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ED RUSCHA

CUSTOM-BUILT INTRIGUE: DRAWINGS 1974–1984

Opening reception:
Saturday, May 6, 6–8PM
May 6–June 30, 2017

980 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10075

Gagosian is pleased to present “Custom-Built Intrigue: Drawings 1974–1984,” an exhibition of key text drawings by Ed Ruscha. Many of these historical gems have been brought together thanks to generous loans from private and institutional collections.

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Throughout decades of formal experimentation, Ruscha has explored the role of language in painting, drawing, photography, printmaking, and bookmaking through a singular, sometimes oblique use of words. From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, he honed his distinctive drawing practice to create some of the most compelling works of his career. The text drawings from this period, exquisitely rendered in pastel, dry pigment, and various edible substances, from spinach to carrot juice, bridge the spirited Pop art for which Ruscha first gained renown with the cerebral Conceptualism to which his work was essential.

The exhibition features a decade of drawings (1974–1984) towards the end of which Ruscha reintroduces the element of imagery. With the inclusion of one work on paper from 1986, we can see a clear shift to another stage of his drawing practice.

Drawing has long been considered the most direct process by which thought is transferred into image; but Ruscha almost completely conceptualizes his images prior to making them. Using a reverse-stenciling graphic technique, Ruscha cuts out stencils in the shape of letters and places them on paper. He then applies pigment around the covered area with unconventional tools, such as cotton puffs and Q-Tips, to create his typography utilizing negative space rather than line. Selectively trawling words and phrases from the American vernacular, with little regard to their prescribed meaning or intention, Ruscha subverts the symbolic system of language altogether. Words and phrases severed from specific time, location, or context resonate with just as much vitality and pathos as when the drawings were created.

Custom-Built Intrigue (1981) combines vibrant colors and dynamic lingo with a flare of California cool, fusing the mythic cars of Los Angeles hot-rod culture (custom-built) with the complex plots of the silver screen (intrigue). In this drawing, Ruscha additionally describes his own creative process of combining words as reusable parts, producing a complex and enigmatic composite of meanings. In two drawings from 1976, *Find Contact Lens at Bottom of Swimming Pool* and *Thick Blocks of Musical Fudge*, richly sensorial words emerge from almost palpable hues. *Find Contact Lens at Bottom of Swimming Pool* evocatively describes a nearly impossible task: the dappled aquamarine surface conjures sunlight striking water, beneath which the missing contact lens supposedly lurks. *Thick Blocks of Musical Fudge* exemplifies Ruscha's formal and linguistic mastery, whereby sound and taste are conflated in a sumptuous synesthetic experience. The words coax the textures and smells of rich confectionery out of the deep brown pastel ground. *He Enjoys the Co. of Women* is classic Ruscha; its droll use of colloquial and abbreviated language creates an open narrative with an economy of means.

Ruscha's protean drawings have a renewed potency in an era when talking heads, internet memes, and 140-character tweets corrode and constrict social channels of imagination, communication, and interpretation.

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A fully illustrated catalogue with an essay by Lisa Turvey, Editor of the *Ed Ruscha Catalogue Raisonné of the Works on Paper*, will be published to accompany the exhibition.

Ed Ruscha was born in 1937 in Omaha, Nebraska and lives and works in Los Angeles. His work is collected by museums worldwide. Institutional exhibitions include “Cotton Puffs, Q-Tips®, Smoke and Mirrors: The Drawings of Ed Ruscha,” Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2004, traveled to Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., through 2005); “Ed Ruscha,” MAXXI, Rome (2004); the 51st Biennale di Venezia (2005); “Ed Ruscha: Photographer,” Jeu de Paume, Paris (2006, traveled to Kunsthaus Zürich; and Museum Ludwig, Cologne); “Ed Ruscha: Fifty Years of Painting,” Haus der Kunst, Munich (2009 traveled to Moderna Museet, Stockholm, through 2010); “Ed Ruscha: Road Tested,” Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, TX (2011); “On the Road,” Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2011, traveled to Denver Art Museum, CO; and Museum of Contemporary Art, Miami, through 2012); “Reading Ed Ruscha,” Kunsthaus Bregenz, Austria (2012); “Artist Rooms on Tour: Ed Ruscha,” Tate Modern, London (2009, traveled to Inverness Museum and Art Gallery, UK; Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, UK, through 2013); “Ed Ruscha: Standard,” Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2012, traveled to Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Massachusetts, through 2013); “Ed Ruscha-Los Angeles Apartments,” Kunstmuseum Basel (2013); “In Focus: Ed Ruscha,” J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles (2013); the 13th Biennale de Lyon (2015); and “Ed Ruscha: Mixmaster,” Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli, Torino (2015–16) and “Ed Ruscha and the Great American West,” de Young Museum, San Francisco (2016).

Image: *He Enjoys The Co. of Women*, 1976, pastel on paper, 22 1/2 × 28 1/2 inches (57.2 × 72.4 cm) © Ed Ruscha.

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