

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

KQED

Ed Ruscha Dreams of Empty Streets in His Version of the Great American West

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Ed Ruscha, Detail of 'Hollywood,' 1968. (© Ed Ruscha)

The story of Ed Ruscha, the iconic 78-year-old, Los Angeles-based artist whose work defines a certain brand of sun-drenched California cool, could be told in a multitude of ways. “But there’s not time to do that,” the artist says. 60 years after Ruscha drove west from Oklahoma to attend art school in L.A., the de Young presents one possible narrative with *Ed Ruscha and the Great American West*.

“It’s shocking and it’s comforting at the same time, to see all the stuff together and put into kind of a storyline,” Ruscha says in his deliberate, Oklahoma drawl. “Things that I haven’t thought about just seem to fall into place.”

The artist’s vision of L.A. specifically, and the “Great American West” generally, is noticeably devoid of humanity. Instead, Ruscha focuses on wide horizons, toxic sunsets, gas stations, apartment buildings, parking lots, pools, rooftops and roadside signs. Curator Karin Breuer’s organizing premise takes viewers on a “road trip” of sorts through Ruscha’s relationship to these images of the American west, mixing and matching just under 100 works from the past six decades.

“If I lived in an ideal world, I would say, ‘Please, no automobiles, no vehicles, no bicycles, no humans; just let me photograph the architecture,’” Ruscha says. “Wouldn’t that be great? A little impossible, but I can dream, can’t I?”

He's explaining his practice of regularly photographing, in the early weekend hours, unassuming stretches of L.A.'s built environment. Ruscha's approach to photography is methodical and unstylized. In *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, one of his earliest artist books, he captures a mile-and-a-half span of Sunset Blvd. exactly 50 years ago, logging its stores, restaurants, music venues and nightclubs in black and white detail. There are next-to-no people in its pages.

Breuer's thematic organization at the de Young shows Ruscha returning time and time again to both physical locations and images used in his own earlier works. His *Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas*, first rendered as a monumental painting in 1963, goes up in flames in 1965, becomes a shadowy silhouette in 2003 and eventually disappears altogether in a blind emboss print from 2011.

In a room called "The View from Above and to the West," two rows of silver gelatin prints show six views from L.A. rooftops in 1961 and in 2011. The updates show slight changes in the urban environment: a patio pops up here, a palm tree grows taller there. Businesses lose their art deco ornamentation over time, softening into boxy structures that resemble Ruscha's own simplified graphite portraits of L.A. buildings.

"It looks like a long-term plan but it wasn't planned to be a long-term plan," Ruscha says of revisiting the 1961 rooftop series. "I like what you could say is the passage of time, and the passage of time is a subject I've kind of gotten my claws into."

In works on canvas and paper, the artist also depicts a potential version of L.A. far in the future. Works like *Oxford, Beverly, Western* offer an oblique view of the three streets from above, speckled with what could be post-apocalyptic dust or particle-filled air. Not only is the landscape devoid of automobiles, bicycles and humans, but it's also devoid of any built structures. Ruscha flattens his adoptive city to resemble a page out of a Thomas Guide map, identifiable only by the streets that once bore slow-moving traffic through town.

Even such spare images are abandoned entirely in Ruscha's signature text works, gathered by Breuer to evoke both realist (*Busted Glass*) and romantic (*A Particular Kind of Heaven*) notions of the West. Together in one room, the text works jostle for narrative dominance, depicting most clearly Ruscha's complicated love/hate relationship to the subject matter at hand.

"When I first started doing this I was almost living in a black and white world," Ruscha says. "Now it's got color to it, and sometimes alarming color. Some of the changes I see out there are jolting. I like old things and I don't want things to change. But it's eventual and certain to happen. It's kind of scary, but maybe the negative aspect of that will feed my work somehow, I don't know."

And lest we think too seriously about the implications of humanity's detrimental effect on the once-beautiful west, Ruscha's own deadpan humor constantly undermines attempts to classify his work into grand themes of westward expansion and art historical conceits. Whether taking a typewriter out on the highway for *Royal Road Test* (a 1967 collaboration with Patrick Blackwell and Mason Williams) or screen-printing an image of the Hollywood sign in Pepto Bismol and caviar, Ruscha seems to have a lot of fun making his work, even when he's very matter of fact about the labor behind it.

“I get going at sort of an honorable hour, maybe eight or nine o’clock, and usually I work till six or seven,” Ruscha says. “Nighttime is good because there are no interruptions. The Sabbath is no big deal. I’m not going to mass anymore. Actually, Saturday and Sunday is always very good because there’s no activity. Phone doesn’t ring. It’s heaven.”

As the creator of a body of work that can tell many different stories, Ruscha doesn’t waste much time contemplating the possible narrative threads. For him, a particular kind of heaven might not be L.A., or the quasi-mythical Great American West, or his place in the art historical canon, but rather an uninterrupted and very productive Sunday in the studio.