

1990

Barns and Farms

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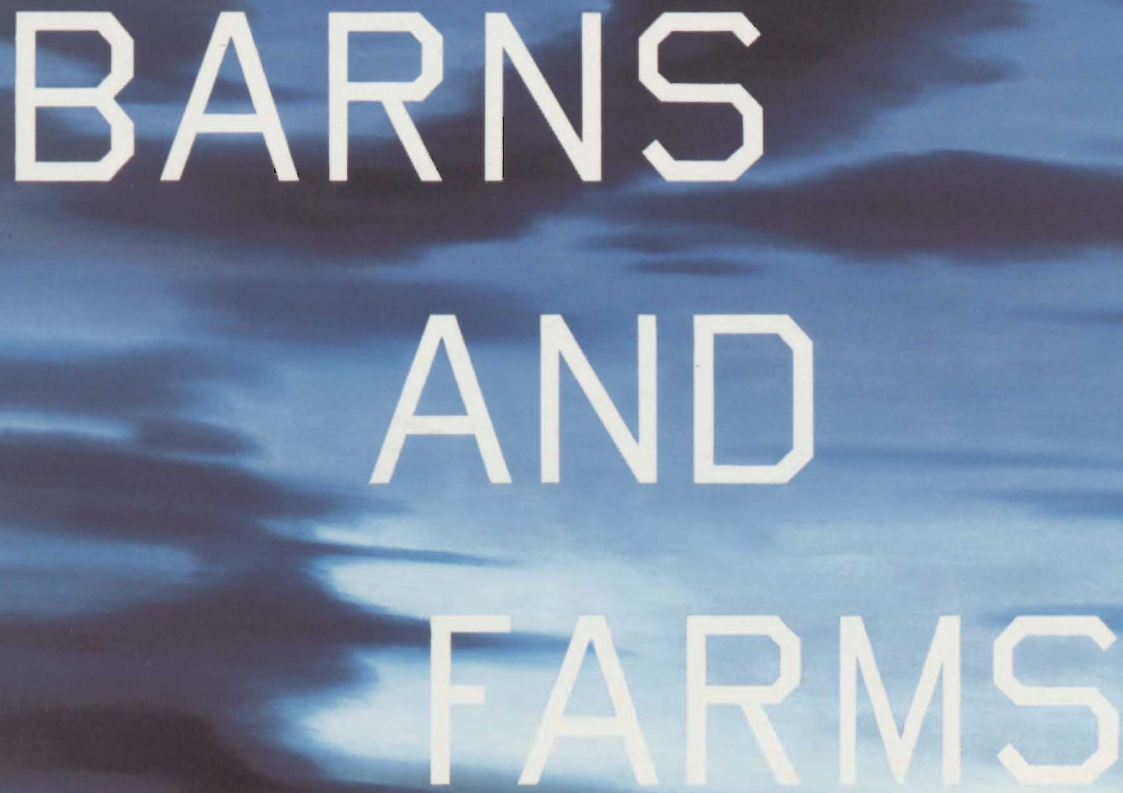
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S H E L D O N

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BARNES
AND
FARMS

EDWARD RUSCHA
JUNE 5 - AUGUST 19, 1990

The art of Ed Ruscha has been a consistent and important presence on the art scene since 1960. Yet his works have not received the high visibility media coverage that the work of many of his peers, such as Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol, have garnered. This situation can, in part, be attributed to the fact that contemporary art criticism has tended to center around clearly defined movements, and Ruscha's work has resisted easy categorization. In addition, interpretations of his work have shifted over the past few decades--his work has been cited in discussions of Pop art, Conceptual art and, most recently, strategies of

postmodernist appropriation. As a result of this elusive quality, his work has tended to receive only cursory mention in general overviews of the art historical chronology.

Since his emergence on the art scene in the early 1960s, Ruscha's work has evolved and matured. However, the one consistent and most significant aspect throughout his work is the emphasis on the work as the central focus of his art. An understanding of Ruscha's use of the word is critical to a comprehension of his oeuvre. Moreover, his emphasis on the verbal is crucial because it illustrates important issues in the art world during the past three decades. Ed Ruscha's works are thus incisive in their ability to lay bare critical aspects of art production and reception, and it is this added dimension that lends greater import to his art.

In the early years of his career, Ruscha's paintings were closely associated with the Pop art movement of the 1960s because of their focus on images from the contemporary urban, consumer-oriented environment. Pop was a pivotal movement in the historical continuum of art in

part because of its insistence on figuration, in contrast to the overwhelming predominance of abstraction in preceding and concurrent movements such as Abstract Expressionism, Post-Painterly Abstraction, and Minimal art. Through its content, style, and presentation, Pop art blatantly exposed the commodification of art and of our society in general, and Ruscha's paintings reinforced this.

His works *Hollywood* (1963) and *Trademark 2* (1962), for example, depict quintessential icons of a society infatuated with celebrity and conspicuous consumption. Ruscha has gone beyond simply incorporating the words "Hollywood" and "20th Century Fox", but has chosen to present them in immediately identifiable forms--those of the sign high in the Hollywood Hills and the logo of a well known Hollywood studio. In so doing, Ruscha directs our attention to a contemporary environment (as exemplified by Los Angeles) in which value is determined by surface appearance, market value, and effective advertising strategies. Like the words emblazoned across

the ubiquitous marquees and billboards, Ruscha's paintings of the Hollywood sign and movie studio trademark reflect the pervasiveness of language and how it is used to authenticate the contemporary post-industrial experience.

During the 1960s, Ruscha produced numerous art works which, like *Hollywood*, incorporated images from this environment. For example, his images of Standard gas stations are appropriate icons for a city like Los Angeles which was the first major urban area to be designed around a freeway system. Other paintings are replete with references to mass media such as comic books, newspapers and advertisements.

That Ruscha's works of the late 1960s intersect with Pop art and focus on words and images that call to mind the breezy, glitzy consumer orientation of Los Angeles is not surprising. Although he was born in Omaha and raised in Oklahoma City, Ruscha moved to Los Angeles shortly after graduation from high school in 1956. He made this decision because, in his words, "California seemed the most natural place to go. I suppose because of the media images we had seen, California had more appeal."¹ This statement reveals the extent to which Ruscha was drawn to the glitter and "laid back" image of California that the media had cultivated, and indicates Ruscha's awareness of the power of the media.

In the 1970s, Ruscha began to focus on isolated words on the canvas, rather than invoking words as an integral part of a specific product or symbol. His works of this period are appropriate illustrations of many of the conceptual issues with which artists at the time were grappling. These paintings ►

TRADEMARK 2, 1962, ink, pencil and oil on paper 8 5/16 x 14 1/2 in.



Edward Ruscha was born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1937 and moved to Oklahoma City at a young age where he was raised and became interested in art at the age of ten. After finishing high school, he moved to Los Angeles where he attended Chouinard Art Institute. Since graduating from Chouinard in 1960, Ruscha has become an internationally successful and prolific artist, participating in over 300 exhibitions. He has also made two movies, "Premium" (1969) and "Miracle" (1976), and published a number of books. He still resides in Los Angeles where his studio is located.

Ed Ruscha
in his studio.
Photograph by
Jerry Fredrick.



HOLLYWOOD, 1968, colored serigraph, 17 5/8 x 44 3/8 in.

porary Art, Los Angeles, 1983. In 1987, "Made in U.S.A.: An Americanization in Modern Art, the '50s and '60s", University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley. In 1989 he was involved in "L.A. Pop in the Sixties", Newport Harbor Museum, Newport Beach, California.

Ruscha has also participated in many international group exhibitions. Some of these are: "18th Salon of Young Painters", Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1967. In Brazil, that same year, "Sao Paulo 9", Museu de Arte Moderna, Sao Paulo. In 1969, he participated in the 35th Biennale Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte Venezia in Venice, Italy and in 1971 at the Hayward Gallery in London his work was exhibited in the show "11 Los Angeles Artists". His recent international shows include: "Cinquante ans de Dessins Americains 1930-1980", l'Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1985; "Homage a Leo Castelli", Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris, 1987; "Changing Group Exhibition", Carsten Schubert Ltd., London, 1988; "Sigmund Freud Heute", Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg, Austria, 1989.

Ruscha's solo exhibitions number over one hundred.

Among his earliest were three consecutive shows at the Ferus Art Gallery, Los Angeles (1963, '64, '65) and a history of almost yearly shows (1974-1989) at the Leo Castelli Gallery, New York. Additional shows include "The Works of Edward Ruscha", San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. On the occasion of this show which toured nationally, the book *I Don't Want No Retrospective* was published. It is a compilation of Ruscha's work up to 1982.

His most recent one-person shows include: "Ed Ruscha/Selection of Graphic Works 1970-1982", Cirrus Editions, Ltd., Los Angeles, 1983; Galleria del Cavallino, Venice, Italy, 1983; "4 x 6", Westfälischer Kunstverein, Munster, West Germany, 1986; Robert Miller Gallery, San Francisco, 1987; "Edward Ruscha: Recent Paintings", Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1988; "Words Without Thoughts Never to Heaven Go", Lannan Museum, Lake Worth, Florida, 1988; Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan, 1989.

explored the relationship between the word and image, or the verbal and visual. Both aesthetics and linguistics are systems that involve underlying structures that condition how we communicate, and how we understand the world around us. By excerpting words from their recognizable contexts, Ruscha forces us to examine our preconceptions about language, visual images, and, ultimately, about the way in which we view the world.

The formal aspects of visual art are addressed by the way in which Ruscha, during the 1970s, abstracted words from any grammatical contexts. By presenting single words or short phrases on the expansive canvas or paper, he forces the viewer to focus on the formal qualities of the letter formation and on the tension between the flat two dimensionality of the lettering and the suggestion of space behind each word. Like credits on a movie screen (a familiar format, given the popularity of motion pictures), these works challenge our perception of plane and space.

The issue of two dimensionality vs. three dimensionality is addressed in works such as *Crackerjack* (1977). Ruscha has written the word in a quivering ribbon which floats in an undefined space. Because of its three dimensional presence, the word achieves a more substantial physicality than one would normally associate with the printed word. As signs or signifiers, words are rarely scrutinized for their visual appearance. Here, that aspect--their formal presence--predominates.

This physical presence is reiterated in other works, such as a series of paintings done in the late 1960s, in which Ruscha presented the word as if it were written with a



CRACKERJACK, 1967, graphite on paper, 15 x 23 1/2 in.

liquid medium. Works such as *Eye* (1969) force the spectator to examine each word as a unique entity, divorced from any meaning or signifying properties. The word simply becomes a visual pattern, lyrical in its curves, loops and linear elements. The random sprinkling of illusionistically painted beans that interrupt the puddle-formed word only reinforce the perception of the image as visual entity rather than linguistic signifier.

Despite this emphatic visual quality that is a hallmark of Ruscha's work, his art also presents challenges on the conceptual level. Ruscha's commitment to the written word necessarily elicits questions regarding content and meaning. In many of his paintings, a conflict surfaces between the visual image, which is the primary conveyor of meaning in conventional painting, and the word, which is the primary conveyor of meaning in the linguistic arena. In works such as *Barns and Farms* (1983), the two elements complement and enhance the total impact. The lushness of the panoramic landscape,

reminiscent of the sublime landscapes of the Hudson River School painters of the late 19th century, coupled with the large white words "Barns and Farms" emblazoned across the canvas, suggests a certain nostalgia and longing for a simple and rapidly disappearing lifestyle. Given Ruscha's roots in Nebraska, this painting can also be interpreted as a personal memory of surroundings that he left behind years ago.

In other works, words stand alone, without the benefit of further elucidation that the background imagery can provide. These paintings have been related to works of Conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth and John Baldessari. These artists incorporated words into their art as a means of encouraging viewers to consider the ways in which meaning is derived. For example, in one work, entitled *One and Three Chairs*, Kosuth juxtaposed three depictions of a chair--a dictionary definition of the word chair printed on a placard, a photograph of a chair, and a real chair. Clearly, this forced viewers to examine their ideas of what

constituted "chairness." Given that our society is language-oriented, and that, anthropologically-speaking, naming has the authority to confer identity on an object or person, these art works address the mechanisms of how we acquire knowledge and how images and objects acquire significance. Ruscha's work can be seen in this same light.

Ruscha elaborated on these ideas in other ways. He produced a series of books, which simply by dint of their format, call to mind the linguistic basis for the transmission of knowledge in our society. Yet Ruscha, as in his other works, incisively questions this by subverting our expectations. Inside these artist's books are not words, but printed images and photographs.

This focus on the book was one which he had explored earlier. In the 1950s, Ruscha had investigated the relationship between book and painting by applying pigment to the covers of hardbound books. In addition, he proposed the notion of canvases as books; in order to make the analogy,

he did paintings in which he painted the titles of the works along the edge of the canvas, as one would find them on the spines of books.

In the 1970s, in an attempt to create works that were even more conceptually cohesive, Ruscha extended his experimentation to the materials he used--specifically, the inks he utilized in the production of his prints. Through his use of ground foodstuffs as his printing ink in series such as *News, Mews, Pews, Brews, Stews & Dues*, Ruscha added another conceptual component to his imagery. By selecting items such as caviar and blackcurrant pie filling, Ruscha endows the prints with an additional formal variable, thereby presenting more challenging works. *Stews*, for example, is literally a hodgepodge, or stew, of materials--from baked beans and fresh strawberries to mango chutney and daffodils.

The edible components of these prints are not visually identifiable in the finished

works, so at first glance, the prints seem to deal solely with Ruscha's interest in the visual and conceptual aspects of words. The words all rhyme, which speaks to the aural quality of language. States Ruscha: "It's awful you see just to say it; the full six words that is. It has a corny and irritating sound to it.

Language gets into my work."² In addition, the words are all related to England, which is where Ruscha produced this series. For instance, Ruscha explains: "England's the only country that has "Mews"; and it also sounds very English."³

Despite Ruscha's demonstrated interest in conceptual problems, the visual aspects are never relegated to secondary status; Ruscha is just as concerned with how the image looks. Not only did he spend weeks experimenting with different foodstuffs for use in printing, but even the lettering was carefully considered. In line with the Anglophilic flavor of this series, Ruscha chose Old

English type set.

In recent years, Ruscha's work has been associated with that of postmodernist artists such as Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, who aggressively utilize words--particularly slogans and advertising copy--to comment on our consumer oriented and gender delineated society.

The very act of appropriation, or excerpting the words, and presenting them in an art work for public contemplation represents a carefully considered strategy to increase the viewer's awareness of an environment that makes such overwhelming demands on our sensory capabilities that more often than not, we sleepwalk through it and subconsciously absorb the vacuous value system that such an environment promotes. Ruscha's recent productions, such as his painting series *Words Without Thought Never to Heaven Go* (1985-87), can be seen in this light.

Ruscha's works are an

intriguing blend of the playful and the serious. His works incorporate both amusing visual images and witty puns, along with profound challenges to our understanding of art and language. Despite the fact that his work cannot be easily categorized in the long procession of art historical movements of recent years, it is clear that Ruscha, through his explorations into the way in which images and words are endowed with meaning and the way in which meaning is transmitted, has touched on the very nature of how we understand the world around us.

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¹Patricia Failing, "Ed Ruscha, Young Artist: Dead Serious About Being Nonsensical," *Artnews*, vol. 81, no. 4 (April 1982), p.77.

²Christopher Fix, "Talking to Edward Ruscha," *News, Mews, Pews, Brews, Stews & Dues* (London: Editions Alecto, 1970).

3 *Ibid*

STANDARD STATION, AMARILLO TEXAS, 1963. (Not in the exhibition.) Illustration courtesy of Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire



Checklist

1. NEWS

1970, organic screenprint
17 7/8 x 26 15/16 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection
1987.H-2865.1

2. MEWS

1970, organic screenprint
17 7/8 x 17 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection
1987.H-2865.2

3. PEWS

1970, organic screenprint
17 7/8 x 26 7/8 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection
1987.H-2865.3

4. BREWS

1970, organic screenprint
8 3/4 x 22 1/4 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection
1987.H-2865.4

5. STEWS

1970, organic screenprint
7 3/4 x 21 7/16 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection
1987.H-2865.5

6. DUES

1970, organic screenprint
17 7/8 x 26 15/16 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection
1987.H-2865.6

7. PIC, PAN AND SHOVEL

1980, color lithograph
22 1/4 x 30 in.
UNL-Gift of Roberta & Herbert
Belkin
1985.U-3763

8. BARNS AND FARMS

1983, oil on canvas
64 1/4 x 64 1/8 in.
NAA-Funded by NEA Purchase
Grant Award, the NAA
Acquisitions Committee, the
Collectors' Forum, Mr. Gene
Tallman and Mr. Harold Stebbins
1989.N-695 (cover image)

9. CRACKERJACK

1967, graphite on paper
15 x 23 1/2 in.
Courtesy of the Joslyn Art
Museum
Museum purchase with funds from
the National Endowment for the
Arts matched by a donation from
the Joslyn Women's Association,
1977.67

10. HOLLYWOOD

1968, colored serigraph
17 5/8 x 44 3/8 in.
Collection of the Oakland Museum
The Oakland Museum Founders
Fund

11. EYE

1969, oil on canvas
61 1/2 x 55 in.
Collection of the Oakland Museum
Gift of the Art Guild and the
National Endowment for the Arts

12. TRADEMARK 2

1962, ink, pencil and oil on
paper
8 5/16 x 14 1/2 in.
San Francisco Museum
of Modern Art
Purchased through a gift of Dr. &
Mrs. Allan Roos, 81.99

13. MADE IN CALIFORNIA

1971, silkscreen
29 x 20 1/2 in.
Courtesy of Dorry Gates

14. THIRTY-FOUR PARKING LOTS IN LOS ANGELES

1967, book/photographs
10 x 8 x 10 in.
UNL-Gift of Bob and Roberta
Rogers
1981.U-3547

15. VARIOUS SMALL FIRES AND MILK

1964, book/photographs
7 x 5 1/2 x 7 in.
UNL-Gift of Bob and Roberta
Rogers
1981.U-3544

16. EVERY BUILDING ON THE SUNSET STRIP

1966, book/photographs
7 x 5 3/4 x 7 in.
UNL-Gift of Bob and Roberta
Rogers
1981.U-3546

PIC, PAN AND SHOVEL, 1980, color lithograph, 22 1/4 x 30 in.



Sheldon Solo is an ongoing series of one person exhibitions by nationally recognized contemporary artists. As a museum of twentieth century American art, the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery recognizes its responsibility to present both a historical perspective and the art of our time. Each Sheldon Solo exhibition assesses the work of an artist who is contributing to the spectrum of American art, and provides an important forum for the understanding of contemporary art issues.

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