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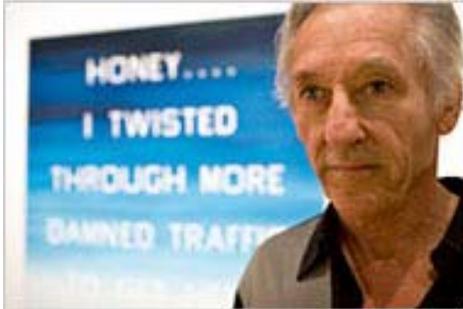
INSIDE ART

London Calling a Spate of Artists to Their Openings

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LONDON — [Ed Ruscha](#) was standing in the middle of the Hayward Gallery the other morning literally surrounded by “Fifty Years of Painting,” his retrospective that opened here on Wednesday. “It’s like a pile-up of noises,” he said looking around at work he hadn’t seen for decades.



Hazel Thompson for The New York Times

Ed Ruscha at “Fifty Years of Painting,” a retrospective at the Hayward Gallery, one of two exhibitions of his work in London.

Mr. Ruscha, the California artist, has been here for more than a week, not just for this show but also for a smaller exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery. The show there is of images he has assembled to accompany a new edition of [Jack Kerouac](#)’s novel “On the Road”: black-and-white photographs that the artist had either taken himself, commissioned from other photographers or selected from found images that correspond to details in the book — like car parts and musical instruments, stacks of sandwiches and skid marks on a desert road.

Even in a city whose energy for contemporary art has been boundless, the number of artists in town for openings this week is dizzying. There are new exhibitions in museums and alternative spaces, specially designed tents and commercial galleries, all piggybacking on the Frieze Art Fair, which opened to the public on Thursday.

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Besides Mr. Ruscha's show, other photo-based artwork can be found across town at the Tate Modern, where "Pure Beauty," a sprawling exhibition of work by another California artist, John Baldessari, also opened this week. Mr. Baldessari is here too, as is the French artist Sophie Calle, who is celebrating a retrospective of her work at the Whitechapel Gallery. The German sculptor and installation artist Anselm Kiefer, meanwhile, was spotted at one of the two spaces run by the White Cube gallery.

And it should come as no surprise that [Damien Hirst](#) had to get some attention too. Mr. Hirst, the 44-year-old British painter was orchestrating an exhibition of 25 new works at the Wallace Collection, that sumptuous town house teeming with Titians, Rembrandts and Velazquezes. It is as unlikely a setting for crass paintings of his signature skulls and sharks as one could imagine.

In the case of Mr. Ruscha, "Fifty Years of Painting" contains some 80 canvases and chronicles his development as an artist from his early Pop Art years through 2007, when he created a diptych more than 27 feet long — "Azteca" and "Azteca in Decline" — that was inspired by a roadside wall in Mexico.

Standing in the Hayward's galleries on Tuesday morning, Mr. Ruscha, 71, could be found staring at "Affiliation," a particularly dreamy image from 1987: a blurry silhouette of a church set in a foggy landscape. He said he remembered making it at a time when he was "tired of paint strokes and wanted to do something that was out of focus."

The show also includes many of his seminal canvases with just one word in the center, like two from the 1960s — "Noise" and "OOF" — as well as a later word painting titled "Sin — Without," a 1991 canvas depicting a sun behind a cloud with only the word "sin" floating in the sky around it.

There are also nods to his native Los Angeles, like "The Back of Hollywood," a 1977 painting with the Hollywood sign seen from behind, its beveled letters set against a glowing sunset. Nearby are canvases of crisply rendered gas stations. "I'm interested in glorifying things that we in the world would say don't deserve to be glorified," he said.

"A lot of my work comes from dreams or maybe nightmares," he added. Others are inspired by road trips. "I like driving," Mr. Ruscha went on, "being on a highway where there are no manmade things."

For the past five years he has been working on his version of "On the Road," because, he joked, "it's so inspirational and right up my highway."

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Mr. Ruscha's canvases fit seamlessly in the Hayward's 1960s concrete galleries. Not so Mr. Hirst's new paintings of skulls and sharks at the Wallace Collection: they have been primly hung against blue-striped silk walls with a view of Poussin's 17th-century "Dance to the Music of Time" in the next gallery. (Mr. Hirst isn't the first contemporary artist to invade the Wallace; in 2004 [Lucian Freud](#) also had a show there.)

"It's exciting to see an artist doing something different in these galleries," said Rosalind Savill, director of the Wallace Collection, who added that she hoped that the Hirst show, "No Love Lost," would draw a new and younger audience.

Mr. Hirst's Blue Paintings, as he calls the series that make up the show, have not been well received by the British press. Rachel Campbell-Johnston, writing in *The Times of London*, pronounced them "dreadful," saying they were "utterly derivative of Bacon (give or take a dash of Giacometti) but they completely lack his painterly skill. And their metaphors are as ham-fisted as the application of pigment."

The paintings had a more popular reception earlier this year in Kiev, where long lines formed to see them at the art center run by the Ukrainian billionaire Victor Pinchuk. According to officials at Science Ltd., Mr. Hirst's company, the show attracted 337,000 visitors. Mr. Pinchuk bought about half of the works; Mr. Hirst still owns the rest.

To entice Ms. Savill to give him a show at the Wallace, Mr. Hirst paid more than \$400,000 toward the renovation of the second-floor galleries where they are on view, updating the lighting, covering the walls with silk and renovating the wood floors.

He was on hand this week to discuss the exhibition and oversee finishing touches on the installation. "I used to bring my kids here to see the weapons," he said, explaining the genesis of the idea to show his work there.

Now that he has given up spin paintings, dot paintings and butterfly paintings, he has shut two studios, one in Gloucestershire and one in London. He's also concentrating on painting again rather than more sculptures of dead animals floating in tanks of formaldehyde or medicine cabinets filled with pills — works that made him famous more than a decade ago and caused a sensation last fall when he held a one-man auction at Sotheby's here.

"Painting will always be around," he said. All of the new canvases have a deep blue background against which familiar images emerge. Besides the skulls and sharks, there are dots and ashtrays

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and the shadow of an iguana, each rendered in different ways. The skulls and sharks bear eerie resemblances to [Francis Bacon](#)'s paintings of screaming popes, images caught in their own web of misery. "I don't borrow ideas, I steal them," Mr. Hirst joked.

He is already planning his next London show: a temporary exhibition of two 20-foot-tall paintings that are to be installed in St. Paul's Cathedral next month. Though he declined to describe the works, he said he was excited about a new challenge. "I get bored easily," he said. "It's nice to keep changing things."