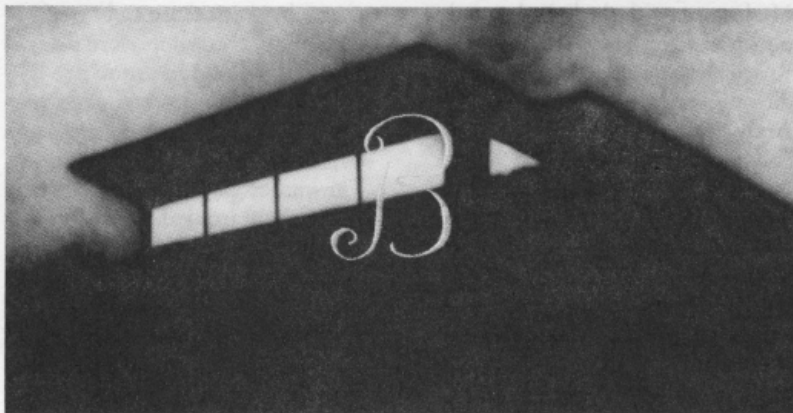


B-House, 1988



Throughout his career, Edward Ruscha has captured the poetic intensity of simple words, phrases, and images culled from the American vernacular. His wry, painted images of words were among the vanguard works of the Pop movement of the 1960s. Using a repertoire of everyday subjects—a series of gas stations, for example, or the single word “Spam”—Ruscha’s early works infused the formalist purity of Modernism with the light-hearted punch of advertising. Ultimately, Ruscha has developed more in the direction of Jasper Johns than of Andy Warhol, insofar as the commonality of his imagery has never entirely excluded the possibilities for self-expression.

In the mid-1980s, Ruscha’s art underwent a significant shift, both in its tone and imagery. While the themes of his work continue to be based on a distinctly American experience, the artist’s previously bright palette has taken on a sombre cast, and images of words have virtually disappeared. His recent works, known collectively as the Silhouette series, are generally painted in dark, monochromatic greys, blues, and browns, and their subjects appear as little more than shadowy silhouettes set against crepuscular skies.

This exhibition includes some of the most haunting works from this series, a group of works based on the ostensibly banal theme of the modern American home. In much the same way that Ruscha once elevated everyday language to numinous heights, in these works he transforms the common suburban tract dwelling into an iconic image suffused with psychic intensity. He endows these

otherwise familiar images with mystery by cloaking them in a vague darkness that suggests the palpable stillness of a moonless night or the shroud of a distant memory. In a recent article on the Silhouette paintings, the critic Kay Larson wrote, “Late twentieth-century America has provided [Ruscha] with the substance of his nightmares, just as Spanish culture did Goya. The slippage between knowledge and meaning, the chasm between sense and sensibility, create a modern disease that will not be put to rest by being labeled the good life (gone bad).”¹

The images’ psychological aspect is not without irony, however, as the anonymity and interchangeability of the depicted homes constantly threatens to undermine their Romantic mood. One finds, also, a sense of humor in these works. In *B-House* (1988), for example, Ruscha has overlaid the gloomy image of a house with an elegant, bright blue letter “B”. This superimposed letter alludes to the common Modernist strategy of interfering with the illusionistic space of the painting to remind the viewer of the flatness of the picture plane. Here, however, the letter “B” functions less to remind us of the flat canvas itself, than it does to suggest simply the embroidered initial of the home’s proud owner. In this work, as in much of Ruscha’s painting, viewers are free to fill in the gaps, to construct meaning, and even narrative, as they see fit.

This invitation to viewer participation is made explicit in a number of recent works in which, instead of writing words on the canvas, Ruscha overlays the image with a lighter-colored rectangular

area or line which suggests the space where a word or caption might go. The absence of actual words in works such as these, however, does not mean that the artist has entirely abrogated the responsibility of creating meaning; clearly, the very absence of text itself reinforces the paintings’ overall effect of hollowness and anonymity. As in *Digit House* (1988) and *Decibel Level* (1990), the empty caption-space often echoes the shape or some other aspect of the image. In *Old Sign* (1988), the artist has collapsed image and empty caption-space into a single form, thereby creating a humorous antithesis to his earlier practice of making sign-like images of words themselves.

Ruscha’s attention to the complex relation between word and image goes back almost thirty years and has anticipated much of the language-oriented art of the 1980s. One finds echoes of his practice in works by artists such as Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, and Lorna Simpson. By stepping back from the direct depiction of language itself, Ruscha’s Silhouette paintings have entered a territory that is perhaps more ambiguous, though no less semiotically loaded, than his previous work. It is Ruscha’s unique achievement to have explored this difficult area with a remarkable combination of deadpan humor and aesthetic sublimity.

Edward Ruscha was born in 1937 in Omaha, Nebraska. He currently lives and works in Los Angeles, California.

Lawrence Rinder

¹ Kay Larson, “Apocalypse Now,” in *New York Magazine*, May 29 ’89, p. 66.

Works in MATRIX:

Cleff, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36". Lent by Evelyn and Jonathon Read.

Digit House, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 75". Lent by Robert Harshorn Shimshak.

Jockey, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36". Lent by Sheri and Paul J. Siegel.

Plots, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72". Lent by Elaine McKeon.

B-House, 1989, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 96". Lent by Frances and John Bowes.

Old Sign, 1989, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36". Lent by David and Wendy Craig.

Decibel Level, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 60". Courtesy Beau Takahara.

Selected recent one-person exhibitions:

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, *The Works of Edward Ruscha* ’82 (catalogue; traveled to Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC; Vancouver Art Gallery, Canada; Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX; Los Angeles County Museum of Art); Fuller Goldeen Gallery, S.F. ’86; Robert Miller Gallery, NYC ’87; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, *Edward Ruscha: Recent Paintings*

'88; Institute of Contemporary Art, Nagoya, Japan '88 (catalogue); Leo Castelli Gallery, NYC '89; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France, *Edward Ruscha, Paintings* '89 (catalogue, in French), travels to Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Netherlands '90 (catalogue, English/Dutch), Fundacio Caixa de Pension, Barcelona, Spain '90 (catalogue, Catalan/English), Serpentine Gallery, London, England '90, and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles '90-91.

Selected recent group exhibitions:

Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, *Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art, 1945-1986* '86 (catalogue); The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., *Spectrum: In Other Words* '86 (catalogue); Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, *Biennial 1987* '86 (catalogue); University Art Museum, Berkeley, *Made in U.S.A.: An Americanization in Modern Art, the '50s & '60s* '87; Stedelijk Museum at l'Institut Néerlandais, Paris, France, *l'ABCD de l'art moderne: 21 peintures + 1 sculpture* '88 (catalogue); Frankfurter Kunstverein & Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, W. Germany, *Prospect 89* '89 (catalogue).

Selected bibliography:

Sterback, Jana. "Premeditated/ an Interview with Ed Ruscha," *Real Life Magazine*, no. 14 (Summer '85), pp. 26-29.
Plagens, Peter. "Ruscha's

Landscape," *Vanity Fair*, vol. 49, no. 2 (Feb. '86), pp. 88-95.

Berkson, Bill. *Artforum*, vol. 25, no. 5 (Jan. '87), pp. 98-101.

Jan, A. *Flash Art*, no. 132 (Feb./ March '87), pp. 107-8.

Heartney, Eleanor. "Ed Ruscha at Robert Miller and Castelli," *Art in America*, vol. 76 (Feb. '88), pp. 137-39.

Kuspit, D.E. "Edward Ruscha," *Artforum*, vol. 26 (Feb. '88), pp. 144-5.

Knight, Christopher. "Against Type: The Silhouette Paintings of Edward Ruscha," *Parkett*, no. 18 (Dec. '88), pp. 80-85.

Rugoff, Ralph. "The Last Word," *Artnews*, vol. 88, no. 10 (Dec. '89), pp. 120-125.

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