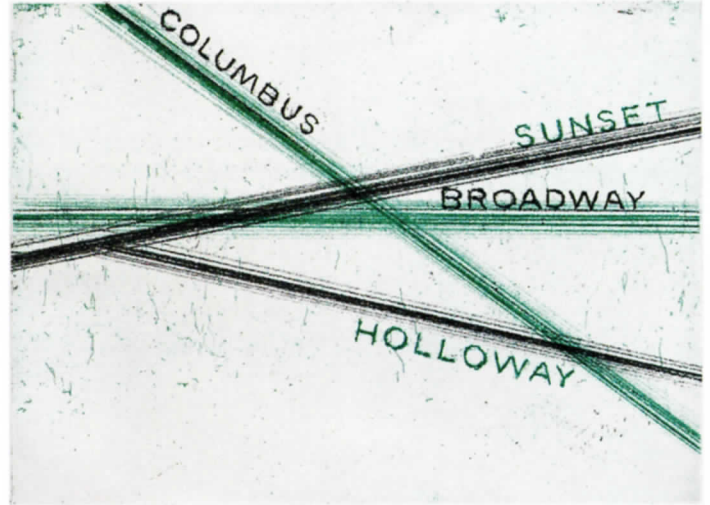
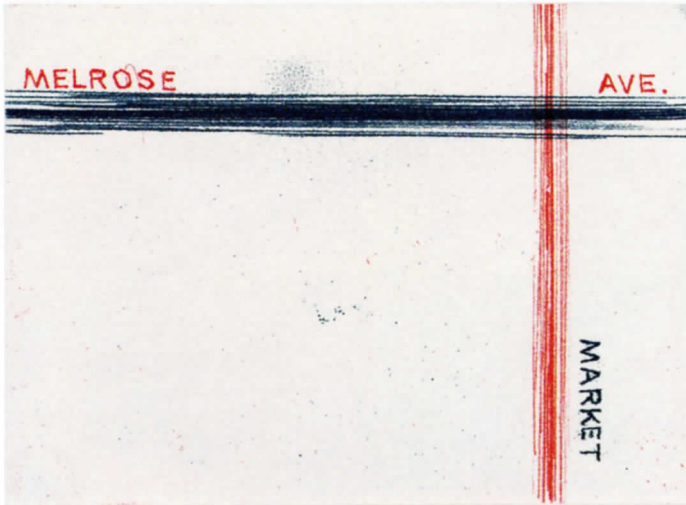


Overview



Ed Ruscha, *Melrose, Market* (left), *Columbus, Sunset* (right), 2001. Color soft ground etchings. Paper size: 8-1/4 x 9-1/2"; image size: 4 x 5-1/2". Edition 45. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

Ed Ruscha Los Francisco San Angeles

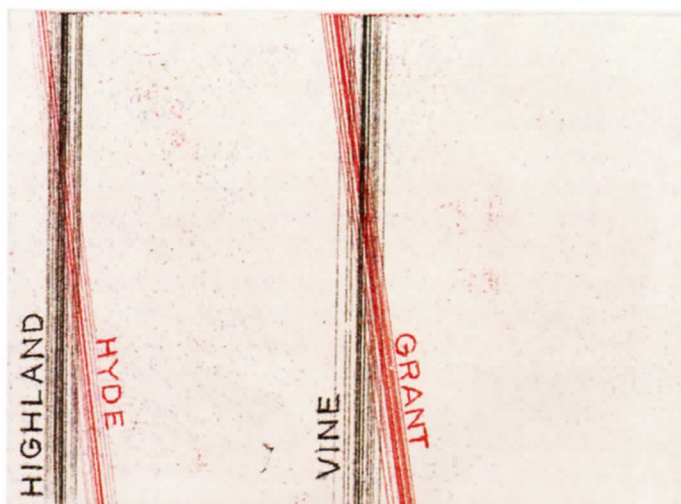
Ed Ruscha was a young artist, only twenty-five, in 1962 when his work was included in an exhibition called *New Painting of Common Objects* at the Pasadena Art Museum. It included Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and a few other artists, mostly older than Ruscha and mostly from New York, who were soon to be regularly exhibited together and called Pop artists. Ruscha's painting *Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights*, done in 1962 of the 20th Century Fox logo, is considered a classic of Pop Art, as is his painting of a Standard gas station done a year earlier. But his work, overall, doesn't fit the Pop Art category. "It is always too simple to reduce an activity to a category," Ruscha has said. "I have drawn from everything which is around me."

Ruscha, who was born in 1937, has lived in Los Angeles since 1956 when he moved there from Oklahoma to attend the Chouinard Art Institute. In the early 1960s Los Angeles was beginning to enjoy attention as an international art center, primarily because of the Pasadena Art Museum whose director was Walter Hopps, and the Ferus Gallery, which was started by artists. Andy Warhol had his first show at the Ferus Gallery. Ruscha showed there, along with Ed Kienholz, Robert Irwin, John

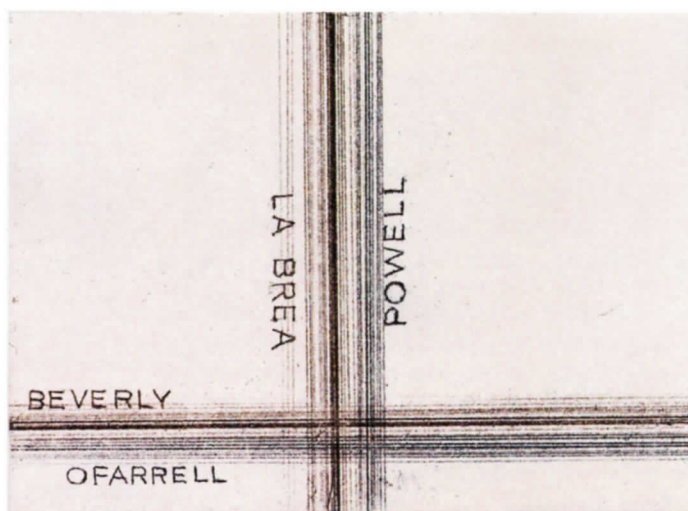
Altoon, and others who are now art world names. "I found them almost priestlike in their commitment to their art and commitment to working," Ruscha says. "I decided I had to commit myself, in this way, to painting."

"I was trained and sort of programmed to think like an Abstract Expressionist, and I was part of that for a while," he continues. "But it was only a step toward my direction. I think an artist has to negate one thing in order to move on to something else. So, it became a question of either loading the brush with color and attacking a canvas—or something else, something preconceived. I took the second way." When Ruscha began to preconceive his work, he also began to stylize it. He didn't try to develop a style. He made using style part of his approach. The word "style," in its first dictionary definition, means "the way in which anything is made or done." The second definition, "distinction and elegance of manner and bearing," applies in Ruscha's case too, both to his highly finished paintings and to his straightforward book works.

When the first of Ruscha's books, *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations*, appeared in 1963, there was no precedent for it, and now we can look around and see a multitude of books and photos and films (even perhaps Andy Warhol's famous films) that are indebted to it. Ruscha's gas stations, all found on the route he would frequently drive between Los Angeles and Oklahoma City, are shown in his



Ed Ruscha, *Highland, Hyde*, 2001. Color soft ground etching. Paper size: 8-1/4 x 9-1/2"; image size: 4 x 5-1/2 ". Edition 45. Printed by Dena Schuckit.



Ed Ruscha, *La Brea, Powell*, 2001. Color soft ground etching. Paper size: 8-1/4 x 9-1/2"; image size: 4 x 5-1/2 ". Edition 45. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

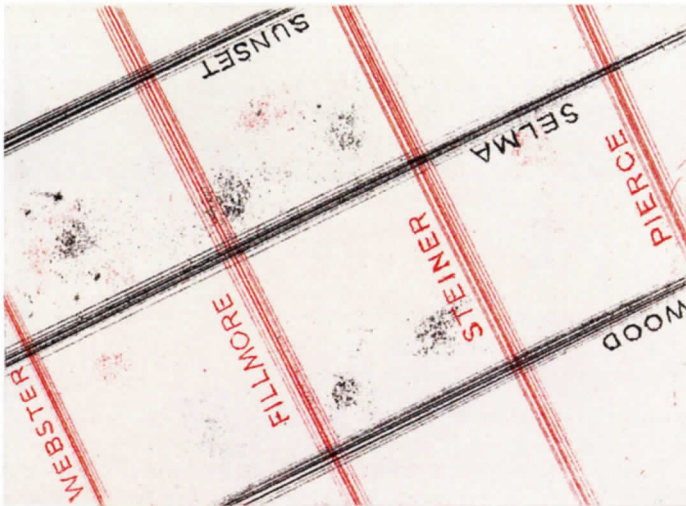
book one after another in ordinary snapshots. Each is identified by a caption giving its name and location. *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* exists because Ruscha did something that simply occurred to him. "I had this idea for a book title—'Twenty-six Gasoline Stations'—and it became like a fantasy rule in my mind that I knew I had to follow. Then it was just a matter of being a good little art soldier and going out and finishing it. It was a straightforward case of getting factual information and bringing it back. I thought of it as making a sort of training manual for people who want to know about things like that."

"Somehow, this has a lot to do with the way an artist thinks," Ruscha adds reflectively. Many art writers have tried to figure out the way Ruscha thinks. His work sometimes includes fool-the-eye elements, sometimes only words simply lettered on the canvas. Sometimes he uses photographs or stencils or symbols or disjointed phrases in combination with landscape images. Besides being called a Pop artist, he has also been called Conceptual or Realist.

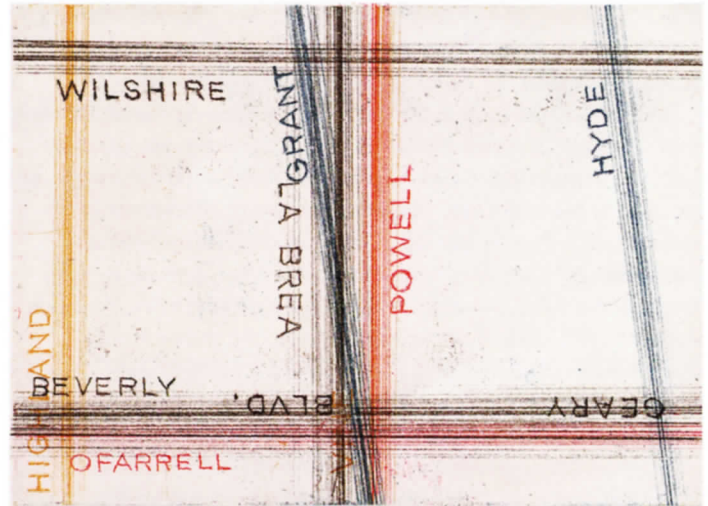
When all else fails, writers rely on his identification with Los Angeles. One critic has called him "the artist of Los Angeles as Manet was the artist of Paris."

"That's almost too much to swallow," Ruscha protested when an interviewer reminded him of that quote. "I don't claim to know more about this city than any other artist. I'm not a native of Los Angeles. I'm from Oklahoma. When I came here it was more or less an extension of my life there. Everything was horizontal. But this was like a Garden of Eden compared to Oklahoma. I knew that I would go to art school and I had a choice of New York or Chicago or Kansas City or Los Angeles, and this was the place because it had an exotic edge to it that I liked at that time. I still love this city, but I'm frustrated by it. Well, you know, I like to get out of town. I like the open areas. I like where there's no city. I spend a lot of time in the desert."

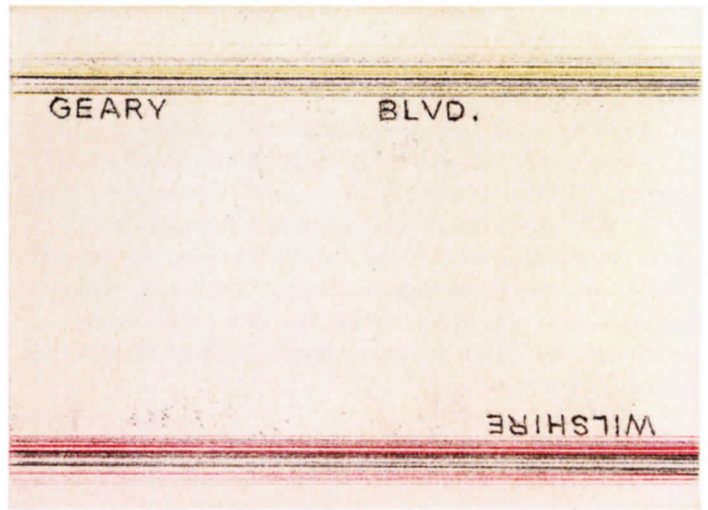
Ruscha's desert, of course, is part of Los Angeles, so far as the rest of the world is concerned. One art writer describes driving



Ed Ruscha, *Sunset, Pierce*, 2001. Color soft ground etching. Paper size: 8-1/4 x 9-1/2"; image size: 4 x 5-1/2". Edition 45. Printed by Dena Schuckit.



Ed Ruscha, *Wilshire, Grant*, 2001. Color soft ground etching. Paper size: 8-1/4 x 9-1/2"; image size: 4 x 5-1/2". Edition 45. Printed by Dena Schuckit.



Ed Ruscha, *Geary, Wilshire*, 2001. Color soft ground etching. Paper size: 8-1/4 x 9-1/2"; image size: 4 x 5-1/2". Edition 45. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

with Ruscha to his desert ranch house, and being "in the grip of a massive déjà vu. This country was the setting for every B Western I'd ever seen." Several of Ruscha's most famous works have as their subject the enormous Hollywood sign that stands in desert hills, and movies in general seem somehow related to what he does. Yet he has never painted movie stars or movie subjects. He doesn't build on movie style, but he has taken something from movies that affects his manner of working. He thinks of a painting as "a flat screen" that gives up its image all at once, and he crafts his work to be quickly absorbed. "With a painting you don't get a running story line from beginning to end," he says. "You are confronted, instead, by something smack, face-on, something which doesn't move."

Ruscha has spoken of staging his ideas on canvas, but his work doesn't seem staged if you think of truly theatrical younger artists like Jeff Koons or Matthew Barney, who are sometimes defined as neo-Pop. These artists style their work into pastiche (a term now used approvingly in art writing) and are indebted to Warhol. They

are not heirs of Ruscha—his influence, strong among younger artists, is harder to pin down. It's toward jargon-free, matter-of-fact, but enigmatic thinking. He lettered "WASH, THEN DANCE" across a cloudy blue-green sky in a 1973 painting, for example. He titled a 1977 painting of an over-scaled fireplace *No End of Things Made Out of Human Talk*. Some art writers today are preoccupied with paintings as "mediation between words and images," which means that images in paintings cause words to form in your brain and words in paintings cause images to form there. Because Ruscha often paints words, his work gets involved in this discussion.

What comes to me in looking at a Ruscha painting is not so much an image but an emotion. Maybe not a heart-wrenching life-changing emotion; maybe instead a smile or a nod toward a feeling that is surprising but familiar. "WE HUMANS" writes Ruscha over a silk moiré pattern. He floats "SHE SLEPT WITH TWO WINDUP ALARM CLOCKS" in tiny letters into a big sky. The emotion comes in the same quick way it does from the

best advertising, and at least partly for the same reason—style. Other language artists generate mental images with bare-bones lettering. But maybe Ruscha isn't a language artist after all.

Maybe—at the most basic level—he's a landscape artist. These new etchings, in which he has created imaginary maps that conjoin San Francisco and Los Angeles, are about as far as anyone can go in stylizing landscape. Mapping is a sturdy, ordinary way of stylizing, but Ruscha has taken liberties with its conventions, using sketchy lines, fingerprints and stray marks to create hypnotic, space-filled, roadlike surfaces. In a catalog essay for a Los Angeles exhibition of some related work, the writer fondly describes his own, and also Ruscha's, old neighborhoods. Most people, however, won't see those sorts of images in Ruscha's maps—unless they recognize the street names. Although this group of prints, which combines street names from San Francisco and Los Angeles, has an added meaning for those who recognize the names, I don't think the neighborhood idea is the primary one.

I see these maps as endless, going off in all directions. As maps they are systematic but not flat. As landscapes they are expansive and without horizon lines. Years ago, in 1990, Ruscha called himself "a victim of the horizontal line, and the landscape, which is almost one and the same to me. I find myself always coming back to this horizontal idea."

If you draw landscapes that aren't located anywhere specific, landscapes as simple in concept as a horizon line, are they still landscapes? I think so, and I think, in much of his work throughout the years, that's what Ruscha has done. In his most recent works, his maps, he has discovered a way to escape from the horizon line, yet continue to make landscapes. "I'm always looking at ways to concoct new things," he has said. "I use different elements, and I feel I have to surprise myself, while at the same time staying faithful to my art."

—Kathan Brown

Adapted from *Why Draw a Landscape?*
Crown Point Press
1999



Ed Ruscha in the Crown Point Press studio, 2001.

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