

Juxtapoz
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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

STANLEY KUBRICK // GUILLERMO DEL TORO // FUTURA

JUXTAPOZ

ART+CULTURE

ED RUSCHA

THE WIDE AND WILD LENS OF
AN AMERICAN PAINTER

STANDARD



AUGUST, #187 \$6.99





WEST OF HERE

ED RUSCHA AT THE DE YOUNG MUSEUM

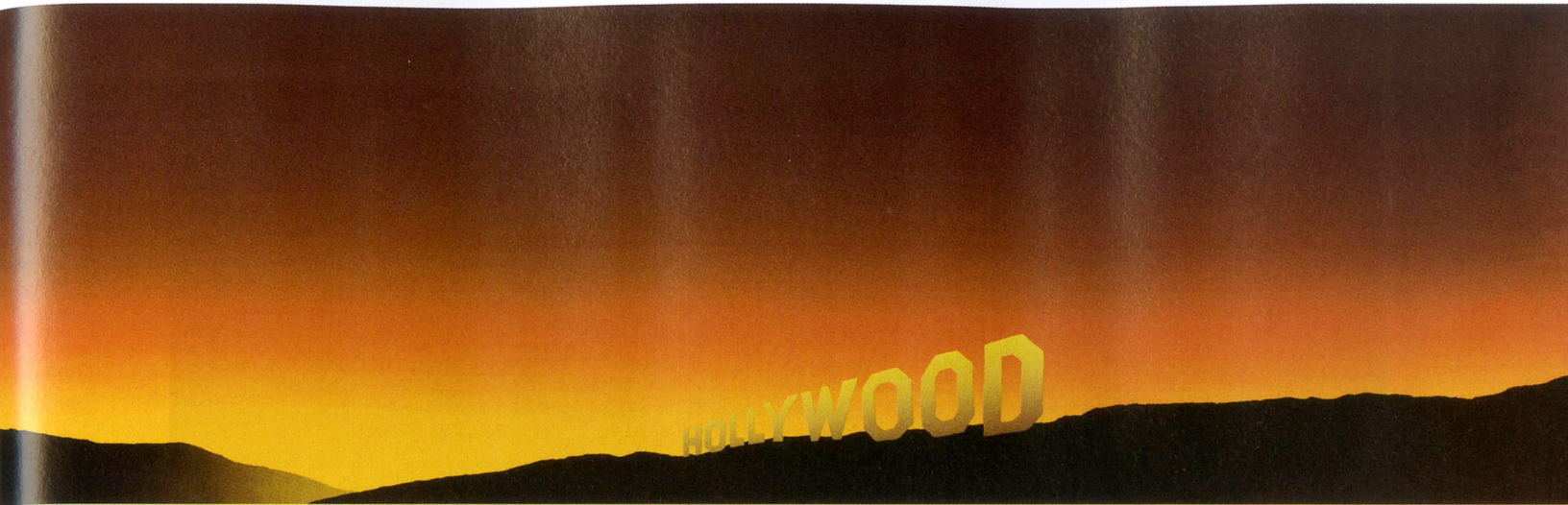
TEXT BY **CARLO MCCORMICK** // PORTRAIT BY **AUBREY MAYER**

PERHAPS IT IS REFLEXIVE TO THE EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS THAT arise with a presidential election season, especially one as exaggerated and polarizing as this, but it is not unwarranted for us to take some measure of what America means. Culture, be it national or regional, is an ongoing conversation between many, worlds of diversity brought to consensus in a collective narrative. Art is not only how we come to read a culture, it is one of the primary ways to describe it in the first place. Few have conjured the physical and psychological landscape of this place, and of what it means to *be* of this place, than has Ed Ruscha. What is all the more remarkable is that even as there is no one America, no single look or feel to these United States, Ruscha has limned some quotidian mundane that captures the essence of what is both common and exceptional in this sprawling nation. And he has done so by locating that broken mirror in which we as a country look to see ourselves: the West.



A.P. 6

Ed Roubin 2006



If history has any bearing on this culture of amnesia in which we live, it can be said that America has essentially been constructed over a series of frontiers, each progressively moving westward, and during this time of discovery and settlement, occupying the mind and heart of the body politic. This is, long after the Gold Rush, the notion of a pioneering spirit still central to our identity. Driving some 1,350 miles from Oklahoma City to California after graduating from high school in 1956, Ruscha followed, as many had for a century, Horace Greeley's admonition to, "Go West, young man, and grow up with the country." Remembering this place, now 60 years later, it still feels fresh as a newly recalled dream. "California was a real lift for me," Ed recalls, "it was swanky and slick, its drive-in and drive-by architecture, perfect weather, palm trees, beaches and waves—it promised a faster life than I had known, a pace that allowed me to lose things. Having been raised Catholic, I could leave all that baggage behind, unlearn all that Bible belt stuff, and experience a real awakening."

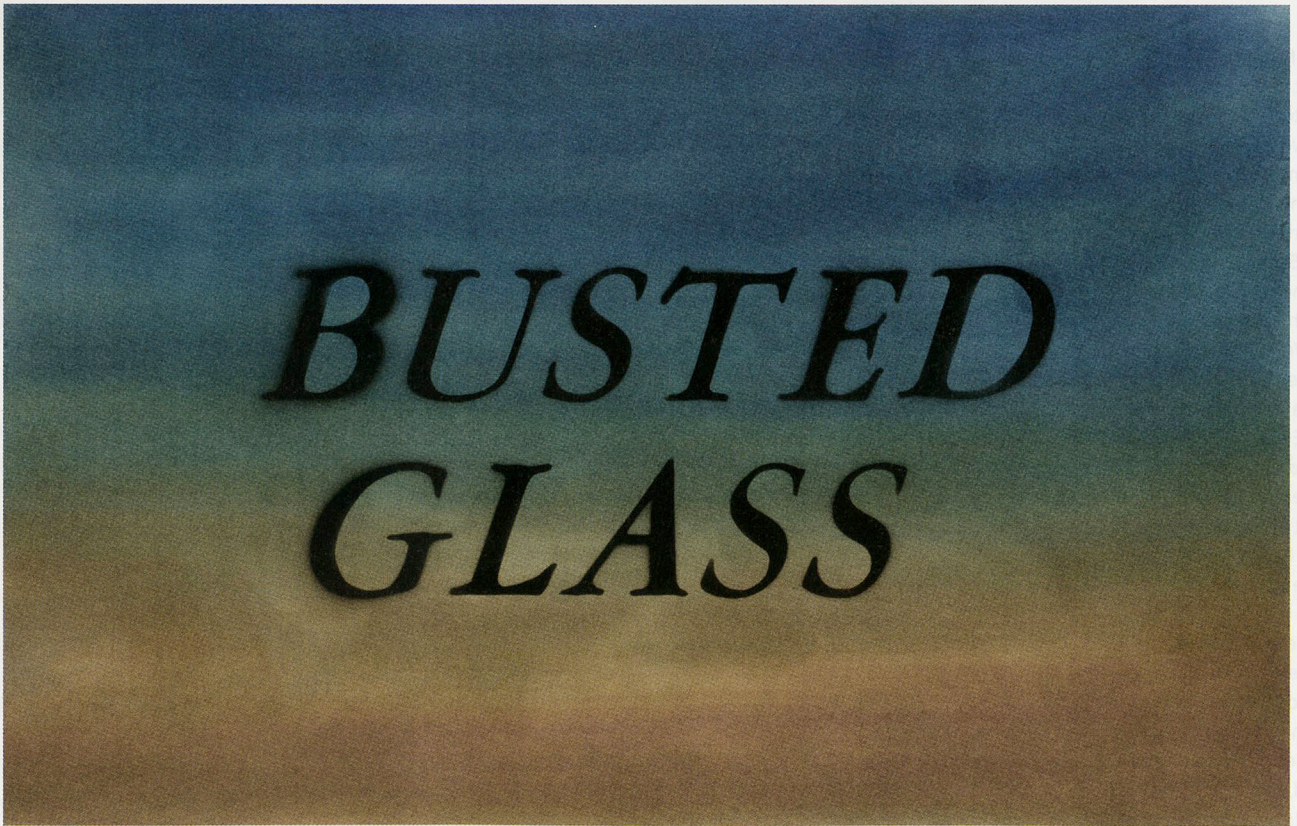
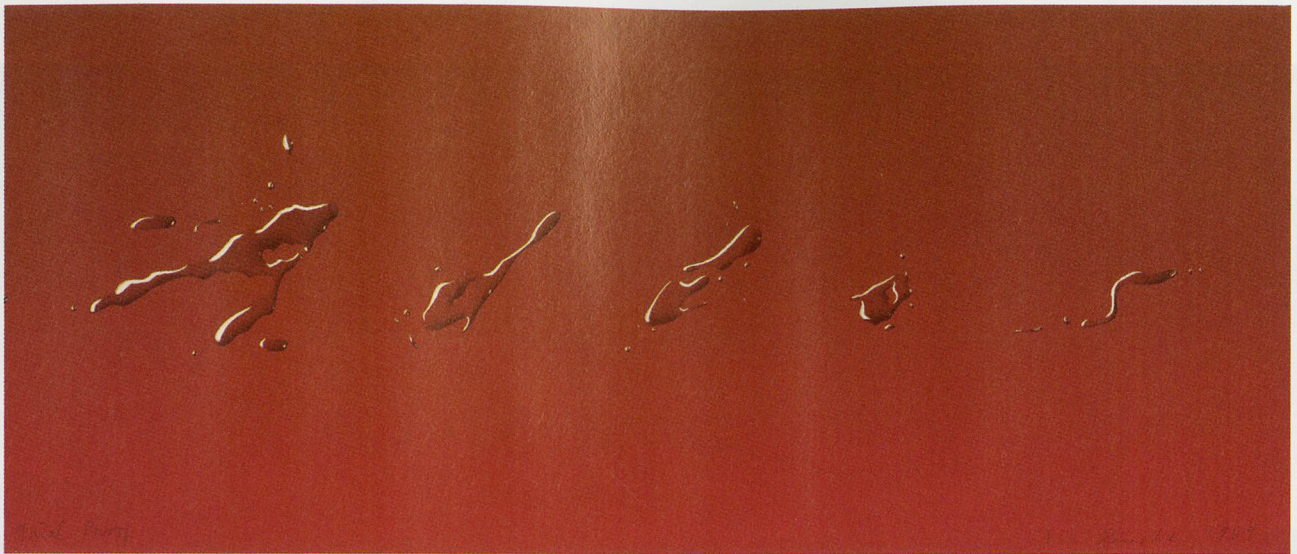
The sense of discovery that Ruscha felt in the '50s, and had similarly thrilled untold wagon trains arriving there but a hundred years before, cresting some inhospitable mount to see what must have been a true glory then (before being paved over and leached of its water table), like a promise delivered, still wields a delusional spell in Ed's paintings to this day. Iconic in a way that delivers the cliché as something more present, even eternal, Ruscha's great West is epic and evasive, a story we love to tell and listen to, even if we don't always quite believe. It's a great view to be sure, and precisely that, a view that reminds us about the notion of viewing, the subject somehow always held at arm's length, seen through a critical distance. As much as the West has come to signify the American dream, to be the locus for our aspirations and the vernacular that conveys our myths, Ruscha's subject is at once a meditation on the physical place and the place it occupies in our collective imagination.

Ruscha's ability to weave a greater narrative on the land and logic of California over these many decades, to do so in various practices ranging from a prosaic inventory-taking to more poetic ruminations, spanning across painting, drawing, photography, printmaking and artist books, embodies a duality that has made him one of the coolest, most clever, yet, even, most sincere artists of our time—a man who is at once SoCal's quintessential Pop artist and among its most formidable conceptual artists. That Ed is so hopelessly the former and profoundly the latter in a culture that spawned popular culture without ever getting enough due as a nexus for Pop art, and is certainly never credited by the East Coast intelligentsia as having much of what could be called native intelligence, is the *suis generis* of his work. Following a hunch however, we wondered about his regard for the big Duchamp retrospective that the great art world bad boy Walter Hopps curated at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1962. As expected, it was revelatory and transformative for the young artist. "A lot of artists had a pretty good respect for him, but Duchamp was, by then, very far outside the mainstream of art thinking. Nobody talked about it all that much then, and he certainly didn't jibe with Chouinard, where I was going to school, which was still very much about Abstract Expressionism," Ed recalls. "His incongruous art forms and contrary way of thinking had a big effect on people, his ready-mades offered absurdity and paradox to the world but, for me, the influence was pictorial, not intellectual. He invented a frame of mind, and I was most struck by how mysterious his objects were. I like that quality, that oddness, and I guess the basis of my thinking was somewhat aligned with his through that."

This attitude of adopting not only the critical thinking of conceptual art but accepting some of its inherent quirkiness lends a kind of idiosyncratic import to Ruscha's paintings, allowing the most facile aspects of the Western myth to

above
Hollywood
1968
Color screen print
44.35" x 17.5"
Published by the artist
Fine Arts Museums of
San Francisco

opposite
Your Space Gravure
2006
Photogravure
with color aquatint and
hard-ground etching
printed chine collé
25" x 29.75"
Published by
Crown Point Press
San Francisco
Fine Arts Museums of
San Francisco
Crown Point Press Archive
Gift of Crown Point Press



above (from top)
Adios, 1969
 Color lithograph
 22" x 9.25"
 Published by
 Tamarind Lithography
 Workshop, Los Angeles
 Fine Arts Museums of
 San Francisco

Busted Glass, 2014
 Dry pigment and acrylic on paper
 22.38" x 15"
 Fine Arts Museums of
 San Francisco
 Museum purchase, Achenbach
 Foundation for Graphic Arts
 Endowment Fund and gift of the
 Achenbach Graphic Arts Council

right
Coyote, 1989
 Lithograph
 27" x 36"
 Published by the artist
 Fine Arts Museums of
 San Francisco



commingle with the expansive and enigmatic otherness in his work. His desert is a journey as much as a destination, like the West itself, a very long and seemingly dead end from which there is no more West left to escape. Of all the many impossible differences that inevitably come up when a New York writer like me tries to communicate with so Cali a cat as Ruscha, none seemed to baffle and amuse him more than when I confessed not knowing how to drive. Here, after all, is an artist whose relationship with the automotive seems baked into his studio practice. "I used to go for a lot of very long drives," Ed recalls, "and they had a kind of numbing effect on me so that in them I began to see things in a more magical way. Going through the desert, the long openness, the shocking heat, all the abandoned things scattered in forgotten old mining and ghost towns—these things meant a lot to me."

Like the land itself, Ruscha's art is emphatically horizontal; it resists the vertical nature of the Old World urban with the grace and grandeur of the vista, adaptable to the sprawl of Los Angeles and the emptiness of the desert alike. As cinematic as the industry of his adopted home, Ed's got a cinemascopic eye and "panavistic" aesthetic, a way of taking in the whole picture while offering due deference to the small details that make life, and the observation of it, so compelling. It seems to disclose a charming modesty in his big picture mind, such that he can tell us offhandedly of his most signature work: "Driving, I began to notice these little buildings called gas stations, which was good because, driving around, I needed them." But, of course, it is not all gas stations and parking lots, and Ruscha admits how, "pop culture inspires me," while conceding how much living in his home in the desert, "means a whole lot to me." In this we understand that it is far more than your typical urbanite's escape hatch. "The botany, the animals, the geology—I care so much about all these things and learning about them out there, to feel how they are still untouched and to know how people are fighting to keep them untouched. It slows down time, and it makes me a better person."

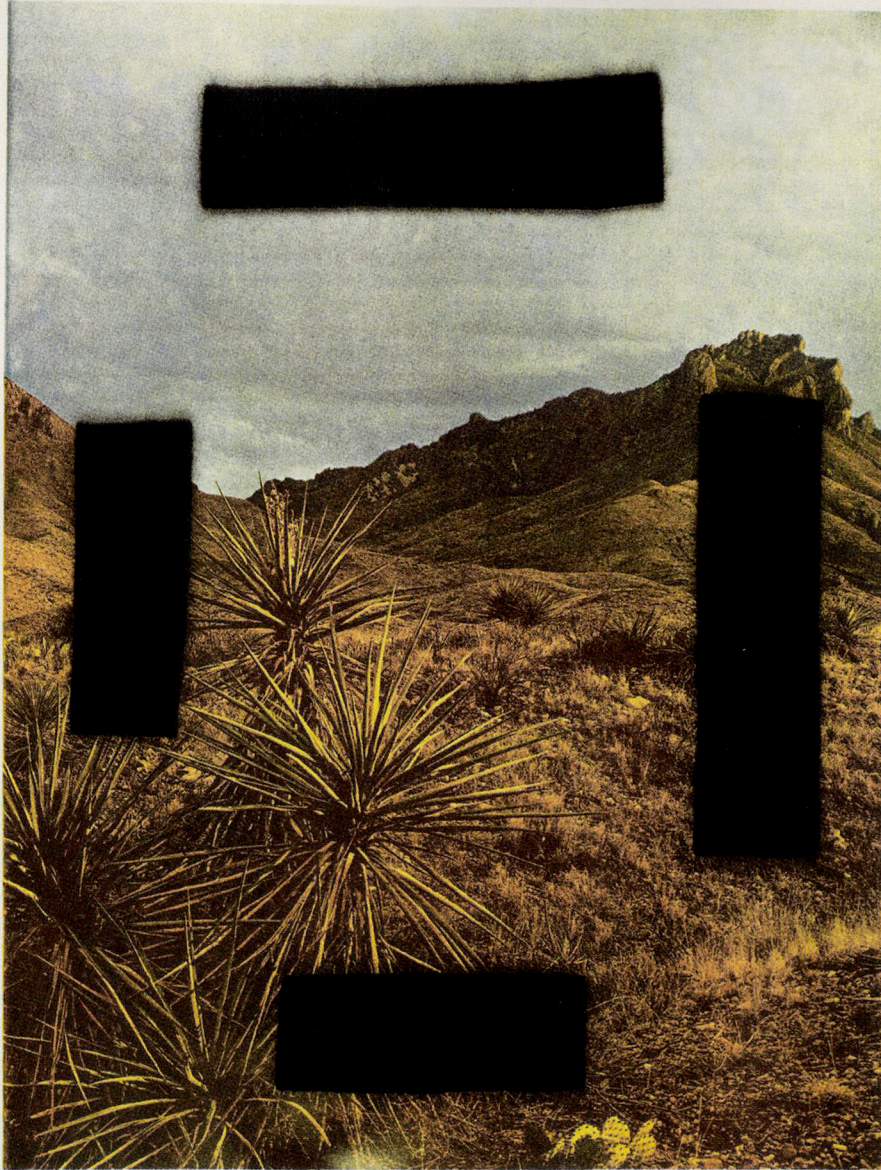
If the land is ever-present in Ruscha, it is most often the setting for the more delirious drama of language that animates his text-based art. "It's not just things I see," Ed explains, "it's just as often things that I hear, people talking, language triggered by sound. Like most everything I do, I'm never sure where anything comes from or where it starts. It just seems to appear. But what I can say, is that a lot of the times, the pictorial is more like a stage setting, a curtain hung behind a thought." There is often something a bit problematic when artists belie the purpose, sources or intention of their art, but with Ruscha, it just makes

above (from top)
Rodeo, 1969
Color lithograph
24" x 17"
Published by Tamarind
Lithography Workshop
Los Angeles
Fine Arts Museums of
San Francisco

Pool #7
from Pools series
series published in 1997
from photographs of 1968
Color photograph
15.88" x 15.88"
Published by Patrick Painter Editions
Vancouver and Hong Kong
Fine Arts Museums of
San Francisco

right
The Fourteen Hundred,
from the series *Twenty-Five
Apartments*
series published in 2009
from photographs of 1965
Gelatin silver print
7.5" x 7.5"
Published by the artist
Fine Arts Museums of
San Francisco





NOOSE
AROUND
YOUR
NECK

Achenbach Proof

Ed Runkle 2001



above
Teepees
 from the suite *Cameo Cuts*
 1992
 Color lithograph
 12" x 12"
 Published by
 Edition Julie Sylvester
 New York
 Fine Arts Museums of
 San Francisco

left
Noose Around Your Neck
 from the series *Country Cityscapes*
 2001
 Color photogravure
 with screenprint
 14" x 18"
 Published by Graphicstudio
 University of South Florida, Tampa
 Fine Arts Museums of
 San Francisco
 Gift of the artist

sense. We don't exactly need to know precisely what he was thinking, because the best part is its open-endedness to the thoughts, impressions and feelings of others. In this way, his importance today is not so much as one of the last great modernists but one of the most prescient of post-modernists. What he told us that we didn't know, though it is likely common knowledge, is that his art comes less from the word in the picture than the description. "I wanted to be a sign painter," he explains. Like Jim Rosenquist, we wonder? "No, he did big billboards on huge buildings, very illustrative," he corrects, "I was more interested in show card lettering, which is a kind of jug band equivalent to that. I like the idea of a billboard, but I was more interested in what it would look and feel like if that spot was empty. I suppose, in the end, it was my interest in this lettering that led me into different typefaces, printing and, of course, the book designs."

The funny thing about the Wild West, and what is so uncanny about its place in the art of Ed Ruscha, is that it doesn't really enter into our national imagination until it is pretty much gone. Just as we could not fully fathom the wilderness until it was conquered, leaving this odd historical logic of how Romanticism and industrialism are relatively concurrent, we didn't appreciate the harsh and brutal nature of the frontier until that moment when it was tamed and lost. This too must explain why the Western

OBSERVING ED RUSCHA

Although it is a rather tawdry form to describe an artist and his work using excessive flattery, successful artists do face this. Over the years, I've heard a number of people refer to Ed Ruscha as the premiere West Coast artist. This is in bad taste in the subjective world of the arts.

Nonetheless, he has been acclaimed as archetypal Pop Art painter of Los Angeles. Ruscha's background as an artist notably coincides with the interesting history of California art in the late 20th century. During the formative '60s he, along with other talented contemporaries, worked his way through the now legendary Ferus Gallery as part of Walter Hopps's "Cool School." During the loose era of Abstract Expressionism, Ruscha used his capabilities as a master draftsman to explore a richer and more precise depth in Pop Art. Inadvertently, he set a personal style of modesty and humility that today has been imitated by many young artists groping for social skills.

In fact, these remarks would probably find discomfort with his down-to-earth sensibilities. Ed's the best.

—Robert Williams

proved to be one of Hollywood's most popular and enduring genres. Certainly, be it in comics, dime novels or the movies, the cowboys and Indians, outlaws and lawmen, didn't take on the power of their folkloric representation until long after they had disappeared from the landscape. "My art is intimately involved in trying to capture the vanished. Nostalgia has great power precisely because it is about what is already gone." Ruscha maintains, "The forgotten speaks directly and deeply to artists who understand the overlooked as valuable. This too comes from my love of movies—how I used to watch them as a kid in serials where you would go to see new episodes every week. Sitting in a dark theater, looking at a large screen of images in light is probably where a lot of my art comes from. Painting is very much like that, and it's why we understand that moving pictures are so cozy with painting." Part of Ruscha's great nostalgia is that he makes us miss even the gradual disappearance of a culture in which these things still matter to people. It's the promise and the disappointment, the dream that lurks somewhere just over the distant horizon, somewhere forever west of here.

JUX

Ed Ruscha and the Great American West will be at the de Young Museum in San Francisco from July 16—October 9, 2016. For more information, visit deyoung.famsf.org



A.P.G

Ed Ruscha 2006

above
Desert Gravure, 2006
Photogravure
21.25" x 24.75"
Published by
Crown Point Press, San Francisco
Fine Arts Museums of
San Francisco
Crown Point Press Archive
Gift of Crown Point Press



above
Rusty Signs—Dead End 2, 2014
Mixografia print on handmade paper
24" x 24"
Published by
Mixographia Workshop
Los Angeles
Fine Arts Museums of
San Francisco
Gift of the artist