



The ‘Huh?’ Factor

Ordinary becomes irreverent in Ed Ruscha’s works on paper at the Hall Art Foundation

BY AMY LILLY

When New York City’s Museum of Modern Art mounted its first retrospective of works by Los Angeles artist Ed Ruscha last year, critics loved it. They admired the 86-year-old’s “deadpan” and “poker-faced” (the *New York Times*) use of text as a subject of art, with its “complete absence of snark” (*New York*

Review of Books). They gleefully recalled that his now-iconic artist’s book, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, published in 1963, was rejected by the Library of Congress, and they noted that the art history world has never known what to do with him.

Criticism is fun to read, but ultimately Ruscha’s work is best experienced on its own ostensibly straightforward terms.

Ruscha’s subject was, after all, average, mundane America — ordinary phrases and words, familiar text from pop culture (the Hollywood sign, the 20th Century Fox logo), and the unromantic parking lots and gas stations behind the country’s obsession with freedom of the road.

Vermonters can now enjoy a sample of Ruscha’s oeuvre in “Ed Ruscha: Works

on Paper” at the Hall Art Foundation in Reading, where 21 drawings, paintings and photos from the foundation’s collection are assembled in a small gallery beside the café. The viewing experience is both baffling and funny, an unsettling of expectations about art and culture in work that is itself a body of oblique criticism.

Seven black-and-white photographs of gas stations begin the exhibition. Ruscha shot them in 1962 along the highway between LA and his parents’ home in Oklahoma City, where he grew up. As subjects, the low-lying structures are all different but

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unremarkable and far from unique; one is the same prefab type that now houses the Spot restaurant in Burlington. The photos are devoid of people and largely empty of cars. They’re often taken from across the road, with large stretches of pavement dominating the foreground.

In other words, they’re “banal” — as the Hall’s own description puts it — which raises several questions: Are these a comment on the visual poverty of American life? Are they meant to challenge the idea of photography as art? Do they elevate the mundane by designating it as worthy of close looking?

Ruscha selected the images from *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, which has become enshrined as a touchstone for artists who make books. But he had little use for regarding the work as precious. The Hall’s group of 19.25-by-23-inch prints are from Ruscha’s 1989 limited-edition portfolio of 10 gelatin silver prints, intended to be framed and shown on a wall rather than viewed singly while turning pages.

The other works on view, text drawings and paintings made between 1970 and 2015, reveal a through line of irreverence. (Ruscha once made a text drawing of the phrase “Artists who make ‘pieces,’” forever problematizing what to call each of his artworks.) While Ruscha also made giant paintings — his most famous, “The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire,” exceeds 4 by 11 feet — the Hall’s works on paper are only slightly larger than the photos: modest but meticulously made, ahem, “pieces.”

One, “Pig” (1970), elegantly depicts the word as three-dimensional scraps of paper standing on edge. The i’s dot is a rolled paper curl; the two pieces making up P are carefully shadowed. The work sets off thought associations between “pig,” capitalism and receipt machines, or at least their blank rolls of paper. But the work’s media — gunpowder and pastel — startle.

Gunpowder, one of many substances



Clockwise from left: From "Selected works (from 'Gasoline Stations)"; "Pig"; "We Few"

Ruscha experimented with beginning in the late 1960s, offered a certain color and ease of correction that he couldn't get with graphite, he said. Given the low-level humor of much of his art — "Microscopic Migraines" (1989) at the Hall overlays the words on a steepled church — it's hard not to follow another trail of associations, from gunpowder as an explosive to the gas stations to Ruscha's penchant for depicting fire.

Most of his other experiments were in organic substances, among them stock diner items such as egg yolk, coffee, mustard, ketchup and chocolate paste. All this makes "Made in USA" (1976), a work in Pepto-Bismol and graphite, all the more amusing. Its precisely stenciled letters against a faintly pink background imply that what is typically a mark of pride can barely be stomach.

Other works toy with text fonts or language, such as the familiarly large A in "Atlas" (1983) and the phrase "We Few" in a 2003 acrylic-on-board drawing. The latter is among a series of palindromes Ruscha did in the early 2000s — "Tulsa Slut," "Never Odd or Even," "Lion in Oil"

— but the Hall's has the added resonance of Shakespeare. ("We few, we happy few, we band of brothers," from *Henry V*.) Can the weight of literary importance be reduced to a phrase that reads the same forward and backward? It's ambiguous, as always.

Ruscha once explained the pronunciation of his last name, which sounds like "rew-shay." A paternal ancestor with the Bohemian German last name of Rusiska, he said, shortened it to Ruscha and rhymed it with the Oklahoma town of Chickasha, which is pronounced "chi-kuh-shay."

Looking for an origin story for Ruscha's work in that mismatch between language and expectation is tempting. But the story likely has the same quality for him as *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*. The book, he said in a 1973 interview, "had an inexplicable thing I was looking for, and that was a kind of 'Huh?' That's what I've always worked around." ⑦

INFO

"Ed Ruscha: Works on Paper" is on view through December 1 at the Hall Art Foundation in Reading. hallartfoundation.org

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