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Ed Ruscha: the veteran artist on the pleasure of the text

One of the most important living American artist is still refining his relationship to colour and text – and still chasing the desire to make great paintings

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*Ed Ruscha, Years Months Weeks, 2016.
Photograph: Ed Ruscha/Courtesy Gagolian*

For a time, Ed Ruscha thought of turning the sun 90 degrees. “I’ve looked at it for quite a while on its side and I’m beginning to feel like maybe it should be exhibited on its side,” he says of one of his latest works, *Sun, Atom*, leaning against the wall in his cluttered and sprawling Culver City studio. In the end, he decides to hang it vertically as originally intended, with the word *sun*, emblazoned across the top in the artist’s self-invented “boy scout utility modern” font. Below, it reads in rapidly shrinking pica, “Earth, Texas, Horse, Hoof, Cell, Molecule, Atom”, with the last written in tiny letters on a cloven ecru background.

Like the rest of his latest series, *Extremes* and *Inbetweens*, at London’s Gagolian, the painting addresses scale and its relationship to word systems. While 10 of the 14 new works in the show are larger than usual for the artist, they feature unmistakable Ruscha motifs, like text over barren landscapes, and images of mountains, which harken back to his *Metro Plot* series of the late 90s.

Another painting, *Really Old*, featuring a reddish smudge burning in the center of a warm beige surface, is an outlier for an artist not normally known as a colorist. “It’s a color that forgot it was a color” is Ruscha’s enigmatic explanation. “That’s raw umber. It’s off in its own world. And it’s not a colorful color, but it’s one that I feel says what I have to say.”

But there’s something else about *Really Old* that represent a departure – it’s a shaped canvas, an inverted rectangle with the titular words across the top and a darkened tip at its bottom. “I’ve always found there’s a pathetic addressing of making art that comes from shaped canvas, and I never liked any of it,” he says, though his own *Charles Atlas Landscape* (2003), with bowed edges, hanging on the wall a few steps from his desk, is an obvious exception. “Something is saying to me shaped canvases are awful, don’t do them, and then I find myself doing shaped canvases.”

Commonly considered the quintessential LA artist, Ruscha and a friend, Mason Williams, left their homes in Oklahoma City and drove west to Los Angeles soon after graduating high school in 1956. The future art star enrolled in Chouinard Art Institute, later known as CalArts, and studied under people like Robert Irwin. Along with many of his classmates, he felt trapped within the confines of the prevalent form at the time, abstract expressionism, but was inspired by the works of Jasper Johns, who seemed to be pointing in a new direction.

“It was like a reversal, a pulling away from them and going for things that were common objects, the common objects that had been ignored for so many years,” Ruscha recalls of the evolving scene that led to his first show, one that put him on a stellar trajectory. “If you go back and look at Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, two of the artists that were embracing abstract art, non-objective art, in a big way, and at the same time, in their life they appreciated Cadillacs and modern life, the whirl of modern life, the action behind it, the mechanisms.”

Just two years after graduating Chouinard, his work appeared in the pivotal 1962 show, *New Painting of Common Objects* at the legendary Ferus Gallery, putting him in the company of future stars like Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol. A year later, Ferus gave him his first solo show and he unofficially joined the gallery’s cool club, including people like Billy Al Bengston, Ed Kienholz and Ken Price.

Pop Art was born and Ruscha was directly in its midst. He made his first sale to a gallery regular, actor Dennis Hopper. “It was quite a surprise when he bought that picture of the gas station of mine,” Ruscha laughs. “It stayed with him, I think, until he got his divorce from his wife and then he lost it.”

It’s not clear why text has played such a prominent role in his work since the beginning, but it might have something to do with his early experience at Plantin Press, where he learned about handset type, followed by a job at an ad agency called Carson/Roberts, where he learned layout and graphics. Critics and academics have sparred over the meaning of the words, and Ruscha says he hopes his art leaves people scratching their heads, but there’s nothing vexing about the text in *Extremes* and *In-betweens*. Whether it’s a painting called *Years, Months, Weeks*, or another called *Tril, Bil, Mil*, there’s something reassuring about the logic and order of Ruscha’s words set against sprawling, neutral-toned backgrounds.

What's missing from the large-scale works is the nostalgia of previous series like 2005's *Course of Empire*, where he reimagined the buildings in his earlier *Blue Collar* series, or his photos comparing the views from his Western Avenue studio in the early 60s to today. Nostalgia does seep into the four smaller works, familiar mountain views, each bordered by an iris, a technique borrowed from early cinema and hinting at the role movies have played in Ruscha's work throughout his career.

"Showing work in a gallery is not an easy thing to do cause you're kind of like putting yourself out there," he says, giddy and a little nervous as the London exhibition approaches. "But I've been doing it for quite a while. And it's a task, but it's a wholesome kind of task. You just do these things cause they sort of come naturally. And frankly, I've been doing it for so long that I'm almost unmoored. I don't know really what the hell I'm up to."

That may be true, but the 78-year-old veteran artist sounds pretty sure of himself. "There's no master plan or agenda or anything, really, and getting to the end result can sometimes be arbitrary. And that's OK with me, too, as long as it satisfies me in the realm of making a good picture."