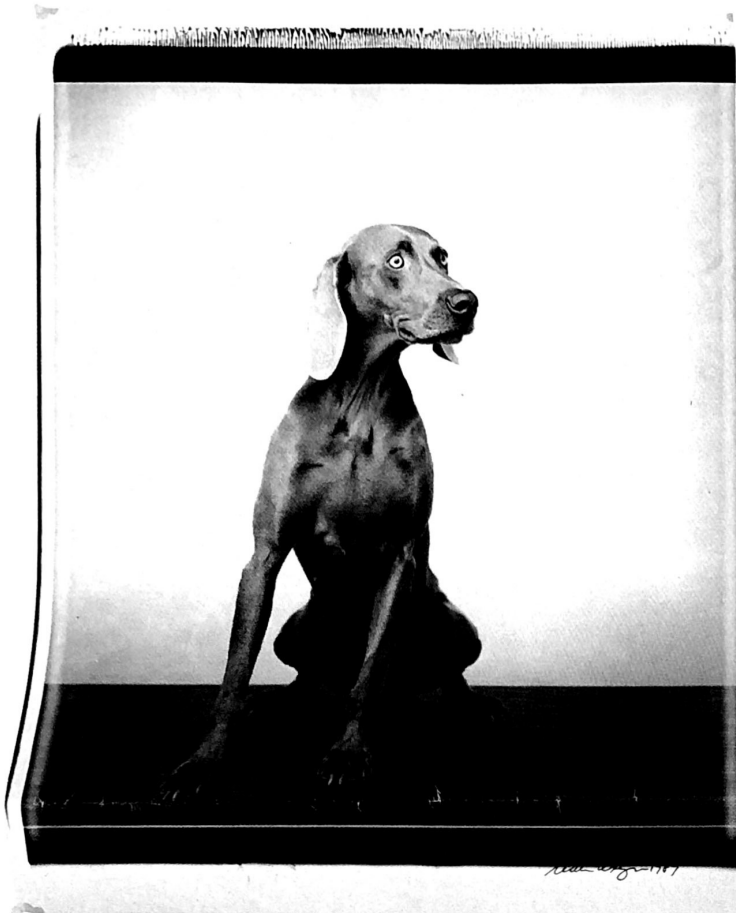


C O N T E N T S



FEATURES

- 162 **L.A. Art 1990**
- 164 **Ruscha Today.** Veteran L.A. artist makes it big. by Hunter Drohojowska
- 168 **Exhibitionism.** The best shows don't come to L.A.—and other misconceptions. by Betsy Bates
- 172 **Vision Vs. Television.** From Ernie Kovacs to the Yonemoto brothers, video art has always borrowed from commercial TV. by Michael Nash
- 176 **Artobiography.** Three L.A. performers put their lives on the line. by James Pickett, Rob Sullivan and Eric Gutierrez
- 182 **Sorcerers' Apprentices.** In an age-old rite of passage, journeyman assistants serve L.A.'s blue-chip artists. by Michelle Huneven
- 186 **Work in Progress.** A portfolio of emerging L.A. artists. compiled by Jeffrey Hirsch
- 200 **This Art's for You.** If you're looking for a painting to appreciate, an art advisor will help you find it. by Lee Wohlfort
- 206 **Where the Art Is.** by Michael Anderson
- 210 **Liberating Funds.** The Lannan Foundation is in the business of rescuing culture's most endangered species. by Eric Latzky
- 214 **Picture Palace.** Ron Goldman built a live-in gallery for the Einsteins of Brentwood. by Michael Webb
- 224 **The Art of Dressing.** photography by Hiro

DEPARTMENTS

- 28 **This Month.** Editor's Letter/Contributors.
- 30 **Letters.** Nash Notes.
- 38 **Datebook.** Carter at Ojai. compiled by Susan LaTempa
- 50 **In Review.** Like It or Not.
- 56 **The Business.** The Reel Problem of Aids. by Richard Natale

- 62 **L.A./N.Y./L.A./N.Y.** L.A. Louver's SoHo Gamble. by Arlene Zeichner
- 68 **Industrial Eyes.** *Godfather Follies.* by Stephen Rebello
- 74 **Car Culture.** Alpha State of the Art. by Bob Merlis
- 79 **Los Locals.** Remembrance of Things Pasted. by Heidi Yorkshire
- 83 **Heart of the City.** The Healing Arts. by Robert McGarvey
- 88 **Sport.** The Boys of Winter. by Alan Rifkin
- 94 **Social Studies.** Out With the In Crowd. by Anne Crawford
- 100 **Videology.** Painters in the Pictures. by Michael Wilmington
- 106 **Sound Tracks.** Cover Art: Is Less Less? by Robert Lloyd
- 112 **Recordings.** The Black Vinyl Market. by Art Fein
- 122 **Urban Issues.** Station Installations. by David Pagel
- 126 **In the Loop.** Kevin Bacon. by Richard Natale
- 130 **On Order.** Touch-Tone Shopping.
- 134 **Equipment.** Car Phones and Beyond. by Robert McGarvey
- 138 **Stylemakers.** Paul Schimmel, MOCA Man. by Irene Borger
- 156 **Going Places.** Three Points West: Travels in Montana, Idaho and Utah. by Paul Roberts, John Keeble and Solomon J. Herbert
- 230 **Shopping Bag.** Where the Buys Are. by Liz Gardner
- 240 **Potations.** Wine Auctions: A Good Year. by Brian St. Pierre
- 244 **Restaurant News.** Tidbits. by Dan Fendel
- 248 **Restaurants.** Western Additions. by Colleen Dunn Bates

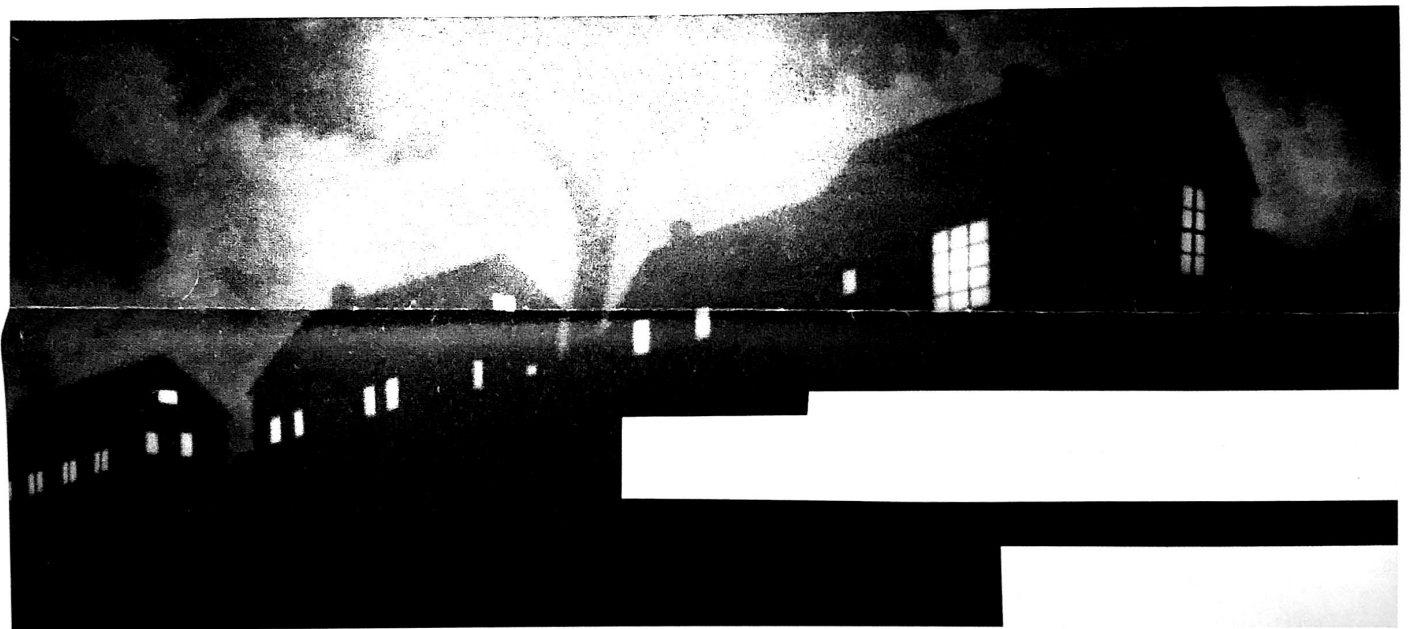
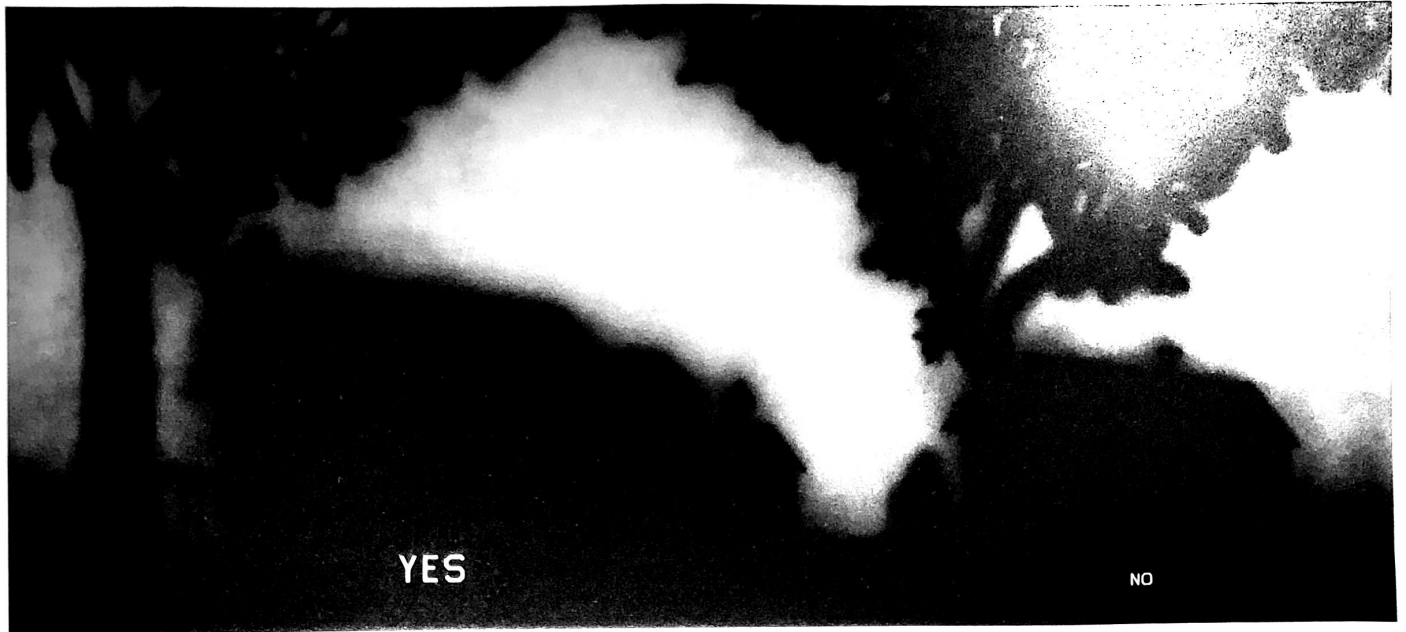
COVER

Edward Ruscha, *Pacific Coast Highway*, 1987. Acrylic on canvas, 60" x 54". Courtesy of Winnie Fung Collection.

THIS PAGE

William Wegman, *Fay and Ruscha*, 1987. Polaroid, 20" x 24". Courtesy of Pace/McGill Gallery, New York.





RUSCHA TODAY

Veteran L.A. painter makes it big

PORTRAIT BY DENNIS HOPPER

YOU KNOW WHAT'S BETTER THAN BEING famous?" demands Edward Ruscha. "Being underground and sincerely appreciated for it; having some statement that is underneath the current of popular art. If you get respect for that, that's one of the choicest moments. Much greater than being world-famous."

Ruscha, who has shown his word paintings with the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York and the James Corcoran Gallery in Los Angeles for over two decades, laughingly

one went to an L.A. collector. Today, according to Cirrus owner Jean Milant, a small ribbon-letter drawing, then valued at \$6,500, can't be had for less than \$70,000. And the major paintings, selling for between \$65,000 and \$80,000 in 1985, are now going for a startling \$500,000.

Last year, a survey of Ruscha's work from the last decade was organized by the Centre Georges Pompidou, in Paris, and the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam. After stops at museums in Barcelona and London, it will

T
O
D
A
Y



Right: *Cruel Rhythm*, 1989. Acrylic on canvas, 24 1/2" x 30 1/4".

refers to himself as a "twenty-five-year overnight sensation." Recent fame makes this renegade artist uncomfortable. His art derives from the mass media and is legitimately associated with pop art. But he was never really embraced by the East Coast Academy of the Avant-Garde. His loopy irreverence and illogic draws upon dada and bebop, fast cars and abandon. His work was too hot, too experiential, too sensual for unqualified critical and institutional approval. *Rew-shay*, as he phoneticized his name on business cards, grew accustomed to operating from the edge. Then everything changed.

In 1987, Cirrus Gallery, in downtown L.A., mounted a survey of Ruscha drawings. They were modestly priced between \$3,500 and \$10,000 and the show sold out. Only

open at L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art in September. Meanwhile, smaller exhibitions have been organized at galleries in Paris and London.

What happened? The homeboy's protean genius—long discriminated against as "quintessentially L.A."—had been discovered by European and New York dealers on the trail of predecessors of a new generation of artists working with language. Fame started closing in, along with a request for an ad for Absolut vodka.

But Ruscha, at 52, is still reluctant to assume the mantle of "modern master." His ambivalence toward the role can be seen in the cover of the catalog for his 1983 exhibition organized by the San Francisco Museum of Art: "I Don't Want No Retro Spective."



LAUGH

TOMORROW

His mandate is subversion camouflaged by subtle and seductive appearance. How else could you interpret a series of prints silk-screened with foodstuffs rather than ink—the Hollywood sign printed in chocolate Metrical, the sky blushed pink with Pepto-Bismol—that faded over time to illegibility? Or his notorious painting of the L.A. County Museum of Art being destroyed by fire?

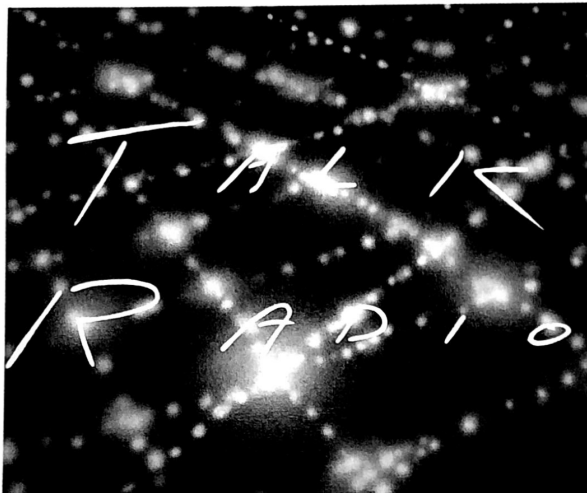
“I always thought, and still think, that absurdity and paradox are where it’s at,” says Ruscha.

Greater name recognition means enhanced financial security. (Those \$500,000 prices are for early paintings that have long since left his hands.) He has a new studio in Venice, a spacious improvement on the cramped Western Avenue quarters where he lived and worked for 20 years. It has also brought new toys. He just bought a voluptuous black 1949 Indian motorcycle—so cherry that Ruscha is reluctant to ride it any great distance, especially on the freeway. He grills himself rhetorically: “The question might be, ‘Why did you buy it, then?’ And my answer would be, ‘Why, just to look at it.’”

Ruscha’s characteristic cool is an extension of his art. An intense, quiet space surrounds him. His words are placed as selectively in conversation as on the canvas. He seems to have scarcely aged despite the slight graying of his hair. His gaze is pale, unflinching. One eye is almost imperceptibly larger and set a bit higher than the other, so his long face seems set at a slight angle, like a portrait by Modigliani. He reserves his attention for matters of some depth.

Success has not spoiled Ed Ruscha. In a neighborhood glutted with trendy restaurants, he suggests lunch at La Cabana, a homemade-tortilla joint. Driving the few blocks to the restaurant, he gestures out the window at a squat, single-story apartment building, its ochre paint flushing to gold in the early afternoon sun. “Isn’t that a beauty?” he sighs. *Continued on page 220*

Top left: *Yes*, 1987. Acrylic on canvas, 54" x 120". Middle left: *You And Your Neighbors*, 1987. Acrylic on canvas, 54" x 120". Bottom left: *Decibel Level*, 1990. Acrylic on canvas, 24" x 60". Above: *Laugh Tomorrow*, 1989. Acrylic on canvas, 54" x 72". Right: *Talk Radio*, 1988. Acrylic on canvas, 20" x 24".



Ruscha Today

Continued from page 167

L.A. has been the object of Ruscha's affection since the drive here from Oklahoma City, along Route 66, in 1956. He intended to study commercial art—a salient influence—at Chouinard Art Institute. (The school, now CalArts, is where his son Eddie now studies art.) He wound up watching the last gasp of abstract expressionism. "It was a completely rich experience but it was exhausted. There was no point in painting like those peo-



News, 1990. Acrylic on canvas, 96" x 72".

ple," he recalls. "I began to wake up when I painted pictures that were preconceived. I didn't have the rules of abstract expressionism. It offered me a no-man's-land. Abandon."

In 1959, he painted a canvas with the letters "E. Ruscha." Other paintings of words rolled forth throughout the '60s and early '70s: "Annie," "Honk," "Damage," "Adios," "Faith." Exclamatory and onomatopoeic canvases gave way to sentences: "Executive Pressures and Loss of Memory," "Three Darvons and Two Valiums," "Hollywood Is a Verb." Throughout the '60s and '70s, in addition to these well-known language pictures, he produced funny little books of black and white photographs documenting unremarkable apartment buildings, swimming pools and gas-line stations, landmarks so banal as to be invisible to the untrained eye. "They were some of the toughest things I've done," he recalls. "They

operated in a medium that had no art life. I got to design my own covers, which is really what I'm doing in my paintings. Every painting of words is a potential book cover. Makes me wonder what the book would be about. Like "Safe and Effective Medication." I'm not up on the origin of that, but the words were just powerful for me."

Ruscha knows that evanescence is a condition of the L.A. landscape. Many of the buildings in those books have been demolished as the city becomes more urbanized and homogenized, with postmodern mini-malls and

glassy high-rises replacing the modest, mute qualities of '50s architecture. In the '80s, Ruscha's work began to carry a decidedly more serious tenor. In a hiatus from language, Ruscha painted darkly ominous silhouettes of houses and trees, often bordered by blank areas of canvas that could be read as signs of vacancy or devices of censorship. "I see them as having roots in a series of drawings of apartment houses I did in the mid-'60s," explains Ruscha. Yet one wonders if the new work isn't reflective of the eroding of L.A., literally and figuratively—the disappearance of the sunny spaces and sanguine mindset long associated with mellow West Coast life. For example, Ruscha has painted, drawn and printed dozens of versions of the Hollywood sign, but in 1982 he rendered the flat, sinister "Black Hollywood."

"The city has tarnished itself," admits Ruscha. "And I don't see anything directly inspiring me. I still love

L.A., but it has less effect on my work today. In many respects, my choices are irrational. I stopped questioning them long ago. I am the person behind the painting, but I'm not the person behind the interpretation."

Ruscha explains the origins of his renewed attraction to figurative work. It began with "Jumbo": "I had an old car, a '39 Ford. Somehow the back of that car became an elephant to me. In more ways than one, since I was never able to sell it."

That "white elephant," painted black and plodding uphill, spawned a series of sooty silhouettes—a wagon train, a Ford Ranchero, masted ships—all of which seem to be traveling under adversity. "The aspect of going uphill automatically refers to adversity, but it's not my intention. It's not personal biography," he says. "It might go back to abstract art. I've drawn diagonals for so long I forget why. The pictures come out of the opportunity to play mysterioso with myself. I never start a picture with any definite communicative responsibility. I'm not out to tell a story."

But pictures talk—that's the essence of Ruscha's art. These seem to be telling ghost stories. The crepuscular gloom of the compositions can also be read as a dying of the light. Ruscha agrees, adding, "I'm making the light die. It's a reversal of attitudes over twenty years." The author of so many tawny sunsets refers to these mostly black and white pictures as his "Franz Kline period," referring to the abstract expressionist who worked almost exclusively in those colors.

The honey-colored light that beamed through window frames in Ruscha's pictures from the '70s, with its potential message of divine revelation, is rendered as cold blue moonlight. The accompanying text, "Laugh Tomorrow," seems to speak of a dim present. The clear, untroubled skies that served as backgrounds for earlier word paintings are now clouded, supporting texts such as "Industrial Strength Sleep." The ubiquitous horizon line is now an oblique aerial view gridded with streetlights at night and supporting the words "Data," "Hostile Polyester" or "Talk Radio."

Ruscha calls the new works "colder to the bone. . . . The earlier work was turbocharged. These are more like a viola or cello. They're not the hot-rod paintings I have done before. They're not about neurosis, but they're not tippy-tap paintings either. I need an excuse to make a painting and once that's recognized, the painting is almost history before it's painted."

Ruscha likes to stress the continuity

rather than the changes in his work. In his survey exhibition he included paintings from the '60s, such as the 1966 acid-green field that supports the word "Chemical." "I don't look at age as though it's an inevitable learning device. I'm surprised I haven't abandoned more things. I hold on. Concepts in my art have always been there."

He captures words as he hears them floating through space or as he reads them in incidental settings—in the medicine chest or driving down a side street. He keeps a pad in the car to jot down phrases that resonate—such as "Christ Candle," from the wall of a shop near downtown L.A.—the way other artists might sketch a particularly poignant view. He says becoming a writer or musician was not an option because "there's no visual payoff." So his aural antenna attracts potent fragments of speech and renders them as forms in space. They become landmarks—marks upon the landscape. And more often than not, they embody the kernel of some universal truth, homily or observation about the human condition. The phrases can be funny, but the humor is a device, seducing the viewer into unwitting collusion. "High-Speed Gardening," for example, allows an oxymoron credibility via the carrot-colored type atop a blur of seemingly fast-paced greens.

Ruscha assigns particular value to an amusing text that came straight from a dream: "He busts into a union hall full of workers and yells out, 'O.K. What is it you guys want, Pontiac Catalinas?'"

"They are like old truths," he explains. "Something tells me when they are right. Blind faith. Like 'Sea of Desire.' It's like painting a portrait. I could never do that. I'd lose interest. But words become like old friends to me." He painted many versions of a phrase he borrowed from Shakespeare: "Words without thoughts never to heaven go."

The passage of time is a theme that threads itself through Ruscha's career. In 1967, he did a ribbon-letter drawing of "1984." In 1980, he painted a pair of exceedingly long, narrow compositions. In one, the bluish dawn was punctuated with the arriving dates of "The Fifties." Its partner, a reddish sunset, depicted the departing dates of "The Nineties." During the last decade, he has represented hourglasses, sundials and clock faces. Does Ruscha have something to say about the coming millennium? "I'm still trying to make pictures rather than communicate with people through my pictures.

"It's just life as usual for me," he shrugs. "I don't ponder the future that much because I know it's coming." □