"I don't have any Seine River like Monet," Ed Ruscha once said. "I've just got US 66 between Oklahoma and Los Angeles." In 1956 an eighteen-yearold Ruscha drove west from his hometown of Oklahoma City to attend art school in LA. Since then, the artist has continuously drawn inspiration from his everyday surroundings, depicting subjects ranging from consumer products to roadside architecture to fiery sunsets across a wide range of media. Like signposts along a highway, motifs reappear periodically, as small reproductions in books or scaled up for larger paintings. Featuring overhead views, dramatic diagonals, and sequential progressions, Ruscha's compositions offer new perspectives on familiar sights, asking us to look closely—and, crucially, to look again.

The shape, sound, and impact of language have been central preoccupations for the artist. "Words have temperatures to me," Ruscha has explained. "Sometimes I have a dream that if a word gets too hot and too appealing, it will boil apart." With words as well as his other motifs—whether object or place—he often pictures their gradual transformation or eventual decay. Seen together, these works reveal a fascination with change that fuels Ruscha's experimental drive, as evidenced by his embrace of surprising materials like gunpowder and chocolate, and underpins his ongoing photodocumentation of city streets.

Tracing shifts in Ruscha's means and methods over time, this retrospective the first cross-media survey of his work to be held in New York in more than forty years—gathers paintings, works on paper, photographs, and artist's books, which show him observing, recording, and interpreting a landscape in constant flux.

The exhibition is organized by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The MoMA presentation is organized by Christophe Cherix, The Robert Lehman Foundation Chief Curator of Drawings and Prints, with Ana Torok, The Sue and Eugene Mercy, Jr. Assistant Curator, and Kiko Aebi, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Drawings and Prints.

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Discover the themes and materials that have shaped Ed Ruscha's art. Scan the QR code to listen on the free Bloomberg Connects app.

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We invite you to explore the accompanying publication, Ed Ruscha / Now Then: A Retrospective, which is available in the Museum Store.

For related content and audio, visit moma.org/edruscha.

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Ruscha left Oklahoma City in 1956 to study commercial art at the Chouinard Art Institute (now CalArts) in Los Angeles. While his design courses focused on precision and balance, his fine art classes emphasized spontaneity and gesture. "They would say, 'Face the canvas and let it happen,'" Ruscha recalled. "But I'd always have to think up something first." The artist would ultimately merge these approaches, neatly ordering text, images, and found materials within painted compositions.

A series of travels—a cross-country hitchhiking trip in 1954 and a months-long European tour in 1961 sharpened his attention to signage, architecture, and everyday objects. Back in California, Ruscha began rendering single outsized words in impasto, accentuating the shape of letters with thick layers of paint. These "guttural utterances," as he called them, include onomatopoeic exclamations (like "oof" or "honk"), popular slang, and brand names. Sourced from comic strips and supermarket shelves, the artist's frequent references to consumer culture aligned him with the burgeoning Pop art movement.

For Ruscha, words "live in a world of no size." Infinitely scalable, they might exist at 8-point font in the pages of a book or tower overhead on billboards. In 1962, intrigued by its commanding monumentality, Ruscha recreated the dynamic logo of the film studio 20th Century–Fox on canvas. The image's dramatic diagonal composition—what he termed its "horizontal thrust"—would become a useful pictorial device for the artist. "I could see that a lot of subjects could work their way into this format," he reflected. "It was like broadcasting something from a tiny point, then expanding beyond the limits of things." Similar to how this painting evokes the fanfare that accompanies the logo on screen, other works of this period explore the sonic possibilities of visual imagery.

"Art has to be something that makes you scratch your head," Ruscha once said. Indeed, his work of the mid-1960s takes familiar subjects—single words, common objects, roadside architecture—and transforms them through novel compositions or surprising interventions. A Standard Oil gasoline station in Amarillo, Texas, for instance, is scaled up from a small black-and-white photograph in Ruscha's first artist's book and stretched diagonally across the canvas of a large oil painting. The bold graphic treatment, low vantage point,

and exaggerated perspective became part of a formal strategy the artist used to monumentalize the mundane.

As Ruscha drew inspiration from his surroundings, Los Angeles began to permeate his work across media. One of his artist's books captures the architectural styles of local apartment buildings; another features a continuous photocollage of the Sunset Strip. Nearby landmarks are represented, but under unusual circumstances: the popular Norms restaurant on La Cienega Boulevard is set ablaze, while the iconic Hollywood sign looms over a seemingly deserted landscape.

In 1966 Ruscha sparked a "romance with liquids." Continuing his material exploration of language, he began rendering words as viscous puddles. "I like the idea of a word becoming a picture," he stated. "Almost leaving its body, then coming back and becoming a word again." Splashed across gradient backdrops, words are caught in a moment of legibility before their presumed dissolution. During this period, the artist also experimented with new media, including gunpowder, which he discovered as a superior alternative to powdered graphite in 1967. He used the material in drawings of ribbons folded into cursive letter forms, debuting yet another method for representing words.

Elements from both series—one fluid, the other flammable—converge spectacularly in the pools and flames that surround the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in a painting completed in 1968. The dramatic composition was born from Ruscha's desire to depict a "raging, active thing that is happening in a very quiet, peaceful kind of background."

Toward the end of the 1960s, Ruscha momentarily "quit painting pictures" to experiment with organic and unconventional materials. "Instead of applying a skin of paint to a canvas support, I would stain the surface," he explained. "It was another way out of this box I'd painted myself into." Embracing the unpredictability inherent to this process, he applied everything from shellac to his own blood onto fabric, and rubbed rose petals and chewing tobacco onto paper.

When Ruscha recommitted to oil painting in the late

1970s, he exaggerated the horizontal proportions of earlier works. According to the artist, the resulting panoramic images "became more than paintings, they became objects." By encouraging viewers to walk alongside them to take in their full detail, these paintings call attention to the dimensions of the canvas supports, as previous works similarly explored the formal properties of unusual substances.

Following a period of experimentation with unconventional materials, Ruscha returned to using traditional mediums, like oil and pastel, to paint and draw prismatically colored and increasingly complex backgrounds. They conjure the sparkling grid of a city at night, the refraction of light in a swimming pool, and brilliant sunsets in the western United States. Yet despite their evocative imagery, Ruscha denies any deeper meaning, referring to them simply as "anonymous backdrops for the drama of words."

Ruscha's use of language in his work also evolved at this

time. In place of single words, the artist began depicting longer strings of text borrowed, he explained, "from memory, sometimes from dreams, sometimes from listening to the radio." Expanding on Ruscha's repertoire of sources, works in this gallery feature phrases from literature and film, conversations overheard, and the terminology found in science books. In other examples, his language is more selfreferential, humorously alluding to his occupation as an artist.

The mood shifted in Ruscha's work in the mid-1980s, as his use of both color and language became more restrained. A switch from oil to acrylic paint, which he applied with an airbrush, prompted the artist to make a series of "strokeless" pictures. Restricting himself to a largely black-and-white palette, the artist portrayed subjects drawn from history and fantasy, such as ships and elephants, as hazy silhouettes. Rather than faithful representations, these motifs function like symbols. "The ship is my interpretation

of a picture of a ship rather than a ship," Ruscha has said. "It's like a painting of an idea about a ship."

The grayscale surfaces of these works recall early photography and cinema, which Ruscha further explored by painting film projections in painstaking detail, recreating the effect of degraded celluloid through simulated scratches and dust spots. Just as these marks interrupt the compositions, blank rectangles occasionally appear in other works from this period. Resembling redacted text, these voids both stand in for language and, as the artist has offered, "suggest a space for a thought."

Representing the United States at the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005, Ruscha presented *Course of Empire*, a series named after Thomas Cole's nineteenth-century painting cycle charting civilization's rise and fall, which the artist had seen at the New-York Historical Society. Ruscha's series matches five black-and-white canvases, painted in 1992 and picturing various boxy structures—including a trade school and several factories—with five color paintings, made roughly a decade later, that imagine the same sites in the future. These before-and-after pairings, three of which are reunited here, reveal numerous changes, from the addition of a chain-link fence and new signage to smog-filled skies that portend ecological catastrophe.

A similar impulse to record the transformation of our built environment over time underpins Ruscha's Streets of Los Angeles Archive. Since 1965, the artist and his team have continuously photographed various boulevards and avenues in Los Angeles. Now comprising 750,000 images, the archive was acquired by the Getty Research Institute in 2012 and has served as an important resource for scholars studying subjects ranging from demographic

change to the local music scene.

Ideas often come to Ruscha on the road, whether driving on the congested freeways of Los Angeles or across the expansive mountains and deserts of Southern California. Drawing inspiration from this varied geography, Ruscha introduced new motifs in relation to familiar themes in his work from the last two and a half decades. For instance, soaring, snow-capped peaks emerge in the backgrounds of his word paintings—a novel take on his ongoing preoccupation with language and landscape.

Ruscha has also meticulously represented cast-off debris

and roadside markers in works that meditate on the passage of time through their depictions of accumulation and decay. "I have always operated on a kind of wasteretrieval method," he has said. "I retrieve and renew things that have been forgotten or wasted." More than mere description of his subject matter, this statement captures the ways certain ideas have been revisited and reimagined by Ruscha across his six-decade career.