

Wetterling Gallery

Ed Ruscha Artist biography

At the start of his artistic career, Ed Ruscha called himself an “abstract artist ... who deals with subject matter.” Abandoning academic connotations that came to be associated with Abstract Expressionism, he looked instead to tropes of advertising and brought words—as form, symbol, and material—to the forefront of painting. Working in diverse media with humor and wit, he oscillates between sign and substance, locating the sublime in landscapes both natural and artificial.

In 1956, Ruscha moved from Oklahoma City to Los Angeles, where he attended the Chouinard Art Institute. After graduation, Ruscha began to work for ad agencies, honing his skills in schematic design and considering questions of scale, abstraction, and viewpoint, which became integral to his painting and photography. He produced his first artist’s book, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*—a series of deadpan photographs the artist took while driving on Route 66 from Los Angeles to Oklahoma City—in 1963. Ruscha since has gone on to create over a dozen artists’ books, including the 25-foot-long, accordion-folded *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) and his version of Kerouac’s iconic *On the Road* (2009). Ruscha also paints trompe-l’oeil bound volumes and alters book spines and interiors with painted words: books in all forms pervade his investigations of language and the distribution of art and information.

Ruscha’s paintings of the 1960s explore the noise and the fluidity of language. With works such as *OOO* (1962–63)—which presents the exclamation in yellow block letters on a blue ground—it is nearly impossible to look at the painting without verbalizing the visual. Ruscha continues to influence contemporary artists worldwide, his formal experimentations and clever use of the American vernacular evolving in form and meaning as technology and internet platforms alter the essence of human communication. He represented the United States at the 51st Venice Biennale (2005) with *Course of Empire*, an installation of ten paintings. Inspired by nineteenth-century American artist Thomas Cole’s famous painting cycle of the same name, the work alludes to the pitfalls surrounding modernist visions of progress.

Ed Ruscha / Now Then opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2023 and traveled to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2024. The artist’s first comprehensive retrospective in more than twenty years, it included over 250 works from his more than six-decade career, illuminating both emblematic and lesser-known aspects of a practice that has influenced artists, designers, and writers worldwide.

The exhibition *Figure It* is Ed Ruscha’s first in Sweden since he exhibited *Fifty Years of Painting* at Moderna Museet in 2010 and simultaneously had a major solo exhibition at Wetterling Gallery.