

The Wall Street Journal
January 15, 2011

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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JANUARY 15, 2011

On the Road With Painter Ed Ruscha

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Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas (1963) is one of the most famous works in the exhibit 'Ed Ruscha: Road Tested.'

A colleague once praised Ed Ruscha's rocky cliffs, parking lots and gas stations as "postcards gone wrong." On Jan. 23, the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas, will open "Ed Ruscha: Road Tested," a 75-piece exhibit exploring the conceptual artist's lifelong fascination with the topography of the American highway.

The 73-year-old, Los Angeles-based Mr. Ruscha is known for adding cryptic phrases to his austere landscapes of the West, such as his 1983 depiction of a flat horizon laced with red letters that read, "We would have a travel agency except no one in this town travels." At auction, one of his paintings has sold for nearly \$7 million. Earlier this week, the artist spoke about his love of the road.

Wall Street Journal: Tell me about your family's first car.



Collection Emily Fisher Landau, New York

Ed Ruscha Uphill Driver, 1986 Acrylic on canvas, 54 x 120 inches (137.2 x 304.8 cm)

Ed Ruscha: I was born in Nebraska, but for me, it all really started in Oklahoma City. I moved there when I was 6 and my father, who was an insurance auditor, had a big 1948 Plymouth for a company car. He used to take my family – my mother, my brother and my sister – on these vacations all over, to Yellowstone National Park, Los Angeles, San Francisco. We kids would cram in the back for hours with a big jug of lemonade and take sips off it. It was great fun. At night we'd stay in motels, or as they called them back then, tourist courts. It was a different era, but that's where I got my first taste of the country. And the open skies haven't changed.

Wall Street Journal: What's the first time you hit the road without your family?

When I was 14, a friend and I hitchhiked to Miami, and that was kind of a big deal. It took us 26 rides to get down there, and when he stayed on, it took me 26 rides to get back. You can't forget something like that. I'm surprised I never got into any jams, but I got a real taste for travel and highway culture from that trip.

Wall Street Journal: What was your dream car?

Like all the guys back then, I loved hot rods, but my first car was a black 1950 Ford. What I really wanted was a 1948 Ford convertible or a 1948 Cadillac, but my friends said, "You don't want to go back in years," so I never bought one.

Wall Street Journal: Who introduced you to the mechanics of car engines and the guts of fixing and restoring cars?



Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Heinz Family Fund

Ed Ruscha, La Brea, Sunset, Orange, De Longpre, 1999, Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 1/8 inches (152.4 x 152.7 cm)

My friends and neighbors were always fixing their cars. Soldiers who felt restless wanted to work on something and they understood cars. Me, I like to look at cars but I

was never really a mechanic. My dad taught me to drive on back roads outside Oklahoma City when I was about 14, but it took me a while to get the hang of that standard shift. I didn't take to it at first.

Wall Street Journal: There's an expense log in the exhibit for the trip you took from Oklahoma to Los Angeles in 1956 with former "Saturday Night Live" writer and songwriter Mason Williams.

He was a neighbor and a good buddy of mine. I still talk to him all the time. We both graduated from high school that year, and California was it, Hollywood was the place to be. So I worked a few jobs to save up—I had paper route, I delivered flowers, and I worked for a building-supply company. My dad didn't really like the idea of my going to art school until he found out that Walt Disney was a benefactor of the school I got into, Chouinard, which later became CalArts. So at the end of the summer, Mason and I headed out, and the clearest memory I have of those three days was oil. It took us so much oil to keep my Ford going. So we were constantly thinking about oil. In fact, the only mishap we had was breaking a fan belt in Grants, New Mexico. That must be the Fan Belt Capital of the West because it seems like everyone loses a fan belt by the time they make it to Grants, out past Albuquerque on I-40.

Wall Street Journal: How did you feel the moment you came over those hills and saw Los Angeles and the Pacific ocean on the horizon?



Private Collection

Ed Ruscha, Standard Station with Ten-Cent Western Being Torn in Half, 1964, Oil on canvas, 65 x 121 1/2 inches (165.1 x 308.6 cm)

Los Angeles was getting 1,000 people – net gain – per day in 1956. So was I just one of them, and I remember the smog, that strange smoke hitting my eyes as we drove down into the city. Now every city has smog but it new to me then.

Wall Street Journal: Jack Kerouac's "On the Road" was published a year after you moved to California.

It was a cult hit, an underground thing, and when I went back to visit Oklahoma everybody was reading it so I got into it too. I warmed up to the idea of the Beatniks, and I agreed California was the place to be. I could also relate to the way the book described that relentless need to be in a certain city by a certain time and then feeling desperate to get back to where I started. It was an education for me, and it's stayed with me for years.

Wall Street Journal: After settling in Los Angeles, what's the farthest stretch of road you ever tackled?

I was always heading out, driving around the West mostly, for a week at a time, exploring for my art. Not the East Coast so much – it was too industrialized, but the West Coast has these long winding stretches and then you come to LA, which has its own culture. That was always exciting to me. But in the beginning I felt like I was driving from LA to New York almost non-stop.

Wall Street Journal: Tell me about finding that Amarillo gas station that became the source for one of your most famous works in the exhibit, "Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas (1963)."

There was something new and clean about it, and the architecture had a zoom to it. I liked the idea that this metal building could be put up anywhere, a pre-fab gas station. So I began concentrating on gas stations after that, and I took pictures of them all the

time, those way stations. There are plenty of nostalgic buildings around, but that gas station had a polished newness that I just had to draw and then paint and then silkscreen and finally make into a book. ("Twentysix Gasoline Stations," published in 1970.)

Three or four artists have told me they've tried to take my book and track down those gas stations, but I don't know if the one in Amarillo still exists. I hope so.

Wall Street Journal: A decade later in 1975, you made "Miracle," a film about a mechanic who finds redemption in rebuilding the carbureator of a 1965 Mustang.

I tried to reverse the truth. Usually when you fix a car, you start off clean but then in the fury of all the mechanics you wind up greasier and greasier. So I switched it: My guy starts out dirty, and as he fixes the car he gets clean. It was a ceremonial thing, like a quasi-humorous-religious idea.

Wall Street Journal: Can the road ever be like therapy?

It can be for some, yes. When I drive, I check out everything I see, and just taking in all those observations helps me think. So I draw and write a lot as I drive, and I know that's dangerous, but I manage to do it off to the side, with my notes on the seat. By the time I finally look down, my notes are usually illegible.

Wall Street Journal: I think we call that art.

Exactly.

Wall Street Journal: People often avoid the roads these days, thanks to airplanes.

I try not to fly a lot, but I go to Europe a couple times a year. I'm fine staying right here. Traveling is irritating to me, but not driving. Going to the airport makes me nervous, but when I set out to just take a leisurely drive, it's blue skies and puffy clouds and time.

Wall Street Journal: Can you describe a road trip you'd still like to take, assuming time, money, equipment, even climate are of no consequence?

Ok, it would need to be a dirt road somewhere here in the state of California in the desert, somewhere that lets me do some exploration on roads without any maps. There are still a few I've never tried, and I want to believe that wild spots still exist out there.

Wall Street Journal: In this scenario, what are you driving?

Guess I'm going to have to go with a four-wheeler.