



Ed Ruscha 1963

Ed Ruscha's oil on canvas "Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas" (1963), the de Young Museum's centerpiece, proves essential in terms of both design and metaphor.

ART REVIEW

2 exhibitions show painter's influence as endless highway

Ruscha's casual confidence helped define West

By Charles Desmarais

There are not a lot of artists like Ed Ruscha anymore. The ones who move in measured steps that somehow never read as repetition but as resolution: increments toward poetic concision. That used to be the way an artist grew. Working in series. Establishing a recognizable style. Developing rapport. Practices unsuited to a time that values the prospective future over anything as outdated as today.

Two exhibitions running concurrently in San Francisco prove the value of Ruscha's steady, casually confident approach, developed over more than half a century. Each traces his keen sense of place, as well as his

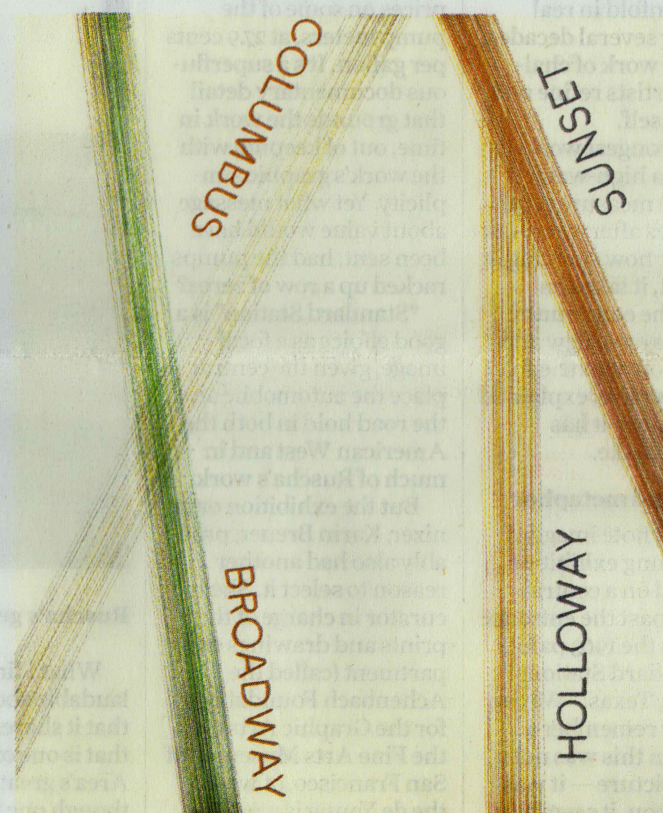
construction of an individual, idiosyncratic geography.

The major show, at 151 pieces in a range of media and scale, is "Ed Ruscha and the Great American West," opening Saturday, July 16, at the de Young Museum. It looks at Ruscha's continuing attention to — some might say obsession with — his adopted Southern California home.

The other presentation, "Made in San Francisco: Ed Ruscha Etchings, 1982-2014," opened Wednesday, July 13, at Crown Point Press. Since 1982, San Francisco's renowned workshop and publisher has worked with Ruscha on several important print series.

A compact but thorough exhibition there —

Desmarais continues on E2



Ed Ruscha 2003

The color soft ground etching "L.A.S.F." (2003) is on display with other Ruscha prints at Crown Point Press.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Ed Ruscha's color screen print "Hollywood" (1968), on display at the de Young Museum, conveys the artist's attention to his adopted Southern California home.

2 exhibitions explore artist's casual confidence

Desmarais from page E1

all 39 prints he has made with Crown Point master printers — includes a number of witty, maplike works that conflate Los Angeles and San Francisco streets. It makes a fine, free-admission complement to the main event at the museum.

Interestingly, both shows reveal Ruscha to be, probably by nature, an artist in line with traditions he once seemed to be subverting. It has been a source of fascination to me, as I have watched art history unfold in real time over several decades, to see the work of challenging artists refine and explain itself.

The strongest work becomes a high-water mark, the measure of all that comes afterward. But no matter how startling at first sight, it takes its place in the continuum. What was once new and apart is now inextricable from the whole, explained by the history it has helped to make.

Design and metaphor

The keynote image of the de Young exhibition, presented on a central wall just past the entrance gallery, is the 1963 painting "Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas." We can no longer remember a time when this was not a famous picture — it was born an icon, it seems.

Its strength is part design — a dense black wedge thrusts left as everything else charges right — and part metaphor: Those yellow forms may indicate klieg lights celebrating the ascendancy of the automobile (and, thus, of Los Angeles, of America), but they could just as easily be searchlights. They scan the cloudless night sky as five stocky soldiers stand ready to defend and enforce our standard.

Seeing it in reproduction again and again may inure us to subtle but deep satisfactions of the work as a painting. Ten feet across and more than 5 feet high, it is an imposing object, with clearly

visible brush marks indicating that it is hand-made.

But Ruscha ingeniously emphasizes the picture's schematic quality — keeping it tentative but also idealizing it — by extending a few lines past the form they describe. We are reminded of architectural drawings or Renaissance perspective studies.

Focus on the road

Particularly intriguing, and generally not visible in greatly reduced reproduction, is the inclusion of prices on some of the pump meters, at 27.9 cents per gallon. It's a superfluous documentary detail that grounds the work in time, out of keeping with the work's graphic simplicity. Yet what message about value would have been sent, had the pumps racked up a row of zeros?

"Standard Station" is a good choice as a focal image, given the central place the automobile and the road hold in both the American West and in much of Ruscha's work.

But the exhibition organizer, Karin Breuer, probably also had another reason to select it. She is curator in charge of the prints and drawings department (called the Achenbach Foundation for the Graphic Arts) of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, of which the de Young is a part.

In 2000 the Achenbach acquired a comprehensive archive of every editioned print and photograph, plus proofs at various stages — a total of more than 1,100 works — as well as impressions of all future graphic output.

The current exhibition is an opportunity to show nearly 100 objects from that archive, in the context of important paintings and drawings borrowed from other museums and private collectors. It works. It would be terrific to see a full retrospective, particularly if it included more of the groundbreaking paintings from the 1960s, but the costs and logistics of that would present a high hurdle.



Ruscha's gelatin silver print "Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas" (1962) inspired him to paint the subject.

What I find especially laudable about the show is that it shares a resource that is one of the Bay Area's great treasures, though one that is too little known or used.

Crucial force in pop art

Permutations of the "Standard Station" theme abound, both in the artist's multiple works and in his paintings, and many of them are shown here. A 1962 photograph — one of the first among many deadpan documents of American commercial and social artifacts that make up a substantial subgenre of Ruscha's output — provided the original inspiration.

Also included is a study drawing from that same year; 1995-96 and 2003 paintings depicting the station on fire, or darkly outlined in a fire-red sky; and prints from 1996 (the station silhouetted against a smoggy sunset), 2003 (lost in layered red haze) and 2011 ("Ghost Station," blind-embossed in white-on-white).

Ruscha's career took off right after he graduated from art school, when he was included in a seminal 1962 exhibition that introduced pop art, even before there was a name for it. But his art quickly proved to be more complicated than pop, if not confounding.

Over the decade, while continuing to paint and draw, he made several inexpensively printed books that have since proved to be among his most influential works of art. "Twentysix Gasoline Stations," "Some Los

Ed Ruscha and the Great American West: 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays. Saturday, July 16-Oct. 9. \$10-\$20. De Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, S.F. (415) 750-3600. <http://deyoung.famsf.org>

Made in San Francisco: Ed Ruscha Etchings, 1982-2014: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays. Through Sept. 3. Free. Crown Point Press, 20 Hawthorne St., S.F. (415) 974-6273. www.crownpoint.com

Angeles Apartments," "Every Building on the Sunset Strip" and "Nine Swimming Pools" reproduced small collections of casually made, black-and-white photographs that documented nondescript examples of their title subjects.

Today, we might think of the look as "slacker art." But that expressionless affect set a conceptual tone that, purposely and literally, paled in comparison to the Abstract Expressionist ideas Ruscha had learned in art school and that he and his generation were trying to shed.

Places, not people

Meanwhile, those little books — though they disguised the artist's extraordinary skills as a draftsman, painter and printmaker — are key to understanding Ruscha's love of the detail amid a broad expanse. They are also, very obviously, devoid of human activity.

In fact, virtually all Ruscha pictures, regard-



Ruscha's "Rooster" (1988), color aquatint with hard ground etching, is on display at Crown Point Press.

less of medium, are unpeopled. They make me think that the places they depict are silent as well — a great irony, because so many of them are filled with words. For all their wit and humor, they are seldom cheerful: The rare picture with a sky that is not acrid or gray in tone seems more sardonic than joyous, particularly with a phrase emblazoned across the surface like, "Honey ... I twisted through more damn traffic to get here." Or, more

succinctly, "Adios." Ruscha's "American West" is a place of his own invention, the de Young exhibition shows us. Even with its visual attractions and comic amusements, it is inescapably, vastly hollow, a landscape where all the sounds are echoes.

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PUZZLE ANSWERS

Crossword Puzzle

SHO	PAH	HOL	IC	FARR
POPE	MOBILE	IDEA		
ASTRO	LOGER	REQD		
STICKY	HATH	QUI		
MACH	MET	SEGUES		
SSS	HORAS	FLASH		
ROSS	SEA	ETTE		
CANT	GET	AWIL	NESS	
ALOE	SAFARI	IS		
SCALY	DERMA	SOD		
HANSOM	ADA	RENI		
EPS	WALT	SMORES		
DOWN	COHOS	SALMON		
INES	AREWE	ALONE		
NERF	WIRES	MONEY		

New York Times Crossword

SAAB	GAYE	OPALS	REARM
PREYS	UPON	NAMED	ENNIO
INTRO	VERT	UNIFI	CATION
CINDY	TUNIS	IST	ADESTE
YEA	ROCCO	CHOIR	REST
CHUKKERS	PROFS		
DECREES	TAKET	LLL	SAD
AARON	PELICANS	ASCII	
BREW	THEN	ANNY	ATTARS
SNO	TOW	RIDGE	GASCAPS
SAW	WOOD	POSTAGE	
SOLOIST	NARRATOR	GOP	
ATTEST	PERCODAN	DONE	
GUEST	ASH	HEAPS	NAACP
EDD	ARCADIA	SHI	TTES
GRAMM	SET	SHOTS	
ALTO	DIEMS	LIEON	SIIS
MARSHA	RI	JASEN	DONNA
SY	YOUR	LEAVE	DIMMED
ENSUE	ARTOO	YOQI	BERRA
RETRY	YEARN	ERMA	SEEN

Sudoku Puzzle

9	8	3	7	6	4	1	5	2
1	2	4	8	5	3	6	9	7
7	6	5	2	9	1	8	4	3
3	9	6	1	2	5	7	8	4
4	1	8	3	7	6	9	2	5
5	7	2	9	4	8	3	1	6
8	3	7	4	1	2	5	6	9
2	5	1	6	3	9	4	7	8
6	4	9	5	8	7	2	3	1

Challenger

1	1	3	2	7
1	5	1	1	6
6	7	1	2	16
1	5	4	2	12
9	16	9	7	7

Chess

1... Bd5!
followed by capture at b3
[Moiseenko-Romanov '16]