& DECAY

AN INTERVIEW WITH ED RUSCHA

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Few people have made more of an impact on Los Angeles than artist Ed Ruscha. Over the last half-century his work as a painter, illustrator, filmmaker, printmaker and photographer has helped define the pop art movement and elevate LA's status as a key player in the world of contemporary art. His laconic representations of southern California offer a deadpan commentary on the social currents driving American culture.

Infused in all things Ruscha is an enduring love for a city whose identity seems to change with every passing fad. A reputed deficiency Ruscha has turned into virtue. For over 50 years, the Oklahoma City native's deep exploration of societal evolution, both literally and visually, remains as affable as it is profound. Whether he's effecting it on the board of the Museum of Contemporary Art, or contemplating it on the street near his studio in Culver City, Ruscha's interpretations of change continue to push Los Angeles towards much-needed self-reflection and lightheartedness. In return he has become LA's poster-father of civic pride.

Earlier this month, the notably terse Mr Ruscha granted me an audience to discuss the finer points of life, love and the art of fistflying.
Ed: Where do we start, what do we do? Jordan: Well, I’ve written about 33 questions. That sounds like a lot. How ‘bout I cherrypick 12 or so... Sure, that’s fine. So you live in LA? Yes, I’m fourth generation Angelena. Really? Hey, that’s unusual. I remember when I came out here in the ’50s there were very few people who were born in California. Most people came here. It’s a different state now. My great-great-uncle was the deputy chief of police for Los Angeles. What year was that? 1920-something. Back when this place was a paradise, it’s what they say. So I read in an interview, you said you were born to watch paint dry. What did you mean? Oh boy, well I like the poetry of the statement to begin with. But I remember saying that before so maybe it’s part of my linguistic kleptomania. I’m a kleptomaniac for words and phrases. But I think really what I meant was that I like to look at art and sometimes I spend long periods of time looking at paintings. Sometimes I’ll spend a good ten minutes looking at a single work. And all the while of course it’s drying more and more. Do you spend that much time looking at work that isn’t your own? Yes, though I don’t go to galleries so much, I go more to museums. Usually I don’t see much art in LA because I’m always at my studio. I’ve got a number of galleries in my neighborhood and rarely get to them. But I know there’s a lot going on out there and there’s no end to new statements by younger artists and older artists too. Are there any specific artists at the moment who are exciting to you? I follow Neil Jenney, who is an artist who lives in New York. I have a soft spot for his work. I’ve got some friends who I think are really pretty damn good, like Joe Goode, and Ed Moses. And Tom Sachs, he’s also in New York. But I keep my eyes open, not exactly on purpose but just by accident. You know, things come my way and I read the newspapers and I see things that are going on in the art world and man they happen so fast. What characteristics are you drawn to in other people’s work? Their independent vision and their own peculiarities. There are some pretty idiosyncratic artists that just sort of have their own voice. I like these people who have their own voices, people who are at the wild edges of things. Those kinds of artists appeal to me. Who were your heroes growing up? Right off it was Ted Williams, the baseball player. And another one was Kid Gavilán, who was a Cuban boxer. Later on it was people like Robert Frank, the photographer, and Jack Kerouac and of course Muhammad Ali, who’s a hero of heroes. Sounds like you’re a fan of true individualists, which is interesting to me considering so few humans appear in your work. Why do you think that is? When I was in art school it seemed like the accent was on seeing and believing in the human anatomy. It seems like human anatomy has been pushed on artists throughout history. It’s like you’re not a true artist unless
you've respected physical anatomy and I just never believed in that. So humans don't really appear in my work that much, and when they do it's in the form of words, so it's a back-door idea. How did you originally get out of Oklahoma City? I felt like there was not much room in Oklahoma for poets or artists. When I was a kid in school, the emphasis in Oklahoma was on the oil business. It seemed like everyone was aiming to be a petroleum engineer and I just didn’t see any hope in that. I wanted to go somewhere where the emphasis was on art. I considered migrating to California, where I had been before. Chicago was too cold. There were some other options, like New York City, but then I landed on Los Angeles and started making plans. Many people credit you for turning LA into the epicenter of the West Coast contemporary art world. Do you accept that compliment? Well, I'll take it as a compliment, but I just feel like there are too many independent artists that are just kinda like, I don’t know, pounding out their own visions, and there are so many people here who are independent from my thought. I never... I’m not one of those people that can say they represent LA better or worse than someone else. Sometimes LA doesn’t come out in the work, sometimes it does. Why do you think your mother referred to you as the master of evasion? (laughs) I think that was a flippant statement of hers, but she had thought that I avoided responsibility at all costs. We had a great relationship. I got a lot from my mother. How does a typical day go for you? Get up 6am, read the newspaper and go on with the day. Be at my studio. Spend almost all day at my studio. Sometimes it’s unproductive, but it doesn’t seem to matter because it’s all part of the process.

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90% Devil but 10% Angel, 1982
Oil on canvas
So even when you're not working you're working?

Yeah, yeah and I could be shuffling paperclips and yet somehow those paperclips matter. What is the most frustrating part of your creative process? If I commit to working on something then it’s frustration free. There might be technical things that have to be overcome from one thing to another, but I generally don’t face frustration. Your work possesses a strong degree of playfulness and yet you’re known for being reserved and understated. I wonder if art is a haven for you to express yourself in a way you’re not comfortable sharing personally. Huh, well, I generally find myself trying to get into the subconscious of whatever I’m about and what I’m about to make, and I like to get into that subconscious without being self-conscious so, you know, it’s a matter of coaxing the subconscious out and sometimes just simply reacting at a snap decision. Sometimes I base my work on blind faith, which can seem kind of temporary or seem kind of fippant, but that’s the way it happens for me. Do you remember the first work of art you were fascinated with? Oh gosh, yeah. It was at the Imperial War museum in London in 1961. I came across a little figure inside a Plexiglas box and I looked at it for a while and I realized it was the shape of a human face. I believe it was titled The Endless Mussolini by the Italian artist Bertelli. He created a circular profile of Mussolini using a potter’s wheel so that as you look around the sculpture all you can see is the face of Mussolini round and round and round, all these infinite levels of roundness. That seemed to be fairly profound to me. It never entered my work in any way and I never imitated it really, but I always... I love that work of art. What are you working on right now? Umm. I’m sort of bouncing from one thing to another. I’ve been working on a series of paintings called Psycho Spaghetti Westerns and it’s basically—I’ve got photographs off the streets of LA, mostly in Hollywood, of abandoned crap on the street, you know, just like sofas and mattresses and oil cans and things like that, that just kind of have age and decay to them. It’s like the pity of failure, you know? And making compositions out of them, and so that’s, you know, sort of—I woke up to the idea of cast-off items. I love the Valley. It’s like a dreamy history of orange groves and horse ranches and things like that. Now it’s much more accelerated and much more populated, but still the Valley has an appeal to me because I like the way you can drive over there, you can go somewhere, park out front of a store and walk in the front door. You know, instead of going down into some subterranean parking structure. So the valley still is sitting on top the ground—it hasn’t gone underground yet, but you know, that’s soon to come, when they’ll start doing subterranean parking and skyscrapers. Is LA still the city you fell in love with? Sometimes I hate it and sometimes I love it. I always liked that thing that artist Harry Gamboa said—he said something like, ‘LA is a desert with mirages and a thing happens and then,
'I WAS BORN AND RAISED CATHOLIC AND MY FOLKS WERE ALWAYS NERVOUS THAT I MIGHT SKIP THE CHURCH, YOU KNOW, WHICH I DID ON PERFECT CONSCIENCE. AND SO I JUST FEEL LIKE I CAN EMBRACE ATHEISM AND IT SUITS ME FINE.'
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Ave of Disgust, 1989
Acrylic on canvas

AVE.
OF
DISGUST