

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

FINANCIAL TIMES

Ed Ruscha: Extremes and In-betweens, Gagosian, London — review
These unsettling, beguiling new works are the artist's response to anxious times

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Ed Ruscha's 'Really Old' (2016)

“Words live in a world of no size,” Ed Ruscha has observed. “You can make them any size and what’s the real size? Nobody knows.” Such lucid innocence is usually the prerogative of geniuses or small children. But if we’re lucky, it also animates our fine conceptual artists, of whom Ruscha is undoubtedly one.

The Los Angeles-based artist’s latest paintings, currently on show at Gagosian’s new gallery in London’s Grosvenor Hill, spin the above insight into a surreal, optical poetry. Made this year, almost all of them display pyramid-like scales of words whose descending size mirrors their meaning. “Universe”, for example, is stencilled in a huge white font at the top of a list that encompasses “America”, “Tampa Florida”, “Back Bedroom”, “Dust Bunny” and “Static Electricity”. “Silence” is writ large — Ruscha always gets his priorities right — above “Commotion”, “Racket” and “Peak Volume”. That the final word, which surely summons some apocalyptic cacophony, is illegible is no error of judgment. Ruscha is a painter who once said that every work he made would be “completely premeditated”.

The meticulous yet insouciant linguistic slopes at Gagosian are inscribed on plain grounds painted in hues of grainy dun brown, astral grey and dusty black. Here and there a wrinkle or fold disturbs the empty prairies. At times, they are juxtaposed with painting of scraps of wooden planking, as if Ruscha is telling us that any old surface will do for a humble signwriter like him.

That ability to create high art out of low ways and means has made Ruscha as enduring and important an artist as any working today. Now in his 79th year, he did indeed start out training to be an industrial painter when he moved to Los Angeles from his home town of Oklahoma City in 1956. Within a decade, however, he'd segued into the Pop/Minimalist/Conceptual zeitgeist. His early paintings slapped vast words — “Boss”, “Smash”, “Noise”, “Space” — on monochrome backgrounds. With photographic books such as *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* (1963) and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) allied to his seminal painting of the Hollywood sign (1968) at sunset as if dipped in the faux-gold of the collective American dream, he stamped himself as the Californian painter par excellence.

Over the decades, the versatility of his media — he has made photography, prints, artists' books, and has even painted in blood — has never diluted the clarity with which he continues to demonstrate that the bond between language and meaning is supremely vulnerable. “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.

The best of these new works flirt with our eye, obliging us to draw close in order to read the smaller text, then unsettle our mind when we get there. Sometimes the journey is beguiling. Set against a sandy ground, “Sun/Earth/Texas/Horse/Hoof” is a marvellously unexpected declination, as if a benign visual-art equivalent of Cormac McCarthy were leading us out into the desert which, Ruscha has often said, is his favourite landscape.

Yet it's unlikely that McCarthy, the American author known for his explorations of his country's psyche at its darkest and most existential, would have come to mind at all when we contemplated Ruscha's work a decade ago. Then, the painter's zany, ethereal lyricism still had the laconic playfulness of one who prefers to rise above gritty sociopolitical realities.

These paintings feel bleaker, sadder, as if Ruscha has finally plugged himself into the gloomy big picture. One chops up the words for numbers — “Tril/Bil/Mil/Thou” — so that their endings appear to have plunged off the edge of the canvas in what is surely a metaphor for wealth's essential frailty. Another starts “Bio” and gradually shrinks the word until “biology” is spelt out at the bottom like a tiny death sentence.

Ruscha has said repeatedly how much he fears for his country's social and environmental future. This new work isn't perfect. Several of the pictures add nothing to what their more potent fellows are achieving, and their almost uniformly large size, though appropriate for Gagosian's capacious galleries, creates a leaden cadence. But it's exciting to see an older artist acknowledging that anxious times demand a response, and taking risks with feeling and intensity as a result. Ruscha mustn't retire into the desert just yet.

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