

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Pop art with a pause

Museum of Contemporary Art in La Jolla showcases works of Ruscha, a West Coast pioneer and master of words and images

Marcia Manna



The Los Angeles County Museum; m on Fire by Ed Ruscha, 1965-1968, oil on canvas. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden Smithsonian Institution. Cathy Carver

A stroll along the La Jolla shore offers an unexpected introduction to Ed Ruscha's art and deadpan wit. There you will find, on the ocean-facing side of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, one of the region's most intriguing visual works: a mural-scale image of a slanted sailing ship with the proclamation "Brave Men Run in My Family."

It's a startling statement that prompts speculation about the connection between the words and the image of a stilted seacraft disappearing into a hazy horizon.

"I think the reaction is intensified because it is outdoors and it's monumentally scaled," said Kathryn Kanjo, MCASD deputy director of art and programs and curator of the new exhibit, "Ed Ruscha Then & Now: Paintings from the 1960s and 2000s."

"The text is baffling given the imagery, and that's the effect he would want."

Ruscha (pronounced Roo-SHAY) is a pioneer of the West Coast pop art scene and best known for word paintings that give one pause.

Sometimes, Ruscha uses unconventional media. Beet juice. Egg yolk. And for the 1970 Venice Biennale, he created an installation that covered the walls of an entire room with 360 shingle-like sheets of chocolate-coated paper.

Ruscha recalled one idea that failed.

“I was going to turn a large water tank into the illusion of a circular apartment building with people and furniture in the windows that glowed in the dark,” he said during a phone interview from his Culver City studio.

“The glow in the dark turned out to be impossible.”

European shows and touring exhibitions in the U.S. have given Ruscha’s work expanded visibility, and in the past decade, his auction sales have soared into the millions. At a Christie’s auction in 2014, his painting “Smash” (1963), with bright yellow letters that seem to levitate over an intensely blue canvas, sold for more than \$30 million.

The museum will showcase 16 of his canvasses at the La Jolla branch, including three from its private collection, which represent works made from 1958 through 2010.

The new exhibit continues through April 24 and includes the painting titled “Ace” (1968), which MCASD purchased in the 1980s.

““Ace” looks like it’s moving,” said Kanjo, who will lead a conversation-based tour of the show at 2 p.m. tomorrow.

“The letters are italicized, the paint is pinched and there is a diagonal thrust that conveys a sense of urgency and speed.”

Kanjo said the exhibition “evolved from enduring relationships and is meant to showcase the span of time.”

It was initiated by the late Richard Marshall, a longtime curator of the Whitney Museum who was a La Jolla resident and an MCASD trustee.

“Richard Marshall led me through two, large size painting exhibitions at the Whitney some years ago,” Ruscha said.

“I needed someone with a vision. He made it fluid and easy rather than complicated, like it could have been. He supported me, and he had a way of perceiving the total gestalt of work and making it descriptive to an audience.”

Marshall died in 2014, but during his life, he championed Ruscha’s paintings and photographs, which depict a fascination with the shifting physical and cultural West Coast landscape. Ruscha turned his focus to gas stations, billboards, swimming pools and the Sunset Strip. And then there are the riveting one-word paintings such as “Annie,” “Oof,” “Lisp” and vernacular from radio and film such as “Brave Men Run in My Family” (recurring in several works), taken from a line Bob Hope said in “The Paleface.”

Marshall also authored two books that presented Ruscha as an artist who could communicate universal themes that resonate beyond a specific identification with Pop, Conceptual or Surrealist movements.

In addition to text paintings such as “Lisp” (1968) and “Annie” (1965), the Ruscha exhibit also includes a pair of 11-foot-wide paintings that are on loan from prestigious institutions.

There is the impressive “Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights” (1962), with its sculptural portrayal of the Twentieth Century Fox logo, courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

And “The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire” (1965-1968) is on loan from the Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

The buildings are precisely drawn, and the whole structure appears elevated, with the perplexing addition of orange flames shooting from the museum’s Ahmanson Building on the left side of the canvas.

“It’s institutional architecture that is set at an isometric angle in a hazy green landscape,” Kanjo described. “And then, almost incidentally, raging flames and smoke continue the motion. Funny. But not funny.”

‘Gumbo of gravel’

Ruscha, 78, was born in Nebraska and grew up in Oklahoma. At the age of 18, he and his musician friend Mason Williams (known for the instrumental “Classical Gas”) drove to Los Angeles where Ruscha enrolled in the Chouinard Art Institute (now CalArts). He worked for a printer, where he learned to set type and, like Andy Warhol, he studied and implemented commercial art techniques.

In the 1960s, he created seminal photographic books such as “Every Building on the Sunset Strip,” and in 1982, he had his first retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The cover of the exhibition catalogue featured his word drawing “I Don’t Want No Retrospective” (1979).

His more recent paintings are images of snowcapped mountains, used as a backdrop for phrases such as “Uh-Oh” and “Pay Nothing Until April.”

At his Culver City home, Ruscha said he has displays of some of his own works, including one that is titled “Figure It On Out.”

“I would say that my work is sort of a gumbo of gravel — now you can imagine what that sounds like,” he said, chuckling.

“But it has been the same all my life as an artist and just a simple variation on theme. I feel like I move from one thing to another, but who knows whether it is progress. I don’t spend too much time evaluating. I just keep working.”