

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTNEWS

L.A. Habitat: Ed Ruscha

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Katherine McMahon



Ed Ruscha at his Culver City studio on December 7, 2015.

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L.A. Habitat is a weekly series that visits with 16 artists in their workspaces around the city.

This week’s studio: Ed Ruscha, Culver City.

One weekday afternoon in December, Ed Ruscha met me in a hallway of his studio, followed closely behind by his dog Lola, a mixed-breed rescue. “She’s afraid of everybody,” Ruscha said. “But if you come around here and pet her, she’ll be fine.”

After some petting, Lola traipsed into a large room toward the front of the cavernous studio, which was once a prop house, and we followed. Before Ruscha moved in about six years ago, the warehouse was filled with marble statues, bronze buddhas, and the like. Now it overflows with books. We sat across a marble table.

This year marks the 60th anniversary of Ruscha’s move to Los Angeles, the city his work so precisely explores, from Oklahoma, where he grew up—a trip that now stands as one of the landmark events of postwar American art.

Ruscha was laid back and affable—youthful at 78—as he recalled what drew him to L.A. back in 1956: the jazz scene, the car culture, and the unique vegetation, among other things. “I had been here as a child, and it was a good memory,” he said.

New York was the center of the international art world at the time, and Los Angeles was on the distant periphery. “When I first came out here, this place was like a scratchy black-and-white movie,” Ruscha said. “Today it’s promising you a piece of fudge around every corner.”

He studied art at the Chouinard Institute (now CalArts) and worked a variety of jobs in the 1960s. “If you were going to go to an arts school, you had to have some skills that would allow you to moonlight in some other phase,” he told me. Using the pseudonym Eddie Russia, he served as a layout designer for *Artforum* (then based in L.A.), painted signs, and hand-lettered gift boxes at a place called Sunset House (now long out of business) that sold Christmas items about a half mile from his current studio. He earned 5 cents per piece.

Now Ruscha is an elder statesman of the West Coast art scene, and his cool, deadpan work has come to define his adopted city. He has captured its architecture in artist’s books like *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) and *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles* (1967), and its feel—its vernacular—in countless paintings, drawings, and prints of words, like *Honey, I Twisted through More Damn Traffic* (1977).

Discussing Sunset Boulevard, he mentioned that he still shoots it every year or two. “It originally appealed to me because it felt like an anthropological or geological study,” he said. “I was not curious about just the buildings involved in it, but also the curbs, the street corners, the signs, the cars. It’s a challenge and I just keep at it.”

Ruscha is busy. On April 6, Gagosian Geneva will open a show called “Mountain Prints,” and he’s preparing works for another show at Gagosian London in October. Meanwhile, “Ed Ruscha and the Great American West,” which features more than 80 works, debuts on July 16 at the de Young in San Francisco, and the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego is showing “Ed Ruscha Then & Now: Paintings from the 1960s and 2000s,” a survey that runs through April 24.

At one point we got to talking about films, and Ruscha said that *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Nosferatu* are among his favorites. I asked how the art world’s relationship to the film industry in Los Angeles has changed over his decades in town. “At one time there were just a handful of art collectors in Hollywood,” Ruscha said, naming actors Edward G. Robinson, Vincent Price, and Dennis Hopper, who bought Ruscha’s first painting. “It’s a more active, accelerated culture here than it was in the 1960s.”

Later we walked out to his backyard. A 1933 Ford was parked near his outdoor workspace, an idyllic sprawling garden, where Ruscha has planted orange, lime, lemon, and mandarin trees. Ruscha said, “I always like what the artist Harry Gamboa said, ‘L.A. is a desert with mirages. Something happens, and then—poof—it’s gone.’”