

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

San Francisco Chronicle

Ruscha in his own words

Charles Desmarais



Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

San Francisco is graced right now with two excellent shows surveying aspects of California cultural treasure Ed Ruscha's long career. At 78, Ruscha (he pronounces it "roo-SHAY") has reached the pinnacle of both the art market and the respect of fellow artists internationally with highly distilled, power-packed paintings, drawings, prints and photographs. I was introduced to his work in graduate school, and it has been a career-long conceptual linchpin for me, as for so many others.

I jumped at the opportunity to spend some time with the Los Angeles artist in conversation about his work and life, on the day before his de Young Museum exhibition premiered to museum members. What follows are edited excerpts from our interview.

How he works: "In art school the real spark happened when other students, and instructors alike, would approach their art like it was almost a blank canvas — almost as blank as this table. And then you take colors, and somehow you bring them to this blank canvas, but there's never pre-described notions that go with that. And I've always wondered, 'Where in the world would you start with something like that?'"

"Yet some of that painting, that Abstract Expressionist painting, was some of the best art — and it's held up quite well throughout the years. It's just as good today as it was back then."

•"I have off-and-on (assistants) that work part time — there's like five or six people, and they keep things going. And I don't mess with machines much, I'm not too good with that — I was

sort of left in the dust with the Internet. Every day I'm reminded: Too bad I didn't join. How would I ever get back onto the Internet world? So I kind of pass on that, but I have an assistant or two that can help me find things. I'm a paper and pencil person."

•"I get up around a quarter to 6, or 6 if I oversleep. Then I make it to my studio and I basically stay there all day. ... Pretty much, yeah. Except when I'm traveling. It's a habitual thing, and it's not as though I have planned out my day. I don't exactly do that. It's fluid, and I bounce from project to project, and never really complete anything in a day's time. But by the end of the week, maybe I get a few things that I'm happy with.

•"I find that I want to spend less time thinking about things that I've already done because that's, in itself, time-consuming. So I kind of put those things to sleep, as much as possible, and concentrate on doing something towards the future."

•"It's maybe a strain of nervous energy, or habitual behavior, that's guided me. If I was so in love with the world, why wouldn't I want to be traveling every day? Why not give up everything and go suck the good stuff out of the world and go everywhere? But I don't. I live a kind of prosaic life. I just get up every day and do this stuff, and don't think too much about it."

Getting out of town: "When I go to (my home in the) desert, it's always a drastic change from the noise of the city. And I appreciate that; I can dig in. And there's always 'events of plain living' that take over. So I can be away from all this noise of the city, and then I'm ready to go back. So, it's sort of a cyclical thing."

Young artists today: "I see a lot of what I consider healthy motions in the art world today. The younger people, especially, they're just willing to kamikaze the whole thing. They just really throw their guts into it, and to hell with what the future's like. I see that and I admire that — some artists can really get along by exploring 10 different attitudes. They'll paint a realistic picture in one stroke, and in another they've got splashed paint. And that's amusing to see."

Critics and editors: (Critic) Dave Hickey is an old friend, and he once said, "Oh, you painted a picture of a Standard station, and you painted a picture of Norm's La Cienega Restaurant on fire. Oh, I see, he paints norms and standards."

"It's such a strange observation, something that I never intended. I can't say it's not true. It's just a coincidence of these two things that somebody other than myself will pick out, and expose. If he's doing it in an antagonistic way, bless him; if he's trying to make me realize something that I planned out, well that's not true."

•"I've often wondered why somebody like Ernest Hemingway, for instance, would ever have an editor to tell him, 'Oh, you can't put that sentence in there.' I found that to be really strange, how writers, especially, have editors that can sometimes attack the very thing that you're trying to say. Or shape something into a more palatable product.

"Artists, myself included, are lucky to be immune to that. Because we can rest on artistic license. You could extend that to the world of literature (or music), too, but the notes have to fall into the right places. With visual art, nothing has to fall into the right places. Sometimes, that very thing, when you've achieved that, you make a good picture. So you have all these irrational things that don't add up, that eventually can add up, and make a solid picture.

“It’s like sailing on a strange sea, where there’s almost nothing out there. That can be scary, of course. Visual artists can just about do anything, and that’s a puzzling fact of life. There’s nobody who comes in and says, ‘No, it’s better if you change that color. Or put that color there. Or, if you like that color so damn much, put it over in the upper left-hand corner.’”

•“There have been times when somebody said absurd things (about my work) that I discount. Indifference is another thing. These books I made, I felt like they’re off in a zone by themselves. I would hand these books out to people — the gas station book (“Twentysix Gasoline Stations” (1963)). I sort of felt, like, ‘Boy, maybe this was kissed by angels. I like what I’m doing here, I gotta keep making this and doing this.’ And I would find that people who were intellectual — poets or people like that would get the book and their attitude was, ‘Are you putting me on? Are you having us on?’

“And yet, ordinary people from the street, like somebody who might work in a gas station, would say, ‘Hey, look!’ I gave the books to strangers who worked in gas stations and pumped gas, and I got more of a welcome from those kind of people than I did from so-called intellectuals.

“I kept making them till I felt like, ‘Well, I’ll put the rest of my ideas in the refrigerator and see what happens in the year 2050 or something.’

“They’re little wild hairs that finally emerged. The idea, I guess, is to keep the future and near future open to possibilities.”

•“When it comes to the exhibit itself, usually what I do is I have a group of things that go into a certain space. And I find the choice wall, and I take my favorite thing and put that on that choice wall. And then everything else kind of falls apart.

“I’m not very good at how to display a group of my things. That’s why curators are so good at what they do. Other eyes are very helpful.”

Having an audience: “Some might see a strangeness to my work, and that’s fine — I’m OK with that. I think it’s best to not exactly know where your position in the big picture is. It’s vague, and it’s also changing all the time, too.”

•“I’ve never felt like I was meant to communicate with anybody. So if you’re not going to do that, then you’re not going to have an audience, I guess. But, inadvertently, whatever I might do as an artist — that I feel that I’m eager to do — will be seen by other people, and that’s part of the package, I guess. That causes me to think about what the art world is like today, and I see it’s vastly different from when I was younger. I mean, there was no promise of making a vocation out of it. We just did it for the sport of it. And to impress each other.”

Sustaining a career for more than 50 years: “I sort of started with a kind of a menu, and then never really looked either way. It’s like some undescribed principles that I follow. But I do it intuitively. There have been periods when things got real slow.

“I don’t look at it as though I’ve reinvented myself. Because I think you’d have to go way down, and almost quit. And then you reinvent yourself. I always just wanted to follow some course. And the course is, of course, no course.”

