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Ed Ruscha: He Up and Went Home

The artist on the Oklahoma roots of his new show, that \$52.5 million painting, and meeting Walt Disney.

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Ed Ruscha in his Culver City studio with Dexter. The artist, long rooted in Los Angeles, has been thinking about the past. At right, Billy Al Bengston's "The Dance (Moontang)," 1957; Julius Shulman's 1950 photograph, "Freeman House" (built by Frank Lloyd Wright). © Carmen Chan for The New York Times

LOS ANGELES — The artist Ed Ruscha has been based in Los Angeles since 1956, and has spent the better part of the last 60 years exploring that city's iconography in a deadpan style that wavers between mundane and philosophical.

He has documented — sometimes in black and white photographs, but mostly in oil on canvas — gas stations, parking lots, swimming pools, the apartment blocks of struggling actors, the Hollywood sign (which on clear days he used to be able to see from his old studio) and, in his large body of text-based paintings, the kind of transactional language one could imagine overhearing at a power lunch at any point in the last half-century, such as: "That was then this is now," "Honey, I twisted through more damn traffic today," "Pay nothing until April" and the iconic "Oof."

Aside from this city, its landmarks and their place in a kind of extreme version of Americana symbolism, the odd evolutions of contemporary vernacular have been the main through-line of his work. In person, Mr. Ruscha speaks with a vaguely unplaceable Western accent, a holdover from his upbringing — he was born in Nebraska, but grew up mostly in Oklahoma — which has softened into slight nonrecognition from his time on the West Coast. Perhaps other than John Wayne, no other postwar figure has been described as “laconic” quite as much as he has.

It’s a good word for him. Watching Mr. Ruscha enter a room feels like witnessing a cowboy suiting up for his last rodeo. His gait is stiff and slow, but also dramatically deliberate, and at 82, he’s still as handsome as a movie star.

On a recent morning at his studio in Culver City — inside an old gray building that previously served as a prop warehouse — the artist sat at a wooden desk, flipping through pictures of his latest works. Uncharacteristically painted on round vellum drum skins instead of the usual canvas, they explicitly refer to Mr. Ruscha’s past in the Southwest with painted phrases that recall the language of his childhood.



Works from Mr. Ruscha’s new show at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas, painted on drum skins, include: “I Don’t Hardly Disbelieve It” from 2018. © Ed Ruscha and Gagolian Mr. Ruscha’s “Not Never,” 2018, inspired by Oklahoma patois. The work is less cynical, more earnestly nostalgic. © Ed Ruscha and Gagolian

“There’s a peculiar kind of — what would you call it? — patois, like Okie jargon,” he said. “People have a funny way of speaking, almost like using bad English, double negatives like, ‘I can’t find my keys nowhere.’ I would see these phrasings in literature too, like John Steinbeck’s ‘Of Mice and Men’: ‘I told you nobody ought never to fight him.’ Yes, they were incorrect, but they had a punch to them.”

The drum skins star in a new exhibition at the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas in Austin, which houses Mr. Ruscha’s extensive archive. They are both familiar and a kind of late-period departure. They deploy the font Mr. Ruscha invented in the early ’80s and has used in his text paintings ever since, called “Boy Scout Utility Modern,” a name that, like much of Mr. Ruscha’s canon, rests somewhere between perfectly literal description and high-minded gag. But his writing is less cynical, more earnestly nostalgic: “I don’t hardly disbelieve it,” or “He up and went downtown.”

The new works were, on some level, a long time in the making. Mr. Ruscha bought the drum skins almost 50 years ago at a leather store in Los Angeles. They were rejects, stacked on a

clearance table because they had noticeable flaws, and he's carried them with him ever since. "I was always looking at them," he noted, "saying, 'You're beautiful, but I can't think of anything to trigger me to paint on you.'"

This salvaging of a seemingly random object was typical. Veronica Roberts, the curator who organized the show at the Blanton, through July 12, described Mr. Ruscha's studio as "an art historian's dream." "Every drawer has a history," she said. She recalled once bringing him pecans from a tree in her backyard, unaware that Mr. Ruscha has a collection of pecan nutcrackers, which he excitedly unveiled to her.

For this artist who has been rooted in the never-ending present of Los Angeles, his recent paintings had him thinking about the past. Mr. Ruscha's father was an insurance auditor in Oklahoma City, "a fairly straight fellow," he said. His boyhood embodied the kind of folksiness that he would later deconstruct in works that rendered classic American imagery — road signs, billboards, the 20th Century Fox logo — into foreign abstractions. "I look back on Oklahoma as though it were an old black and white movie," he said. "I'd drink a quart of milk every morning and read the newspaper. That was kind of my routine."



Mr. Ruscha's photograph of 8900 Sunset Boulevard in 1966, a 2014 digital inkjet print. © Ed Ruscha and Gagosian



Mr. Ruscha, shown in his studio, kept the drum skins that provide the material for his new works for almost 50 years before deciding to paint on them. Patience is a key component of his art. © Carmen Chan for The New York Times

He also spent a lot of time listening to country music and jazz, which he described as “two very diverging, conflicting and yet somehow harmonious schools of music.” He was especially intrigued by country radio programs like “Lum and Abner,” a comedy act that centered on life in a fictional small town in Arkansas, and whose language would greatly influence his work. “Sometimes Lum would say something very abstract,” he explained, “And Abner would say: ‘Oh don’t get so testamystical with me.’ I felt like I wanted to incorporate those kinds of notions, that kind of American speech into my work.”

In looking to the language of his youth, there is an almost childlike innocence to the drums — other phrases include “I ain’t telling you no lie” and “I never done nobody no harm” — though Mr. Ruscha also added that this kind of language was not present in his own house. “I never spoke this way, and if I did, my parents would be quick to correct me,” he said.

He had ambitions to become a sign painter when he left Oklahoma at 18 for Southern California, to study at the Chouinard Art Institute. This development did not particularly thrill his father, at least not until he read a story about how Walt Disney was the school’s primary financial backer, and that many of its students went on to work at his animation studio.

Chouinard, which would later become CalArts, a school that played as big a role as any institution in developing an American avant-garde was not Mr. Ruscha’s first choice — that would have been the nearby ArtCenter College of Design, from which he was rejected, fortuitously, as it turns out. ArtCenter was highly professionalized and had a strict dress code. In the age of the beatnik — this was the late ’50s — students couldn’t have facial hair, or wear a beret. Bongo drums were outlawed on campus. Chouinard, on the other hand, was a bohemian stronghold. It was here that Mr. Ruscha began to study the chaotic spontaneity of Abstract Expressionism, and the work of a young Jasper Johns, whose detached symbolism — targets, maps, the American flag — was like a sarcastic rebuttal.



Mr. Ruscha’s “Pay Nothing Until April,” 2003, acrylic on canvas. © Ed Ruscha and Gagosian. Mr. Ruscha’s “OOF,” oil on canvas from 1962 (reworked 1963), is owned by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. “The single word, its guttural monosyllabic pronunciation, that’s what I was passionate about,” Mr. Ruscha has said of his early work. © Ed Ruscha and Gagosian

He'd take class trips to the Clark Library, where he became enamored with typography and printing. As a student, Mr. Ruscha actually had one dislocating encounter with Walt Disney, which is a little like trying to imagine a meeting between Thomas Pynchon and Dr. Seuss. It happened at a hotel downtown, where Mr. Ruscha was helping to pick student portfolios for Chouinard's scholarship program.

"I'll never forget that he walked up to me and he said, 'Hi, I'm Walt Disney,'" Mr. Ruscha said. "I remember leaving this hotel, and I walked out into the street, and I saw Walt and his wife drive off in a Thunderbird." He added, still sounding dutifully impressed, "Like, a new Thunderbird."

A less ephemeral figure at Chouinard was Robert Irwin, who was Mr. Ruscha's teacher and became a lifelong friend. Mr. Irwin, who is best known for his ultra-minimalist installations that make use of natural light and site-specificity, taught a course in watercolors. He liked to dramatically prepare his students for what Mr. Ruscha described as "the event of painting," making students cover a stiff backing board in layers of tape, then mounting paper on top of that, and finally wetting the paper, so that it had a stiffness and bounce to it ("like a drum," Mr. Ruscha said, tapping his fingers on the desk).

All the anxiety of confronting a blank page was channeled into simply preparing the surface, so that by the time a student began making his first mark, the anxiety had faded. "He had a way of softening your thinking, and embellishing this idea of free-form thought, and not to worry so much about what you're doing," Mr. Ruscha said. "And to let it evolve."

Mr. Ruscha is a great talker, but he's not known to interpret his work or to offer explanations. One of his early paintings, "Hurting the Word Radio #2," (1964) which literally shows a clean, almost advertorial depiction of the titular word being pulled apart by two vises, recently sold at Christie's for \$52.5 million. It is a painting that Mr. Ruscha recalled originally selling to the collector Joan Quinn (and her husband, Jack, a lawyer who died in 2017) for a couple hundred dollars.



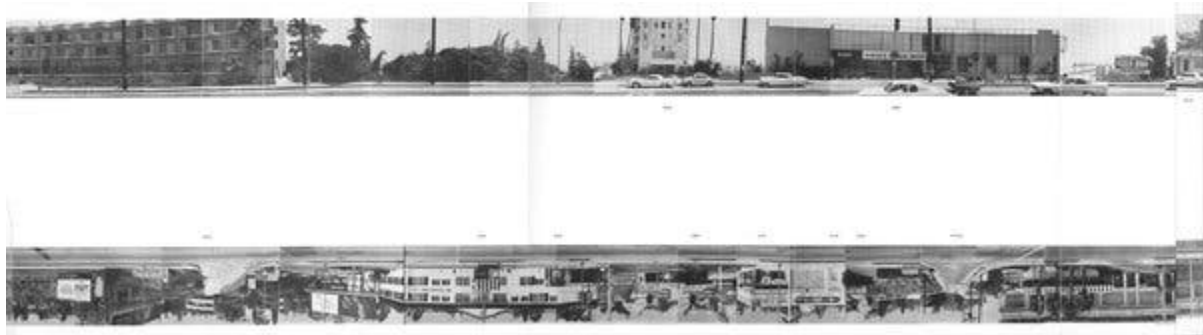
Mr. Ruscha's early painting, "Hurting the Word Radio #2" (1964) depicts the word being pulled apart by two vises. Last fall it sold for \$52.5 million. © Christie's

"You can only get so curious about that subject," he said, brushing it off. "It's just the flow of commerce, and here we are, little helpless creatures while it all whooshes by." At one point, he mentioned how he didn't take to Los Angeles immediately ("it was very smoggy"), and how he

still thinks San Francisco “is the most beautiful city in the world. More than L.A.” So why doesn’t he live somewhere else? “Well, cuz I don’t,” he said with a laugh. “I live here.”

Perhaps patience is the key to his character — the patience of a man who will carry discarded drum skins around for 50 years before finally deciding to paint on them. One of his most famous works is “Every Building on the Sunset Strip,” a self-published accordion-folded book from 1966, which, like “Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations” before it, is a photographic work succinctly described by its title. Every couple of years, Mr. Ruscha rephotographs the street on film, along with other major thoroughfares in central Los Angeles, like Hollywood Boulevard or, most recently, Melrose Avenue, with nothing changed in the process except the streets themselves.

It takes him about a day and a half, and his brother, Paul, who has worked with him since the ’70s, helps him do it. And aside from his original images of Sunset, he’s never published or exhibited these photographs. They are now owned by the Getty, which is making them available digitally: there is likely no greater record of Los Angeles’s evolutions in the last 50 or so years. He thought that a city that changes so often should be “nailed down and captured.”



A detail from Mr. Ruscha’s “Every Building on the Sunset Strip” (1966), a record of Los Angeles’s evolutions in the last 50 or so years, “nailed down and captured.” © Ed Ruscha and Gagolian

“I began to see the city decaying in negative ways,” he said of why he started this project in the ’60s. “Anything that was worth looking at seemed to be erased and something came along to replace it that was repulsive. That continues to be true today, too. I see the city as highly pressurized, just from the pure function of too many people living here. And I notice it every time I go out on the street, that something’s a little bit different. You know: ‘Oh, that’s gone.’”

About two weeks after this interview took place, news spread that John Baldessari, perhaps the only other artist with as long an association with Southern California as Mr. Ruscha, had died at age 88. “John sailed his own boat and it wasn’t a Princess Cruise ship,” Mr. Ruscha said in an email response, sounding like one of his paintings.

In some of Mr. Ruscha’s works dating back to the mid-60s, various lodestars of the cityscape are painted engulfed in flames, like the Norm’s diner on La Cienega, or the Los Angeles County Museum of Art on Wilshire. Recent history has rendered certain aspects of Mr. Ruscha’s career into dark portents, cataclysmic visions of a decadent culture that can’t help but devour itself.

Which is to say: very little is left unchanged of the Los Angeles where the artist started his career, except maybe the Hollywood sign. And Ed Ruscha himself.