

# Ruscha's an art 'outsider' with insight

*Others have L.A. look, but he looks at L.A.*

By Hunter Drohojowska

Ed Ruscha is the quintessential L.A. artist. For 24 years he has dissected this city with a precise, mordant humor in his images of gas stations, trademarks, palm trees, swimming pools, parking lots and the Hollywood sign. Yet the retrospective exhibition of the best-known L.A. artist was not only organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, but it opened there.

Titled "The Works of Ed Ruscha," the show opens today at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the last stop of a five-city tour. But LACMA, as if adding insult to injury, doesn't have enough gallery space to accommodate the entire collection at one time. So the exhibition will be divided into a sort of art miniseries, with part one (1959-1973) on view through April 17, and part two (1973 to present) running May 3 to June 5.

Ruscha is somewhat amused by these developments, particularly by the fact that the show was not assembled in his hometown. Nonetheless, he is forgiv-



Artist Ed Ruscha, among L.A.'s best-known artists, opens the first of his two-part show at LACMA today.

ing. "Henry Hopkins (director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) is an old friend, one of the first art people I met in L.A.," Ruscha explained recently while relaxing in his Hollywood studio. "I'm just glad they booked my act. The show had to be done this way because LACMA had a space problem, but no time problem."

Ruscha's attitude toward the county museum was not always so

tolerant. He once spent three years completing a 4½-by-11-foot painting of LACMA on fire. But now he sees opportunity in the two-part retrospective. "I'm enthusiastic about this because it's not like the exhibitions in the other cities. Hence, I get new feelings from it. And there's potential for making a new show out of it. I'm adding new things that haven't been shown before."

Best known for his images of

words, sometimes called paintings of titles ("Three Darvons Two Valiums," "Hollywood Verb"), Ruscha has worked for years in a modest stucco building on Western Avenue. The Hollywood sign, the subject of many his paintings and drawings visible from one of his studio windows.

Casual in a plaid flannel shirt

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# Ruscha

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jeans and Hush Puppies, Ruscha, 45, is every bit the handsomely aging artist. His tan face remains youthful-looking under his full head of gray streaked hair. His slate blue eyes are as cool, wise and wily as an old gambler's. It's the face of a pioneer survivor, a boy from Oklahoma who beat the odds and seduced Hollywood.

Ruscha was gesturing towards one of his new paintings, a radically horizontal, scarlet canvas on which appear the words "You and Me" in dark red. It's autobiographical ("All the words I use reflect thoughts or feelings I have") and represents the fact that he and ex-wife Danna have reunited after years of separation. "We obviously have an on-and-off relationship. It's been on for a while now and it's real good. Life is simple, and that's the way it should be."

During the more complicated years after his 1975 divorce from Danna, Ruscha dated so many actresses that critics just couldn't restrain themselves from commenting on his love life. (Dave Hickey carries on about it in his catalog essay for the Ruscha retrospective.) His art became a series of visual confessions, fragments of words and feelings rendered in unconventional materials: "Baby Cakes," in blueberry extract and egg yolk on moire; "She Didn't Have To Do That," in blood on satin; "Very Angry People," in cherry stain on moire; and "He Enjoys the Co. of Women," in pastel.

"I think I'm attracted to actresses because they are outspoken ... and self-sufficient. They're a little like mermaids, a little unreal in part," mused Ruscha in explaining his former associations.

His attempts to understand the women in his life led to a 1975 movie called "Miracle," with artist Jim Ganzer and actress Michelle Phillips. In it, he metaphorically examines those relationships in the context of Catholicism, which figured strongly in his youth. It's a funny, simple story of a car mechanic, initially portrayed by Ganzer as dirty and dumb, who becomes so obsessed in repairing a Mustang that he completely forgets, even ignores, his date with sexy Phillips. At the end of the film, he emerges victorious in a clean, white coat. The film's message seems to be that obsession leads to metamorphosis.

"Well, (the movie) is basically autobiographical and has to do with the temptation of a woman, denying that temptation, and getting on with the work — which is ever-present," Ruscha explained.

When asked to chose between women and work, Ruscha replied, "It's more uncomfortable not to be with a woman," adding with a slightly embarrassed chuckle, "Shows where I am, huh?"

On a less mundane level, "Miracle" embodies what Ruscha calls "extremes of religion and car culture." His work thrives on such dichotomy, the combinations of paradox and opposites. "Everyone has considered the iconography of looking up at a window and seeing light coming in. It has a sort of 'answer-from-God' feeling."

But in Ruscha's world, such a powerful image is pitted against its equal in order to create anomaly. He uses divine light in his drawings to illuminate secular observations, such as in "Those of Us Who Have Double Parked."

Critic Peter Plagens separates Ruscha from other

established L.A. artists — Billy Al Bengston and Larry Bell — with the distinction that "They end up with the 'L.A. Look,' while Ruscha ends up looking at L.A." Prime examples of Ruscha's vision are contained in a series of small books of photographs he produced: "Thirty-Four Parking Lots in Los Angeles," "Some Los Angeles Apartments," "Every Building on the Sunset Strip," for example, document the mundane essence of L.A. as though it were high culture.

Ruscha has found an audience as the cartographer of the L.A. psyche, conveying its essence without describing fact. Horizonless space where objects and ideas float immune to gravity's demands, boundless areas where the banal becomes an icon, where all imagery is in the unchanging ever-present — this is Ruscha's L.A.

Ruscha acquired his dead-pan perceptions while growing up in Oklahoma City. "There's not much room for artists and poets there, not much room at all," Ruscha recalled in his soft drawl. Although he attended art classes, Ruscha found his true inspirations in the comics and the movies.

"I was not interested in old masters, or the history of art. I never was interested in that until recently, the 1970s. My first touches with fine art were through mass media. I saw (Marcel) Duchamp's and (Jasper) John's work through postage-stamp-sized reproductions.

"I was confounded and I was awakened by being confounded. That was the power of those works to me. The fact that I could not explain them just swept me off my feet. Only much later did I see the actual paintings."

Ruscha's conception of an artist was "a person cut loose from society," in his case, from Oklahoma City, his strict Catholic upbringing and the authority of his parents. So, when he was 15, Ruscha and a friend hitchhiked through the South and found the freedom exhilarating.

That experience emboldened Ruscha to decide upon a career as an artist, an ambition grudgingly accepted by his father, who was an insurance auditor. In 1956, Ruscha and Mason Williams, the musician, set out in a shiny black 1950 Ford for L.A.

"It was like a siren calling," recalled Ruscha. "Perfect climate, and lifestyle. Car culture had something to do with it, maybe the movies."

At Chouinard Art Institute, now CalArts, Ruscha eventually forgot about commercial art and studied with artists who exhibited at the Ferus Gallery, most notably Robert Irwin. After 4 years, he left Chouinard to study in Europe. On his return in 1962, Ruscha was included in the first West Coast exhibition of Pop Art, "New Painting of Common Objects," organized by Walter Hopps at the Pasadena Museum of Art. By 1963, he was being represented by the Ferus Gallery — quite an achievement for an Oklahoma boy in the big city for just six short years.

Although he remained connected to the meteoric Pop art movement until the 1970s, when his work with books and words was associated with the whirlwind Conceptual movement, Ruscha has never thought of himself as being part of any movement, or even the art world. He's too much the outsider.

But he is also a survivor. "I see the whole art world as being kind of a little bit lumpy, slow to change, and fickle. It's full of 'isms' and artists find themselves being sort of like gymnasts. They've got to dodge these 'isms.' If you can do that, you can survive."

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