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Ed Ruscha Exhibit Examines the Artist's Oklahoma Roots

Major homecoming show at new \$30 million Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center chronicles the rise of a pioneering conceptual artist

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Ed Ruscha's 'Mocha Standard' (1969) is one of several ways the artist explores his Western influences in the show.
PHOTO: ED RUSCHA/GAGOSIAN

Ed Ruscha is going home. The 83-year-old artist has long been linked to Los Angeles, but a new exhibit in his childhood hometown of Oklahoma City reveals his aesthetic was set long before he ever saw the Hollywood sign or the Sunset Strip.

The sweeping, 75-work survey, “Ed Ruscha: OKLA,” opening Feb. 18 at the new Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center brims with telltale paintings of oil derricks, gas stations and open roads threading through vast, empty expanses that echo the state’s own scenery. The show chronicles his rise as one of the country’s pioneering conceptual artists and includes everything from a rarely seen 1960 woodcut portrait of his mother, Dorothy, to his signature wordplay paintings. Also included are a pair of vellum drum skins on which he’s recently written slang he heard growing up, like “I never done nobody no harm.”

“Everything has an original source, and for me, that’s Oklahoma,” Mr. Ruscha said in a recent interview from his studio in Los Angeles.



Ed Ruscha in his Los Angeles studio in 2010. PHOTO: AUBREY MAYER/ED RUSCHA/GAGOSIAN

Since finding fame in the mid-1960s, Mr. Ruscha's wry works have been steadily collected by major museums like the Museum of Modern Art and have resold for as much as \$53 million at auction. Yet until now, he has never had a solo museum show in Oklahoma, where he lived from age 5 to 18.

The scope of the exhibit reflects the ambitions of the nearly year-old, \$30 million contemporary arts center, the first of its kind in a state that's better known for producing country singers than contemporary art stars—an oversight made worse because so many artists like Mr. Ruscha felt compelled to move elsewhere to see and make cutting-edge art, said Jeremiah Davis, artistic director and the show's co-curator. "Now, they can stay," Mr. Davis added.

Alexandra Schwartz, who co-curated the show, said she and the artist re-examined the overlooked influence that Mr. Ruscha's Catholic, middle-class upbringing had on his oeuvre and found some fresh connections. "He's an artist who is so identified with L.A., but now it feels like he has double citizenship," Ms. Schwartz said.

For example, the exhibit includes several iterations of religious words like sin, angel and amen that he's painted or drawn using unusual materials like gunpowder over the years. Mr. Ruscha said the words nod to the faith his father devoutly followed. The artist said he previously downplayed his ties to Catholicism—"I was never an altar boy," he said—but these words poignantly remind him of his father, who moved the family to Oklahoma so he could work as an auditor for an insurance company.

"If I'm honest, the ornamentation and ritual of the Church also stayed with me, like silver threads, and connected me early on to the world of art," he said.



Ed Ruscha's lithograph 'Sin-Without' (2002) is partly a nod to his father's devout Catholicism. PHOTO: ED RUSCHA

The show also includes his 1970 “Chocolate Room” installation featuring walls lined with paper sheets that have been dipped in chocolate. Other highlights include some of his early Pop drawings of comic books, which the artist collected as a boy. A cartoonist neighbor was an early artistic influence, he said, as were the chunky fonts he spotted on pantry products like Spam. In the fourth grade, he worked on class murals recounting the 1889 Oklahoma Land Run, and later he attended Native American powwows and painted blurry silhouettes of teepees.

As a teenager, he stumbled onto books about surrealism in a public library. Back then, he aspired to be a commercial sign painter, but he marveled at the surrealists’ fluid, lunar landscapes. They reminded him of the flat vistas he encountered whenever he drove outside his own city. Even now, Mr. Ruscha’s landscapes tend to stretch out, not up. “Well, Well,” a 1979 screenprint in the show, illustrates his horizontal approach as well as showcases his signature knack for wordplay. In the work, a pair of oil derricks punctuate an otherwise flat void.

Mr. Ruscha left the city in 1956 to attend Los Angeles’ Chouinard Art Institute (now California Institute of the Arts), but he said he never stopped finding excuses to return home to visit friends or his older sister, who still lives there. Each time, he said he tries to listen for twangy accents he fears are disappearing. He also jots down phrases of regional vernacular to take home and paint.

“Once, I owed a guy money, and when I asked him how much, he told me to ‘figure it on out,’ ” he said. “What a piece of English.” Rather than mock, Mr. Ruscha painted the idiom over a snowy mountain backdrop. “I wanted to glorify the words and let the scenery serve as a stage,” he said. That work, 2007’s “Figure It On Out,” is in the show.



Ed Ruscha's 'Figure It On Out' (2007) was inspired by an interaction he had with a fellow Oklahoman. PHOTO: ED RUSCHA

Looking back, Mr. Ruscha said he thinks his romance with Los Angeles started in the air-conditioned movie theaters in Oklahoma City where he and his siblings retreated during hot summers. These days, it's memories of home that turn him wistful. "The state has this rip-roaring, hardscrabble history," he said. "I do look back on it like a black-and-white movie."