

RANCHO RUSCHA

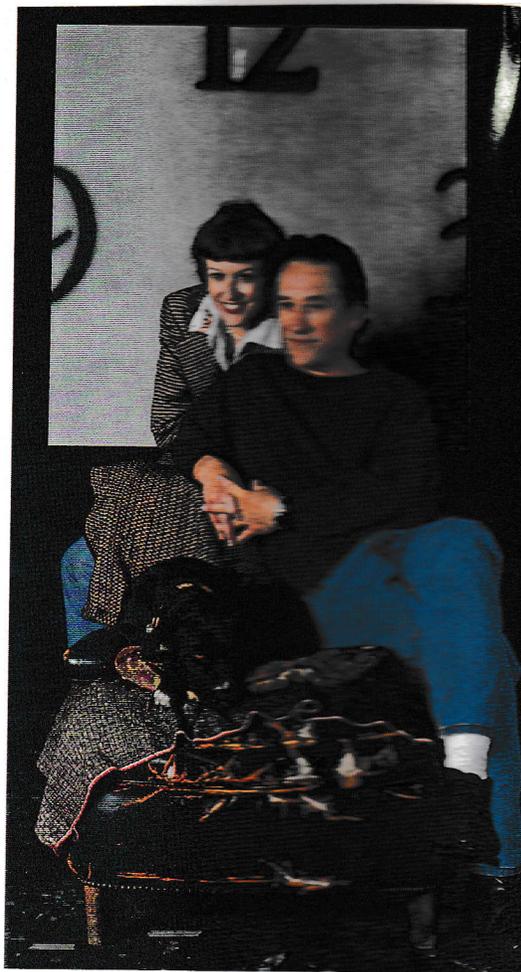
THE ARTIST'S LOS ANGELES RESIDENCE

TEXT BY HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARY E. NICHOLS



OPPOSITE: Ed Ruscha's own works *Cold Beer Beautiful Girls*, 1993, and *Big Inventions That Make a Big Difference*, 1984, are joined in the new entrance hall by *Orange House Painting*, 1963, by Joe Goode and a chandelier from a southern California skating rink.

ABOVE: The couple seek out objects from different periods in southern California style. One result of such blending is a Billy Al Bengston work titled *Oporto Dracula*, 1972, with a Rin Tin Tin lamp and a photograph autographed by Rin Tin Tin's owner.



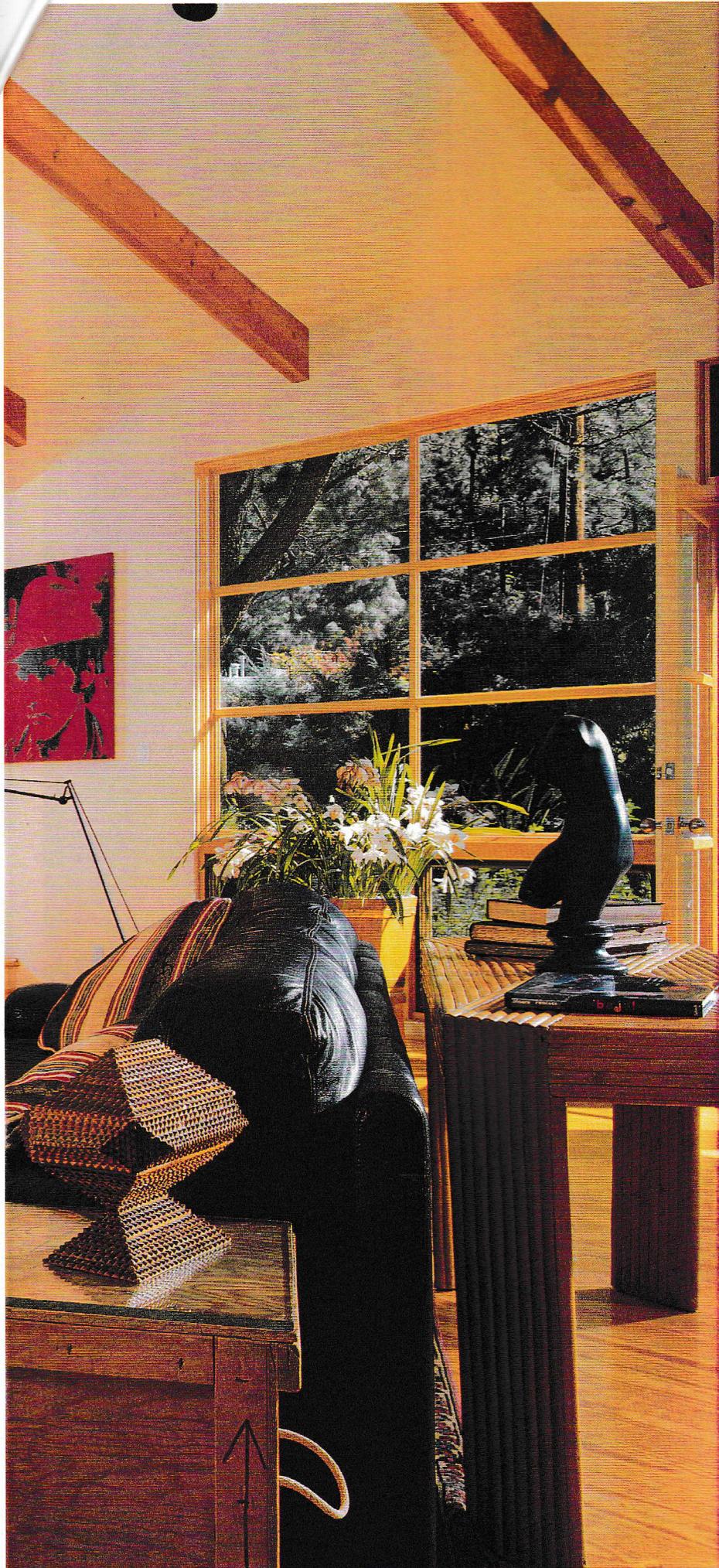
ABOVE: Edward Ruscha, whose words on canvas made him the seminal West Coast Pop artist, and his wife, Danna, bought the residence adjacent to their west Los Angeles house and remodeled it after Cliff May's ranch house aesthetic. "We both have definite tastes," notes Danna. "We're fussy."

Edward Ruscha remembers the lure of Los Angeles: "I knew there was going to be jazz, hot rods, blondes, palm trees, ocean and everything that every other location lacked. I was a sucker for it."

It was 1956 when he drove west from Oklahoma City with songwriter Mason Williams. "When I came here, everything was blunt and clear," recalls Ruscha. "My painting got to be the same. I was doing those monosyllabic word paintings. Somehow they seemed to reflect the whole experience I was going through out here."

Hope and Honk, no less than his paintings of gas stations, sunsets and the Hollywood sign, from the 1960s and 1970s, captured L.A.'s optimism and idiosyncrasy. "It was so wide-





eyed when I first came out here, and so was I," he says with a laugh.

Ruscha was quickly embraced by the Pop art movement—his work was, and still is, represented by legendary art dealer Leo Castelli. It was a heady, exhilarating time. He married Danna Knego, who in 1968 gave birth to their only son, Edward Joseph Ruscha V, known to his parents as Frenchy. That year Ed Ruscha painted the word *Rancho* in a liquid script that looks like poured honey on a golden ground, a painting that seemed to embody the warm glow of his newfound domesticity.

Ed and Danna Ruscha divorced in 1977, but ten years later they remarried and bought their own "rancho"—a low-slung ranch house high in the Santa Monica Mountains. This time he painted a picture of three darkened ranch houses under overarching trees silhouetted against the predawn light. The atmosphere is peaceful and quiet; the three houses could stand for the reunited family. Asked about the connection between the pictures of houses and his domestic life, Ruscha admits, "My domestic life is important to me. I have to have some kind of balance to feed the work. The folly of it all is that, away from work, that's what a home is to me. I guess I'm like anybody else. I love a comfortable surrounding."

Ed Ruscha maintains a warehouse-size studio in Venice and a getaway in Palm Springs, so a modest ranch house might have provided comfort enough if the next-door neighbors hadn't decided to sell their property. But the neighbors did, and the Ruschas' next move was inevitable. They had seen too many of the smaller homes in their area torn down, their lots replanted with massive houses. "There was no doubt about it," says Ruscha, shaking his head. If they

Architectural designer Morgan Livingston connected the two houses with a high-ceilinged living room. "We wanted a big room but not a formal one we would never sit in," says Danna Ruscha. Andy Warhol's 1971 portrait of Dennis Hopper is on one wall.



"Home life is prosaic," says Ed Ruscha. "So prosaic it's embarrassing. At any time you might catch me reading a plumbing manual." Above the living room sofa is Ruscha's 1972 work *Hope*. On artist Jim Ganzer's *Ganzerstand* is a 1920s Mexican lamp from cowboy actor Harry Carey's ranch in Newhall, California.

"Los Angeles was so wide-eyed when I first came out here, and so was I."



"Designing the house didn't have to do with lofty ideas on space and form. It was just practical," says Ruscha, whose painting *Mother's Boys*, 1987, is in the dining room. On the table, which is accompanied by Dorothy Schindele chairs from the 1950s, is H. C. Westermann's 1968 sculpture *To the Flower People*.

didn't buy that house, they were sure to find themselves in the shadow of what he calls "a three-story Swiss Tudor Pop Gothic."

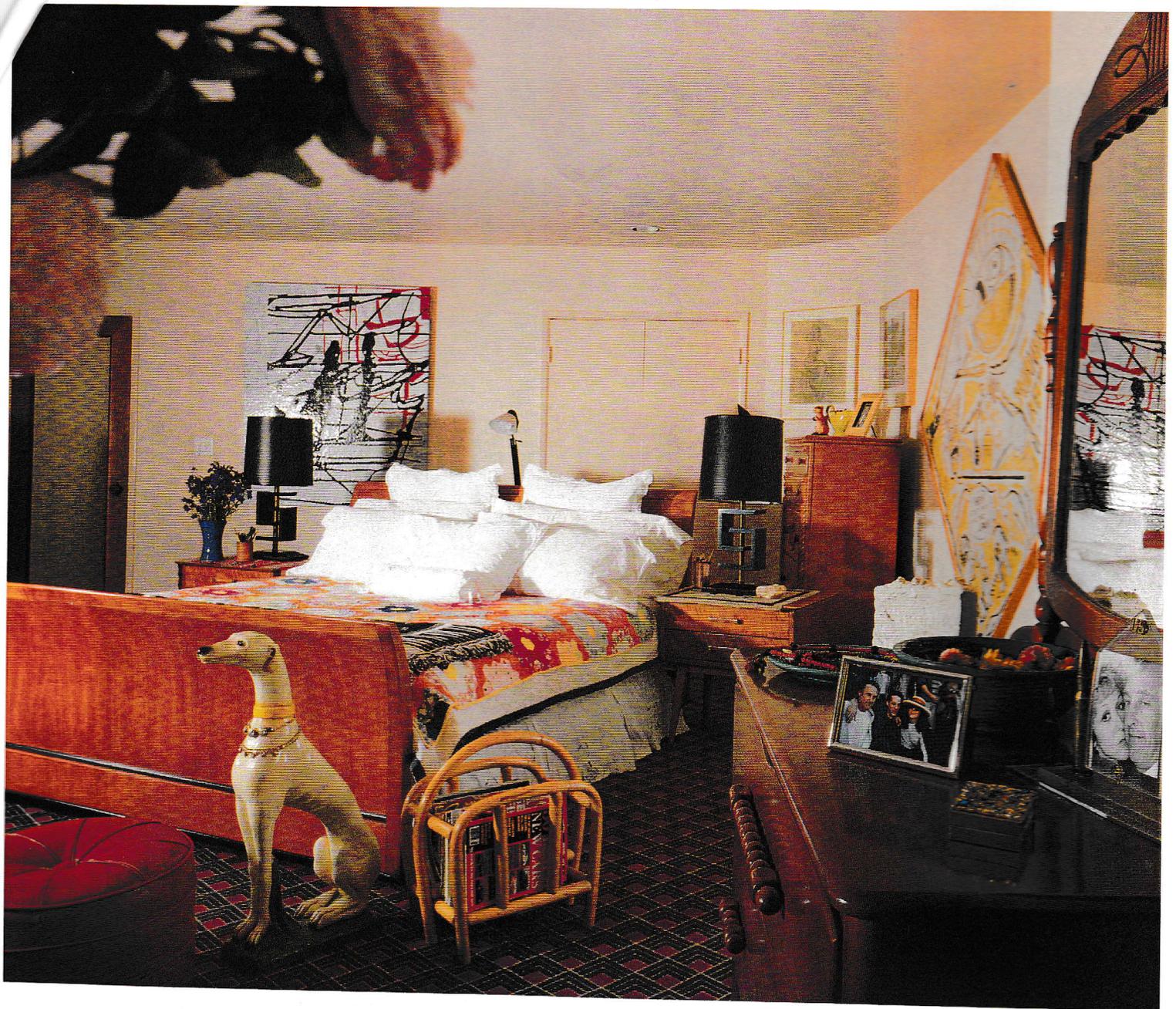
After the couple acquired the property, the next question was what to do that wouldn't emulate the very construction they wanted to avoid. "I could never live in a Bauhaus habitational study," he insists. "And I know zilch about architecture, so I don't see myself building from the ground up. I always felt that existing houses

were instantly livable and pleasant."

They intended to connect the two houses via a large central living room. Working with Los Angeles architectural designer Morgan Livingston, they ultimately tore down most of the new house, keeping only the fireplaces. It was then reconceived as an addition, retaining all the accoutrements of the ranch house aesthetic but executed on a grand scale.

The entrance hall ceiling, for example, elevates to twelve feet to ac-

commodate the artist's marquee-scale painting, which proclaims in black and white, "Cold Beer Beautiful Girls." The giant wagon-wheel chandelier bearing small copper lanterns was salvaged by Danna Ruscha from a southern California skating rink. The daughter of Hollywood actors, Danna recalls, "I was in John Ford's house when I was a teenager, and I was so impressed by their chandelier that I always wanted one." A painting of a ranch house in a brushy ochre



ABOVE: "No matter how I live I never have enough space to put up all my art," Ed Ruscha says. To the left of the dresser in the master bedroom is Mike Kelley's *Headache Napkin #1*, 1983; under it is *Wedding Cake Slice*, 1966, by Claes Oldenburg.

OPPOSITE: "Cliff May is the ideal example," says Danna Ruscha. "We looked at his houses in the area and used his idea of a corridor." In the newly created lanai, a Kenny Scharf creature meets a 1965 staircase sculpture by Joe Goode.

field by Joe Goode hangs in the entrance hall as a symbol of the Ruschas' commitment to indigenous southern California style.

Danna Ruscha worked closely on the redesign by researching the work of Cliff May, the architect responsible for ranch houses scattered throughout the canyons of west Los Angeles. She saved or re-created features that other homeowners might cast off. The kitchen was dramatically expanded

and required all new cabinets, but she had them built in the knotty pine of the original. The floors are heavily grained pine. Her crimson porcelain O'Keefe and Merritt stove from the 1940s, the centerpiece of the room, is surrounded by counters of aqua Formica. "You don't see much Formica in so-called high-end houses," she admits, "but I find it cheerful."

Skied on one wall is a typical Ed Ruscha sunset, an elongated horizon-

tal canvas with darkened mountain ranges across the base and three diagonally denoted designations—Laurel Canyon, Coldwater Canyon, Benedict Canyon. Their house is the next stop in the westward geography of the painting, which echoes their lives. "Laurel Canyon is where we started with our Moorish house," says Danna, "and we've kept moving west."

The couple are avid collectors of what could be called Los Angeles's



histories. Their furniture and accessories have been selected from some of southern California's most distinctive periods and placed in unexpected correspondence. A carved wood table in the kitchen is surrounded by an Eames chair, a curvaceous library chair on rollers and an ornate Spanish-style chair. "I'm not locked into one era," says Danna. "We didn't want anything that looked too done."

She chronicles her own collecting

strategy. "We had a house of all Stickley furniture, but it was very dark. I sold the Stickley when it became too popular, but I have a few pieces left." A bronze Stickley vase rests on a bamboo table with matching side chairs in a corner of the dining room. Posed on the dining table is a sculpture by H. C. Westermann engraved with the wry saying, "No man stands so straight as when he stoops to help a boy." Ruscha's painting of the American flag

flies on one wall. One of his texts on canvas states, "Big Inventions That Make a Big Difference." Is this the room of corny American homilies? With its flagstone fireplace and view of the Santa Monica basin below, it is wholesome and cozy—feelings embraced by both Ruschas these days.

The large living room that connects the new addition to their old ranch house resembles a museum gallery

continued on page 138

RANCHO RUSCHA

THE ARTIST IN LOS ANGELES

continued from page 71

with its fourteen-foot-high beam ceilings and angled windows. "Art dominates," says Ruscha. "I never have enough wall space. I imagined this thing as vast, but I still can't put up a Matt Mullican painting I have that's sixteen feet long." He has hung his own moss-colored painting *Hope*. On another wall hangs a painting by Billy Al Bengston. Beneath it, Danna has erected a mock altar to celebrity German shepherd Rin Tin Tin.

Throughout the house are works of art by the Ruschas' friends and other artists: Warhol's portrait of Dennis Hopper, photographs by Weegee and Berenice Abbott, paintings by Jim Shaw, a drawing by Mike Kelley, a sculpture by Kenny Scharf, an oil painting on paper by Thomas Hart Benton. Since this represents considerable aesthetic range, how does the artist choose his own pictures for the home? "There are some paintings I can't live with," Ed Ruscha says simply. "After making a painting, you have to think of where it's going to go. It's not going to go just anywhere. Some are irritating."

While the new addition accommodates the public areas of the house, the rooms in the original house retain the comfy aura of privacy. The master bedroom, unchanged by the renovation, remains a cluttered haven with French doors that lead to a kidney-shaped pool. Danna keeps a collection of photographs of actresses and models from the 1930s and 1940s. The old living and dining area now serves as an overstocked library of books on art, illustration and design as well as old children's books.

Their dedication to the ranch house style does not reflect their childhood homes. "I was raised like Li'l Abner," Ed Ruscha scoffs. "We parked cars on the front yard. Danna got me to be legit." And Danna Ruscha, who has such abiding affection for all of the memorabilia of L.A.'s past glamour, spent most of her adolescence in New York. She says, "This is like the Eisenhower dream house I wish I'd grown up in. It's like *Happy Days*." □
