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Take a Tour of Ed Ruscha's New Text Paintings at Gagosian

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*Ed Ruscha, "Galaxy — U.S.A. — Dot," 2016, acrylic on canvas, 182.9 × 315 cm
(© Ed Ruscha. Courtesy Gagosian)*

Take another trip into the word-based world of Ed Ruscha's art at an exhibition of his latest paintings, which runs at Gagosian's Grosvenor Hill branch in London until December 17.

The works in this new series, titled "Extremes and In-Betweens," were all produced in 2016, and see the artist exploring hierarchies through text size. This approach is typified by "Galaxy - U.S.A - Dot," in which the text descends in size as it gets more localized, beginning with a large "galaxy" and going through "U.S.A.," "State," "City," and "Block," before ending in a suitably small "Dot." Like all the works, this one too is set against muted colors; in some of the works it's a washed-out black, and in this painting it is what Ruscha calls "a color that forgot it was a color."

The sense of absence suggested by this draining of color extends itself into the text. Rather than stenciling the words on top of the background as you might expect, Ruscha instead paints the background over stencil, leaving the words — all written in his signature font that he has wryly called "Boy Scout Utility Modern" — visible in negative space.

This void writing serves to charge the words Ruscha includes on his canvas, either complimenting them (as in the "silence" in "Silence with Wrinkles," 2016), contrasting with them ("earth," "mile"), drawing attention to their empty expanse ("galaxy," "universe"), or drawing attention to the absence of meaning at the core of a term like "America" — an especially potent statement from one of the most quintessentially American artists in this year of the country's extreme division.

"Ed Ruscha: Extremes and In-Betweens" runs through December 17 at Gagosian.