

Art Now LA  
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Ed Ruscha  
*Now Then*  
*A Unique Way of Seeing the World*  
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by Jody Zellen



In 1956, Ed Ruscha left Oklahoma City to study commercial art in Los Angeles and immediately developed an affinity with the city. Los Angeles then, as it is now, was filled with signage and advertisements. It also has awe-inspiring skies, palm trees and iconic architecture and the young Ruscha's drawings and paintings soon filled with these images. In Los Angeles today, people speak of Ed Ruscha moments like palm trees silhouetted against gradient backgrounds. It is unexpected and ironically humorous that moments or things that exist in "real life" are referred to as being like Ed Ruscha paintings.

*Ed Ruscha / Now Then* is a retrospective exhibition that showcases his work from 1958 – 2022. It was first presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York from September 10, 2023 – January 13, 2024 and is now on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Included are photographs, paintings, works on paper and ephemera that highlight Ruscha's career, and illustrate his unique way of seeing and presenting the world. In many ways Ruscha's work and this exhibition is about perspective: the different angles and points of view that one can frame what is in front of them and present that information. What is present? What is left out? How do things change over time? Are they read from front to back or back to front? These questions have long been a concern for Ruscha, as well as a point of departure.

Small renderings of *The 20th Century Fox* are presented from multiple vantage points, as are larger paintings of Standard gas stations. Likewise, *Spread* (1972), can be read from two sides. *Spread* is a large work on paper that is suspended from the ceiling so it becomes sculptural. Here, Ruscha rubbed chewing tobacco onto the front and back of the paper to spell the word right reading as well as backwards. This is just one example of Ruscha's conceptual wit and interest in perspective, perception, language and how images of words can be read. Canvases filled with language appear throughout the exhibition. These pieces are created using a range of colors and typefaces that direct the reading of words such as BOSS, OOF, WON'T, SMASH, NOISE, QUIT, SPREAD and FAITH. Ruscha has depicted stains as well as objects floating in space. He has a deft hand and can render abstractly or in exacting detail with equal dexterity.

The pick-up truck rig used to photograph every building on the Sunset Strip is documented in the exhibition and presented alongside the accordion folding book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966). Ruscha's other photographic projects include *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles* (1967) and *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963). These now iconic books and images have influenced generations and have spawned numerous homages. The exhibition includes the infamous *Chocolate Room* (1970/2023) which was first produced in Venice, Italy and is recreated for each subsequent presentation. For the work, Ruscha screen printed sheets of paper with Nestle chocolate and wall-papered an entire room to create a visual, as well as olfactory blast.

Among the later works are black and white word paintings like *The End* (1991), paintings of Los Angeles intersections that juxtapose the names of the streets amid a sandy concrete texture like *Beverly at Western, Normandie and Vermont* (1999). Also on view is *Inch, Mile* (2016) a painting of different wood grains and surfaces inscribed with the words "inch" and "mile" in comparative scales. Uncharacteristically, and somewhat of a surprise, is the more representational trash heap depicted in *Psycho Spaghetti Western #7* (2010-11).

Lesser known works are interspersed with well-known images like the 1965-68 painting *Los Angeles County Museum of Art on Fire* and numerous depictions of the iconic Hollywood sign painted in block letters and presented on canvases that are different shapes, sizes and colors. The takeaway from the exhibit is an impression of Los Angeles as a city of signs. Ruscha's city is an expansive space, and though devoid of actual people, his image of Los Angeles is filled with an active and long-lasting human presence.

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