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Ed Ruscha Continues His Wordplay

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In Ed Ruscha's new canvases, on display at Gagosian in London, words are presented in logical sequences and in diminishing or augmenting typeface. Ed Ruscha, via Gagosian

LONDON — Every week or so, Ed Ruscha drives for three hours from his home in Los Angeles to his cabin in the Californian desert. There, the artist engages in what he describes as “events of plain living” — fixing a faucet, feeding a bird, watering a neglected tree.

“L.A. changes constantly, and the things that we all appreciated are not going to be there next week,” Mr. Ruscha said in an interview at the Gagosian Gallery in London, where he is showing 15 new works. “I like the no-change part of the desert.”

That desert landscape seems to serve as a backdrop to many of the new canvases on display here (through Dec. 17). This is Gagosian’s first show of Ruscha paintings since an exhibition at its Rome gallery in 2014-15, and comes on the heels of the “Ed Ruscha and the American West” survey at the de Young Museum in San Francisco.

Many of the new canvases hanging in London are the color of sand, and — as is the Ruscha trademark — covered with words. The novelty is that the words are presented in logical sequences and in diminishing or augmenting typeface. On one canvas, for example, the word “Galaxy” is inscribed in large letters at the top, followed in a pyramid of diminishing characters by “Earth,” “U.S.A.,” “State,” “City,” “Block,” “Lot” and “Dot.”

“The new things are about micro and macro: from the smallest atom to the universe,” said Bob Monk, a Gagosian director who has known Mr. Ruscha for decades and was at the London opening. “He’s also getting older, so he’s starting to think about bigger issues,” he added, referring to philosophical questions such as the passage of time, our place in the universe and mortality.

At the Gagosian last month, the 78-year-old artist himself was reluctant, as he has been all his life, to ascribe meaning to the words in his paintings. Looking youthful in a navy blue windbreaker and running shoes, the mild-mannered Mr. Ruscha — who was ranked among the 10 most expensive living American artists by Artnet last year — discussed his career in carefully chosen words.

“I’m not trying to wrap things up or make final statements or capture anything in a big way,” he said. “It’s more like, whatever the voyage is, that’s where I am. I’m just traveling along the tops of things, not trying to bring an answer to anything, necessarily, but just to keep making pictures.”

Mr. Ruscha was born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1937, and moved with his family to Oklahoma when he was a child. (He and his wife recently gave 30 works to the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at the University of Oklahoma after Mr. Ruscha learned that it had acquired a work with an outline of the state.)

At 18, he moved to California to study at the Chouinard Art Institute in California (now California Institute of the Arts), and never left. He set out to find a place for himself in the early 1960s art world, which was moving out of Abstract Expressionism and into Pop Art. He became interested in typography while working in a print shop.

As a recent art graduate, Mr. Ruscha was painting mostly abstract pictures, and he said he began to see “a place for things like words.” He added that he always appreciated them “because they’re logical in their own way” and because “a word can be almost any size” on a canvas.

On his early canvases, he inscribed single words like “Damage,” “Boss” and “Scream.” Later, he used phrases. Some were set against a colored background or a landscape, such as a snow-capped mountain. (Four new mountain works are in the Gagosian show.) Eventually, some of the words were written out in a typeface of his own invention, dubbed “Boy Scout Utility Modern,” which is used for the works in the current show.

His word sequences can seem haphazard: “Lion in Oil,” for instance, or “Honey, I twisted through more damn traffic today.”

“It seems like they have no connection with each other and are totally random,” said Ralph Rugoff, who runs the Hayward Gallery in London and put on a Ruscha show there in 2009-10. “But I don’t think Ed is ever random.”

“His thought process is so deep,” Mr. Rugoff added. “It’s not like you’re just looking at a picture: the picture is really in the service of ideas.”

Besides script, Mr. Ruscha’s paintings tend to represent what he sees around him — whether it’s a stretch of desert or a pile of detritus. The centerpiece of his recent Rome exhibition at Gagosian

was a painting of a used mattress that he had spotted on the side of the road. There were also torn strips of tire known as “gators,” a large household appliance and discarded cans, bottles and clothes.

“I’ve always worked on this waste and retrieval method,” Mr. Ruscha said. “Things that are cast off have an appeal for me.”

Unlike so many postwar American artists (Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, to name a few), Mr. Ruscha never made the move to New York, which he described as “a very magical place.” “I did have an urge to go there, but it never got serious, and I never did,” he said.

As a result, recognition and fame were slower in coming. “He made a breakthrough at the right time — but, people would say, in the wrong place, because to be an artist, for 30 years you had to be in New York, not Los Angeles,” said Anthony d’Offay, a former London art dealer who has donated his collection, including many Ruscha works, to the British national collections as part of a roving program called Artist Rooms. The program is organizing a Ruscha show at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art next year.

Mr. Ruscha’s auction prices have risen steadily over the last decade (“Smash,” from 1963, was sold for an auction high of \$30.4 million to Larry Gagosian at a Christie’s sale in New York in November 2014). Yet he sounds somewhat overwhelmed by the explosion of works and prices in the art world nowadays. “You could almost say today that there’s too much art, too many artists, too many dealers, so there is a bit of an overload about that,” he said.

Still, he said, “I think there are lots of young artists that are coming along making pretty damn good statements” that are “very in tune with everything that’s going on.”

Mr. Ruscha may be on the threshold of his eighth decade, yet his art continues to be uplifting. Though the new paintings touch on potentially somber themes, they are rendered in luminous colors and letters; the new mountain paintings feature beautiful blue skies.

“I like things on the bright side, but that doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate the dark side, either,” he said. “There’s a blackness to the universe that is incomprehensible. It never really appealed to me to try to cover that or try to investigate it. There are so many other artists in the world who do that well that we’ll let them tell the story.”