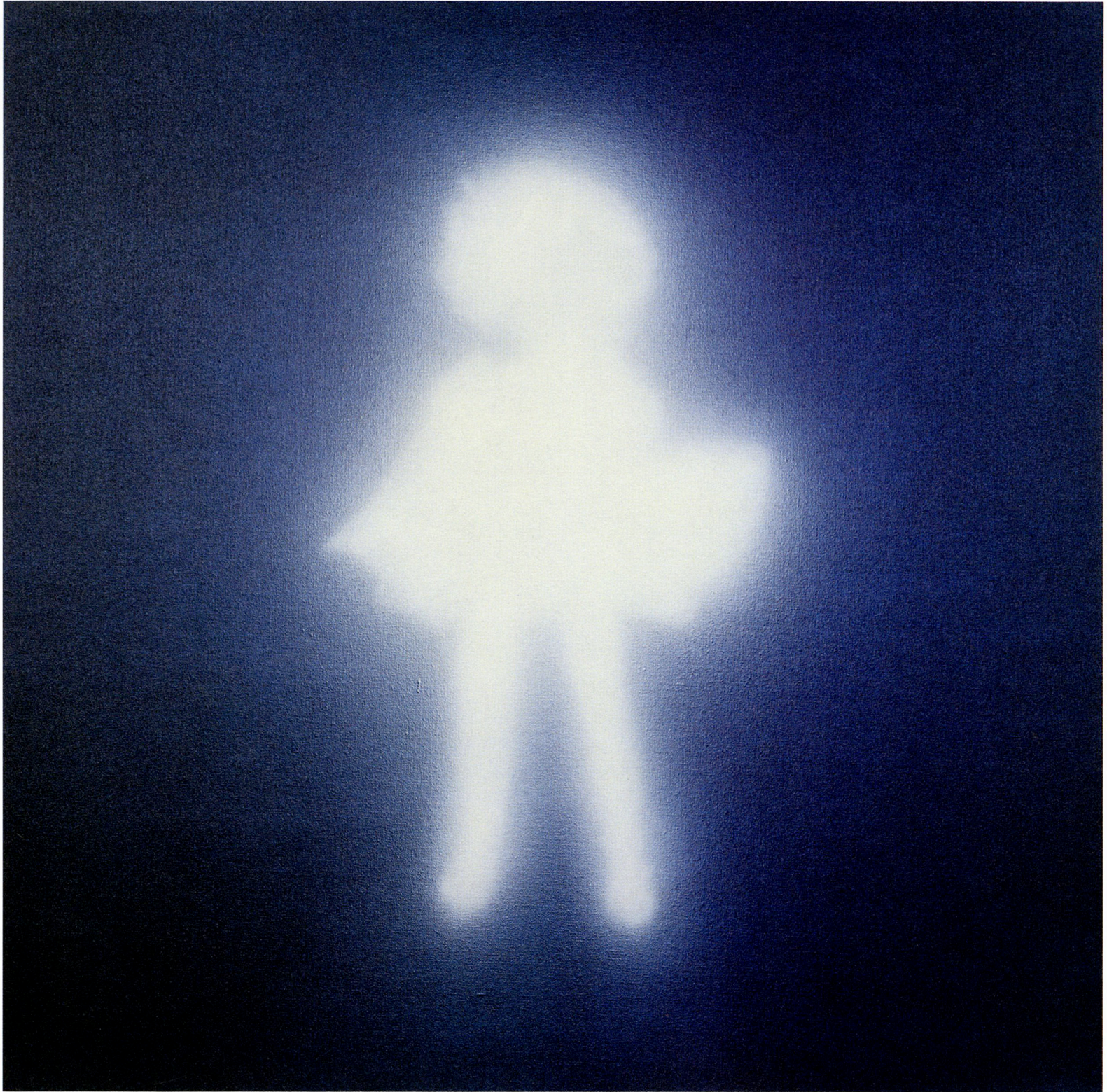
Not really. I mean, if I settled in India somewhere, then my art would probably be considerably different. But if I settled anywhere in America, I might be doing the same thing [as I do here]. I would be responding to popular culture and neons and nylons. This city only inspires me because I live here. And believe me, I love it and hate it.

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WORDS..., 1987 *Acrylic on canvas, 64 x 64 inches*



LITTLE WHITE GIRL, 1989 *Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 inches*

“I’VE BEEN ON THE HIGHWAY FOR A LONG TIME, BUT I’M NOT SURE WHAT I’VE SEEN YET. THERE’S A LOT LEFT TO SEE.”

Have you ever traveled somewhere very far just to look at a piece of art? An artist friend of mine recently made a pilgrimage to see Giotto’s chapel in Padua, for example.

I went there to see that Giotto, too. Also, I went to London, to the Imperial War Museum, to see this sculptural object by an artist named Bertelli. It almost looks like a bedpost, like something that’s been run out on a lathe. It’s really a profile of the face of Benito Mussolini. I jumped when I first saw that work, so I go back and visit it every so often.

Do you get a feeling of sublimity—a spiritual kick—from that piece?

Oh, I do. Another place I go in Great Britain is to see Ophelia, which is a John Everett Millais painting. It’s good just to stand in front of something and get that little blast of air that comes from it.

I’m curious about your relationship to the desert. You have a place in the Mojave, right?

Yes. I’ve been going there for years. I like it because nothing really changes. It kind of reminds me of being in an old Gene Autry movie. I’m attracted to that. I love it.

Is it a restorative thing for you to spend time there?

You know what it is? It’s like an elixir. When I go out there, I’ve got these trees that I’ve planted. I go, and I splash water on the ground, and it’s almost religious. Just go out, splash water on the ground, come back.

I’m really interested in what some people call “desert rats.” They’re such a unique American type. In a way—and I don’t mean anything derogatory by this—they’re kind of analogous to the hillbilly in Appalachia.

Oh, sure. And they exist. There are people who are still looking for gold out there and people who are committed to being hermetic. Those are pretty interesting people; they’re mavericks in their own way. They’ve chosen, a lot of times, to turn their backs on the city and a culture that’s all accelerated. They’ve got a pretty honest approach to what they’re doing. They just carry on in their own way. There’s something heroic about it.

When I look at art that has text in it, I can’t help but parse it even though the artist’s intention is often to divorce the words from meaning. Your text paintings in particular, whether they’re just one word or a longer phrase, read to me like poetry or aphorisms.

I never know whether I’m painting pictures of words or with words. Then I stop even thinking about it. I’ve been doing it for so long, and I don’t know why I’m doing it. You know?

But these works feel positively packed with meaning.

I’m trying to make things official by creating a painting of something, especially a word. I feel like I’m sort of hammering it out in concrete or stone. I guess that making my art is really sort of like shouting out no particular information.

I love that.

It can be sort of dumb and frozen and, yes, that is my way of officializing things.

When I look at your photos of parking lots and gas stations, there’s this really beautiful consideration of banality. It feels revelatory. But now that digital photography has fully proliferated, we’re buried in photos of the banal. It’s almost like the means of production today would render it impossible for you to make those photos with the exact same impact if you made them now.

Yes. But I’m not insulted by any of that progress business. Forty years ago, it was a pretty slow world and not many of these issues had been brought up by people. Now, we’ve got thousands and thousands of artists and thousands of galleries and too much information. Yet, at the same time, I think it’s still fine, and I don’t have a sour vision of what the art world is like. There are young artists who are doing totally original things. It’ll never end. There’ll always be some vital, interesting things to look at.

But do you ever feel like there are just too many artists?

Sometimes I gasp and I say, “Please, no more. I can’t take it.” [Laughs.] It makes me crave old, scratchy, black-and-white movies, like if I could go back in time and live in an old world. But I still have a generally positive outlook as to the future of everything.

Have you always looked at the world that way, or has it developed over time?

I feel like as an artist, I—and maybe I might just say this about all artists—want to open the gates to heaven. We want to make the best thing that has ever been made, and who knows where that’s going to go? The restlessness and the irregularity of it are all part of it. I don’t have an exact plan by any means.

Do you often get that gates-of-heaven sort of metaphysical satisfaction from making art?

I think generally I do. I get it almost every day, and then there’s also self-doubt and all that. “What am I chasing? My own tail.”

That seems like a dangerous question for an artist to ask himself.

[Laughs.] It’s like searching for bones in ice cream.

As you get older, do you ever take the time to look back over everything you’ve done? Do you kind of assess the big picture?

Well, I’m kind of self-effacing about the whole thing. I feel like maybe all I am is another bump on the highway. What, really, are all artists up to anyway? They have the opportunity to piddle with the universe and think about things in their own terms and try to make something of it. I feel like everything I’ve done throughout the years has been a variation on a theme. It hasn’t really strayed that far from the main impetus, which is some little spark back there when I was 17 or 18 years old. In that respect, I haven’t even learned that much.

Or you’ve learned a lot about one thing, maybe.

Yes, a lot about one thing. Or I’ve been on the highway for a long time, but I’m not sure what I’ve seen yet. There’s a lot left to see. **x**