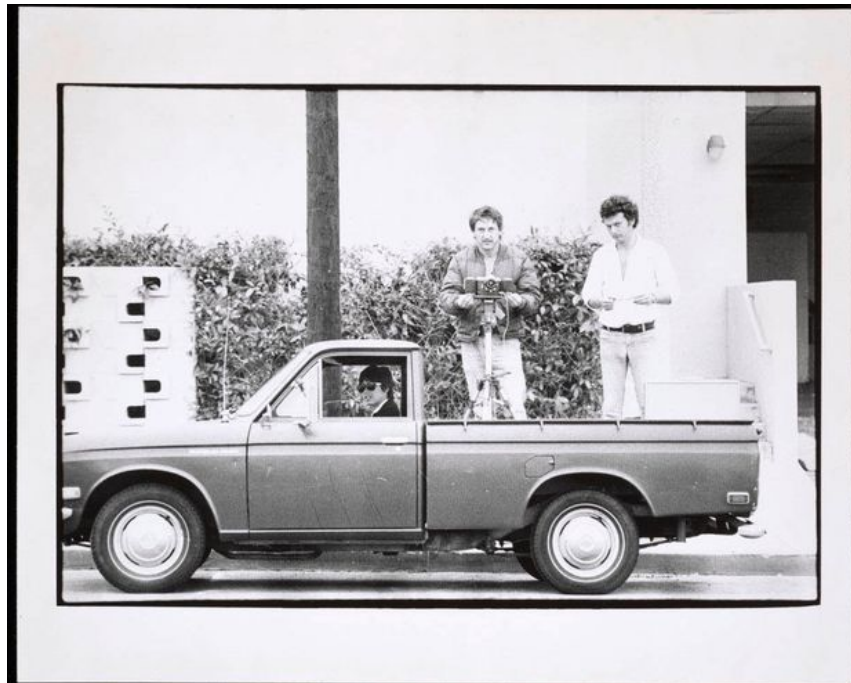


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Artist Ed Ruscha Spent More Than 50 Years Photographing the Same Los Angeles Street *'12 Sunsets,' his new interactive digital archive, includes 65,000 images covering all 22 miles of Sunset Boulevard*

Brenda Cronin



Ed Ruscha (center) with crew in his Datsun pick-up truck, 1975.

PHOTO: STREETS OF LOS ANGELES ARCHIVE. THE GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE. © ED RUSCHA

When Ed Ruscha began photographing the streets of Los Angeles decades ago, strangers would ask what he was doing, squinting behind the lens of a retrofitted Nikon on a tripod in the flatbed of his Datsun pickup truck. “I just said, ‘Ahhh, this is a school project.’ Or something like that,” Mr. Ruscha recalls.

For more than 50 years, the artist has meticulously documented a number of streets, including Sunset Boulevard, which runs 22 miles from downtown Los Angeles to the Pacific Ocean. Now some 65,000 of his photographs of the street have been digitized and collected in “12 Sunsets,” an online archive launched recently by the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. Capturing Sunset Boulevard year in and year out “became an obsession,” Mr. Ruscha said, “because it’s such a Rolling Thunder of a street!”

Mr. Ruscha, who turns 83 this month, mixes Pop art, conceptual art and surrealism in a varied oeuvre infused with deadpan wit. “I kind of bounce around between making paintings and things that are not paintings, or drawings,” he said. “And I make prints, lithographs, etchings—things like that.”



The Whisky-a-Go-Go club on Sunset Boulevard, 1966. PHOTO: STREETS OF LOS ANGELES ARCHIVE. THE GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE. © ED RUSCHA



The Whisky-a-Go-Go in 2007. PHOTO: STREETS OF LOS ANGELES ARCHIVE. THE GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE. © ED RUSCHA

The seeds of “12 Sunsets” were planted in 2012, when the Getty acquired an archive of about 500,000 images of Los Angeles streets by Mr. Ruscha. Over the years, he stored many strips of negatives by winding them around motion-picture reels. “We got these giant film canisters, as if we’d gotten 10 copies of ‘Lawrence of Arabia,’” said Andrew Perchuk, deputy director of the Getty Research Institute.

The images are a trove for demographers, urban planners and architectural historians: “There is no other such fine-grained record of an American city that anybody knows of,” Mr. Perchuk said. Visitors to the site can tool virtually along Sunset in either direction, east or west, and see how restaurants, karate schools and tuxedo-rental centers flourished and vanished. A stretch of the boulevard in West Hollywood known as the Sunset Strip was a longtime center of the music business, whose presence comes through in stores such as Organ Center and Guitars ‘R’ Us, the offices of music publishers and a sprawling Tower Records.

The Getty worked with designers and visual-data experts to digitize and geotag the images so they can be sorted by year and searched by location or keywords, such as “palm tree” or “muscle car.” The consistency of Mr. Ruscha’s shoots, keeping his camera at the same height while a driver moved slowly along the street, eased the slog of digitization. “From Ed’s precision, we were able to give the exact location of the camera for every single photo,” Mr. Perchuk said.

Mr. Ruscha thinks of the photographs as “a kind of a geological, geographical phenomenon” where everything “is as important as the next thing.” That means, he said, that “the vacant lot will get as much attention as the Whisky-a-Go-Go or the Chateau Marmont,” a landmark nightclub and hotel on the Sunset Strip.



The Sunset Plaza shopping center on Sunset Boulevard, 1966. PHOTO: STREETS OF LOS ANGELES ARCHIVE. THE GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE. © ED RUSCHA



Sunset Plaza in 2007. PHOTO: STREETS OF LOS ANGELES ARCHIVE. THE GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE. © ED RUSCHA

Mr. Ruscha, who was born in Omaha, Neb., and raised in Oklahoma City, fell in love with Los Angeles when he visited with his parents at age 10. “The palm trees stuck in my head, and the weather was much better than what I had in Oklahoma,” he said. “It had a form of glamour that I liked.” He moved to Los Angeles in 1956 for art school and began photographing his adopted city.

More than 60 years later, Mr. Ruscha is still at it. In the late '60s, he often began his shoots at dawn on Sundays, so he could creep along without coming across many people or cars. “The police would stop you today,” he said. “You can’t sit in the back of an open pickup truck now.” These days, he and his crew use a van, taking pictures through a cutout window.

During the past year, Mr. Ruscha suspended his street photography and turned to painting and other projects. The pandemic “has been disruptive all right, but it’s not a torture,” he said. “I always love noisy Hollywood parties but I don’t miss them one iota, so I’m fine. I get a lot of work done.” One recent effort was the cover art for Paul McCartney’s album “McCartney III,” which is slated for release Dec. 18.

Meanwhile, the artist finds an escape from city streets in a high-altitude desert landscape not far from Joshua Tree National Park. Mr. Ruscha has been visiting here for decades, making the three-hour drive from Los Angeles. “It’s like an old Gene Autry movie...with big boulders and dirt roads,” he said. “It’s like an elixir.” For now, “it’s like there’s a little air pocket around me,” Mr. Ruscha said. “I’m in the desert thinking, well, what am I going to do?”