

Pivotal: Highlights from the Collection
Orange County Museum of Art
October 7 – December 31, 2017
ARTIST INFORMATION

Ed Ruscha

Born 1937 (Omaha, NE), works in Los Angeles, CA

Pine Setting, 1988
Acrylic on canvas

Ed Ruscha was born in Omaha, Nebraska, and moved to Oklahoma City as a child. After moving permanently to Los Angeles in 1956, Ruscha took courses in graphics, typography, book-making and printmaking in Los Angeles at the Chouinard Art Institute. By the early 1960s he was well known for his paintings, collages, and prints, and for his association with the Los Angeles-based Ferus Gallery. Like the work of Dada and surrealist artists, Ruscha's compositions build on unexpected juxtapositions of imagery and the imaginary. One of a group of black-and-white "shadow" paintings begun in 1986, *Pine Setting* is a darkly unsettling vision of the suburban tract home. The extreme angle and simple, soft-focus, black silhouette of the house and trees against an undefined background take on a mysterious, monumentalized quality akin to a scene from an Alfred Hitchcock film or a crime site photograph with a blank label awaiting some lurid caption.

b. 1937, Omaha, Nebraska

Resides in Los Angeles

I use conventional techniques -- a rectangular canvas and paint. My art is extremely personal. It would be nice if other people understood everything I do, but I know that communication is limited. I consider myself lucky if people just get a feeling from my work, a sense of how things are." -- E.R.

Ed Ruscha grew up and went to school with Joe Goode in Oklahoma City before traveling to Los Angeles in 1956. He became caught up in the accelerated activity of the local pop scene. Ruscha, who studied advertising and commercial design at Chouinard, graduating in 1960, was influenced by the newspaper collages and stenciled lettering of New York artists Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. He traces his involvement with words as subject matter to his early training in commercial graphic design (working one year at an advertising agency, "sheer hell;" employed as a book designer; and creating layouts for Artforum), in addition to his long-standing fascination with lettering and typography.

In the 1960s, Ruscha introduced paintings which combined words or captions with newly-invented commercial icons. Words became literally the subject of these paintings.

Ruscha's words are divorced from contextual meaning. They are chosen more for their sound, spelling and appearance than for their meaning. "I separate myself from the English definition of the word." They often are depicted illusionistically, as though spelled out in three dimensions, with ribbons, spilled water or maple syrup. They may take on a visual character related to their meaning, e.g. FLASH, L.A. Times (1963) in which the huge caption appears in large yellow italics racing across the canvas. Words may be physically composed of unusual, sometimes organic, substances, e.g. spinach in NHAM's A Couple of Pals (1975), which over time may fade or decompose. (The "organic inks" is Mews, Pews, ... (1970) proved to be somewhat unstable; pinks from red salmon roe, for example, slowly changed to bright yellow.)

By the early '70s his visual wordplay developed into a more conceptual and literary undertaking. Prints, drawings and paintings featured phrases like, "Those of Us Who Have Double Parked." Layered with visual and verbal puns, his works continued to employ language as subject.

During the 1980s Ruscha began depicting unsettling scenes at dusk (his Silhouette series), replacing his formerly witty or irreverent words with blank spaces which resemble whited-out text (e.g., NHAM's Pine Setting, 1988). Ruscha employed a spray gun for the first time to create a fuzzy-edged, soft-focus quality; he desired to "make a strokeless painting." He stated that the blanks were waiting to be filled in or were like a censor's strip suppressing the meaning conveyed by once-visible words. The Silhouette series has a sense of anonymity and ambiguity. Dave Hickey suggests Ruscha's exclusion of words results in a sense of loss: "Decay of language is something that has obsessed Ruscha throughout his career, and in a way these silhouette paintings seem to be intimations of a postlinguistic universe . . . If you remove words and the information they convey, you lose contrast, you lose color, you lose definition. And these paintings function most powerfully in the memory of those absent words."

In a December, 1989 issue of Art News Ruscha stated, ". . . I don't have a waiting list of words or a backlog of ideas to work from . . . Right now I don't know what I'm going to do next. And I like that. Much of the time it's like I'm operating on blind faith. It may be there's some sort of emptiness or stage play at the roots of my work. . . The truth is, I'd be happy just being a patch on Hans Hoffman's painting pants . . . The way I see it, I'm just a little art victim. I'm a soldier for art with a job to do."

— Phyllis Kleinberg

EDWARD RUSCHA
Annie, 1965

By isolating a single word from the title frame of the comic strip Little Orphan Annie, Ed Ruscha created a painting that was at once an abstract formal object and an object of popular culture filled with associational nuance. Annie, 1965, is one of several identical paintings in different sizes that Ruscha created in the early 1960s using this fragment of everyday life. Rendered in the primary hues of red, yellow, and blue, the work echoes its source material in the comics and simultaneously suggests the core building blocks of modern color theory and abstraction. Graphically pure and allusively charged with meaning, the Annie canvases linked Ruscha to the international Pop Art Movement and signalled the beginnings of Ruscha's continuing use of words as subject and vehicle for his artwork.

ED RUSCHA
Pine Setting, 1988

One of a series of black and white paintings begun in 1986, Pine Setting is a darkly unsettling vision of the suburban tract dream home. The extreme angle of sight and the simple, unmodelled black silhouette of the house and tree against a pale background take on a mysterious, monumental quality akin to a Hitchcock film scene or a crime site photograph with its white label awaiting some lurid caption.

It is the viewer's own associations with the subject that gives the painting its meaning as Ruscha offers no fixed narrative or literary allusions for the work. Like his word works, the painting is a construct to explore fundamental formal issues of figure and ground, tonality, and composition. The use of the house as a subject in this series was inspired by the real estate paintings of Joe Goode from the early 1960s, one of which is on view.

— WALL TEXT