

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Los Angeles Times

### Ed Ruscha weighs in on Obamas' taste in art

October 15, 2009



In his early days, Ed Ruscha painted single words that packed a punch: oof, slam, smash, honk. In the '80s, he took a subtler approach, floating equivocal phrases in painted skies.

Consider “I Think I’ll...,” a 1983 piece that has moved into the first family’s living quarters at the White House, courtesy of the [National Gallery of Art](#) in Washington, D.C. The longer you look at the painting, the more words emerge from a streaky red sunset.

The phrase “I think maybe I’ll...,” in large block letters, descends from the top left to lower right of the 53 3/4 x 63 3/4-inch canvas. Conflicted fragments in smaller print — “Maybe ... yes ...,” “Wait a minute ... ! ...!,” “On second thought,” “Maybe ... no ...” — take an opposing path. The final word, “yet...,” all but slips away.

It’s hard to imagine George W. Bush living with the Ruscha. As president, he called himself “the decider” and seemed to pride himself on sticking with his decisions no matter what. But Barack Obama is not “W,” and the L.A.-based artist is delighted.

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

“I hope my painting has a reverse effect on White House decisions,” Ruscha wrote in an e-mail from London, where he recently opened exhibitions at the Hayward and [Gagosian](#) galleries. “I am 1,000% behind this administration.”

Like many of Ruscha's trademark works, “I Think I’ll...” is an amusing take on human behavior that leaves lots of room for interpretation. But the painting acquired a new layer of meaning when it appeared on a recently released list of 47 artworks lent to the White House by Washington museums.

“We were all kind of tickled by the Ruscha,” said Harry Cooper, a National Gallery curator who worked on the art loan project with White House curator William Allman and the Obamas’ decorator, Michael Smith. “All those phrases about uncertainty are not ones you would necessarily associate with executive power.”

The painting was donated to the National Gallery in 1990, in honor of the institution’s 50th anniversary, by Los Angeles collector Marcia Simon Weisman. It might seem a surprising choice for the Obamas, but it’s one of 20 modern and contemporary works selected for their temporary home. Public areas of the White House are decorated with older works from the permanent collection, Allman said.



The Obamas made some relatively conservative choices, including sculptures by Edgar Degas and a painting by Winslow Homer, but they brought a fresh look with the Ruscha, as well as abstractions by Josef Albers, Leon Polk Smith, Nicolas de Stael, Sam Francis and Richard Diebenkorn and works by African American artists.

There are four brightly colored figurative paintings by William H. Johnson, an African American who died in poverty in 1970 and is now widely admired for his powerful folk art-like simplicity. “Black Like Me #2,” a 1992 work by Glenn Ligon, appears to be an abstraction, but it’s composed of a reiterated phrase from a book by John Howard Griffin, a white journalist who wrote about the painful experience of passing himself off as a black man.

All in all, the loans cover a broad range, Cooper said. “Some of the work is political. Some of it is just beautiful. There are big names and lesser-known names, older work and work by living artists — in our case, Ed Ruscha and Susan Rothenberg. All the works we lent are very strong. They are colorful, they have strong shapes, they are powerful things to live with.”

-- Suzanne Muchnic

*Photos: "I Think I'll..." by Ed Ruscha, courtesy of the artist. "Black Like Me #2" by Glenn Ligon. Credit: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.*