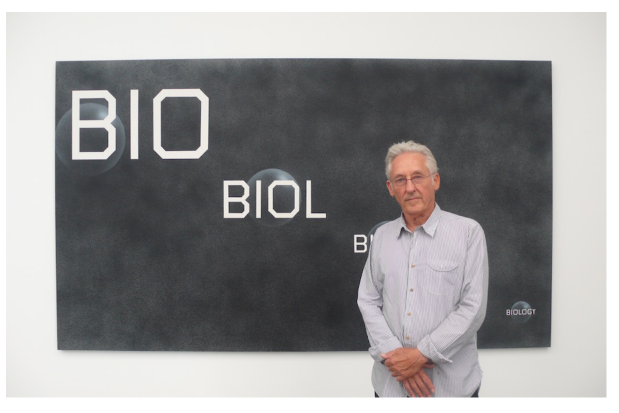
Interview with Ed Ruscha

Written by Elena Cué
Published: 23 November 2016

Author: Elena Cué



Ed Ruscha. Photo: Elena Cué

Ed Ruscha (1937, Omaha, Nebraska) is one of the survivors of the American Pop Art, movement that has maintained it's influence since it emerged in the mid s XX until now. His work articulates images and words, providing them with a multiplicity of meanings, prompting thinking. Through Ruscha we can travel by car along California landscapes: roads, buildings, and billboards, where images and texts are intertwined. His work has been exhibited in the best museums in the world, such as, among others, in the Whitney Museum in New York, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris or in Spain in the Reina Sofia Museum.

Despite his nearly 80 years of age he retains all his charm and appeal, physically and intellectually. On the occasion of his last exhibition in the Gagosian Gallery of London, we talk about his work and career.

Your latest works are shown in this exhibition "Extremes and In-betweens". On the canvas, against a painted backdrop, a series of oversized words gradually fade out and their meaning goes from the universal to the specific, almost disappearing.

You know, I think that this work comes from a book that I made in 1968 called *Dutch Details*. I was invited to the Netherlands to make a project. I wanted to make some pictures in this little northern town of Groningen in the Netherlands, so I took photographs and it was like a progression. I took pictures across a bridge one very wide picture and then I walked forward, took another picture, all the way across the canal to the window of someone's home and inside the window were flowers in a vase. And somehow, that's always stayed with me, so I think that these works come out of that spirit. I think that anything I do as an artist comes from something that I did years ago and so I'm just a variation on a theme.

Ed Ruscha, Galaxy, 2016. Photograph: Ed Ruscha/Courtesy Gagosian

Then usually, your inspiration comes from your memory?

Yes, but also things that I see in the street and in life, I'm influenced by all these things. But it usually is somehow affected by things that I did many years ago. So when I was 18 years old, I maybe had the basis of what I do as an artist. And everything I do is just a little bit off of that.

Could you describe your pictorial evolutionary process, from a more emotional art like abstract expressionism to the more rational conceptual genre?

Yes, in some ways I feel like abstract art is everywhere and it's quite an achievement. It's a very modern step forward, the invention of abstraction. You know, 150 years ago people starting making abstract art. And it was a really important step to do art that is not figurative. And so abstract art affects everything that I do, and that most people do. You know, every artist wants to open the gates to heaven and I'm really no different. I'm influenced by almost everything I see: bad, good, in-between.

You have described yourself as an image-maker; could you tell me about that?

I love abstract expressionism. For me, unlike the artists who cultivate it, I'm better when I think of something in advance and then plan the painting out. I have a preconceived idea about what I want to do. So that's my approach, and in many ways I don't think like an abstract expressionist. I think like a person who plans the work out.

So it is more conceptual than emotional?

Yes, but emotion can enter too.

But mostly control…

Yes!

Ed Ruscha, Hollywood, 1968. © 2012 Edward J. Ruscha IV. All rights reserved. Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

Your landscapes of broad horizons, raking light, twilight mystery, dramatic sunsets, desolate places… I find enormous romanticism in the immensity of your landscapes, a sort of modern Caspar David Friedrich. Is there romanticism in your work?

I don't put romanticism in my works, but I hope that it's already there. I love Caspar David Friedrich's work. But you know, he was a very individual and impressive artist. It's hard to describe him, but I see so much in his work. And not just the figure that's standing looking out over the horizon but he did drawings and paintings of ice that was fractured; they look like geology. You know, his work is great.

Yes, it beckons one to look beyond, towards a metaphysical dimension. Are you interested in what lies beyond the physical?

I certainly don't think of my work as being mystical or cosmic. It's more simply my contact with the world as it is, so I don't delve into mysticism. I know a lot of artists do; they believe in that. But I'm maybe not there. I'm more practical I guess, or visually sometimes I don't know where I am with it, and I've been doing this for so long that I forget why I'm doing it!

Your work is full of meaning…

Somehow my work took on the elements of words and English language, and somehow I got onto that because I studied printing and I wanted to be a sign painter. From there it went to printing, to books - I love books and I've made books for many years. So those elements are there, I can't escape this. And I don't want to escape it either, it means a lot to me.

In some of your paintings these words or texts have contradictory meanings with the image. They convey irony, humor. What is your intention?

Well I don't set out to make something that's funny. Irony is another subject – I mean it's just the basis for my thinking. It comes from all different directions. When I did these paintings here, I had to establish some kind of platform for my thinking and a lot of it had to do with color. I wanted to establish a color and I arrived at this raw umber. I like raw umber – it's almost like a color that forgot it was a color. And so I thought, that's the answer right there. To make a stage setting for these thoughts that are the progressions of thinking – you know, whether it's time or whatever it is - it all just has to come together somehow.

Ed Ruscha, Manana, 2009. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery.

What disturbs your mind? What drives you to paint?

I think that everyday life is enough to produce the incentive to paint. It's not necessarily the torture of unknown things that make me want to explain that. It's like living in an isolated world and somehow working within that world with the limited tools that I have and so I just keep working. To explain it is difficult.

You do not appear to be one of those tormented artists…

Well a tormented artist might be somebody who is an artist one moment and then is not an artist and it's a struggle. For me, the immediate struggle never really happened but there are all kinds of elements that enter into the making of art and it's not all joy and flowers and sweetness, you know. But at the same time, it's not all torture either, so I just see things that I want to make a picture of, and then I make pictures.

Your photographic series of buildings, gas stations and swimming pools are presented as sequential documentation. Where does this passion for the artist books come from?

Probably from childhood and traveling, and things I see that are beyond childhood. When I was introduced to the real world, I was introduced to traveling and especially in the western United States. So I was driving a lot and traveling over the west and I began to see gas stations. And so my camera was a voice for me, and I wanted to somehow record this and make - not just photographs - but I was very curious about the concept of a book. It was very magical to me. Taking the book and starting out with thinking about a book that is empty and has no images, no writing, nothing. And then you take the book with its very clean, empty pages and somehow filter your thought into these empty pages and make a story or an idea, and develop it. And so books to me are like making art.

One of your pictures downstairs is like an open book…

Yes, it drives me crazy. It comes up in a lot of my work of the last ten or fifteen years, this idea of opening up. And sometimes I don't even know that I'm doing it, so it's just very spontaneous and open.

And, what is the relationship between your art and movie-making?

I saw many movies as a child, and the old movies were on giant screens. There's something really magical about that, it makes a big impression on my life. In many ways, it's like looking at a painting - except the painting doesn't move - and here you have something on the wall that is moving and also telling a story and giving you music! So in many ways, painting is to me very influenced by movies. And then movies began to open up, the format becoming wider and wider, until you have Panavision… panavistic. So I started making paintings that were very wide and skinny like this, and it's like opening the horizon. Making it wider, giving you more. And somehow that had a lot to do with seeing movies.

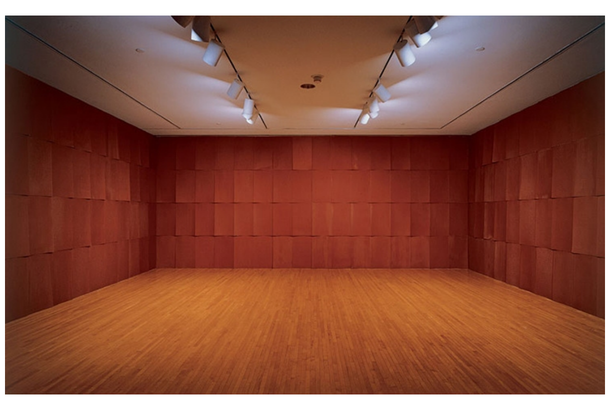
Ed Ruscha. "Standard Station", 1966

Your interest in architecture, and specifically in petrol stations is evident. What fascinates you so much about architecture?

I can imagine when I first saw the gas stations. I loved the little house, and there's always a roof overhang that come over the top of the gas station where cars are pulling in underneath to get gasoline and drive off. And this little house at the back was so comical. So gasoline stations gave me my first exciting introduction into the world of architecture. And I even had dreams of maybe living in one of those gas stations sometimes, where you had this little room in the back. Architecture was always reduced to that for me, so I have a very fundamental belief in the simplicity of architecture.

You have experimented with all manner of materials, including organic substances such as food and drink, dynamite etc. You took part in the 35th Venice Biennale with *Chocolate Room*. How did this experimentation begin?

I saw that painting a picture was like putting maybe a skin onto a canvas, where it sits on the top of the canvas and I began to feel uneasy about that. I thought the idea maybe should be to stain something, where it goes down into the surface. I could see that organic materials and unconventional materials like axel grease or something – or if you take flowers and rub them into a canvas - all go down into the canvas, they don't just sit on top. So making images out of something that is not paint made it very intriguing for me and interesting. I think it just offered another opportunity to do something. I was tired of painting on a surface. Now I'm back to painting a surface, you know! But in my work I have a lot of things that I can't explain; I never liked airbrush art, but then I find myself doing airbrush art. And I never liked shaped canvases, but now I find myself doing it.



Ed Ruscha, Chocolate Room, 1970.

The external influence that the Californian landscape has, is evident in your work. However, where do you find your inspiration or the stimulus for your more conceptual work?

It goes back to nature. There are many modern things that I appreciate, but then I also love going back in my mind and seeing. I like the desert a lot, just the emptiness of it and the drama of the desert and the cacti and the vegetation and the animals and the no people idea. I mean, I love emptiness. So that also has a big effect on everything I do as an artist. It's nature and it's also popular culture, so I've got a mix of those things.

Speaking about the emptiness… why did you choose not to include people in your paintings?

When I first met Andy Warhol, I gave him one of my books of gas stations and he looked through each page and he said, oh I love it, because there are no people in it… and I'd never thought of that. I didn't realize. Well yes, you're right; there are no people in there. I was stunned. So I have no compulsion to describe a figure with paint. And so I don't.

What is the most frustrating aspect of your work and which is the most rewarding?

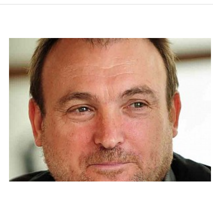
I thought at one time that the thing I really want to have when I make a picture is the finished product. But then there's also the getting there, the things you have to work through and the mistakes you make. Sometimes mistakes are very good. And if you turn a mistake into something that is positive, then that's part of the end product.

How do you feel when you look back at your own work, for instance, in a retrospective exhibition. Does the distance of time render them remote from who you are today?

No, it's actually very close. I mean, I think that things I did many years ago are very close to me today and that I'm not that far… maybe that means that I've not progressed very much! But when I started, I had no thought of ever making a vocation, making a living of my art. I had no concept that people would buy art and allow me to live off of it. And most of my friends were the same, you know. We did it for the glory of it, and to impress one another. The idea of making a living out of it was never there. And then the real world kicks in, and here we are!

Ed Ruscha. Photo: Elena Cué

You have allowed cookies to be placed on your computer. This decision can be reversed. Remove Cookies · Change Cookie Consent



Alejandra de Argos - Todos los derechos reservados