

Painting words for things that can't be pictured -- but don't call it pop

Kenneth Baker, San Francisco Chronicle Art Critic
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"I'm not into communication" Los Angeles painter Ed Ruscha said -- the last thing an interviewer wants to hear -- in an unhurried conversation last week at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Anyone might guess from looking at Ruscha's 27 pieces in "Pop! From San Francisco Collections" at SFMOMA that he does not do message art. But words communicate -- or wink out meanings -- even in the splendid isolation to which Ruscha typically subjects them.

When he painted the word "noise" in yellow across the blue field of "Noise" (1963), he made the canvas' silence boom. It still does.

Several of Ruscha's pieces on view contain words for things that cannot be pictured -- his answer to abstraction. They include the paintings "Faith" (1972) and "America's Future" (1979) and the drawings "Space" (1963), "Dry Whistle" (1974) and "1984" (1967).

In the present setting, "Noise" plays nicely off the "Silence" sign in the photograph Andy Warhol silk-screened on canvas to make his electric chair paintings, two of which hang nearby.

But Ruscha, 66, has little use for the umbrella term "pop art."

"A label is a label. It's never had any weight to it," said Ruscha, who was in town as the guest speaker at SFMOMA's annual Director's Circle dinner. "It's a chatty word, though, isn't it? It's always been an easy word and to the public a fun word.

Contrast that with 'conceptual' or 'neo-expressionist.' And 'pop' did have a corralling effect, bringing together these various artists working with popular imagery."

So, does he feel unfairly corralled with anyone in "Pop! From San Francisco Collections"?

"That almost comes down to asking which artists' work I like and don't like," Ruscha said, scowling his reluctance to answer. "If I can think of someone here whose work is underappreciated and underreported, it would be Jess," he said. "Though I don't really feel there's much connection between his work and mine."

"But I might say that George Segal is someone whose work seems to me outside the realm of pop art," Ruscha finally said. "It seems to me so deadly serious."

Ruscha trusts words when he chooses them as materials. He accordingly relies on his ear more than many visual artists do. The ring of a word or phrase can set him in search of a way to make it look right.

Training in graphic design at the Chouinard School of Art in the late '50s and design jobs early on acquainted him with the spectrum of typefaces and the curious power well-positioned words can have, apart from speaker's meaning.

But "there's no technique to my development of these drawings and attached words," Ruscha said. "I don't struggle over them. It's not a collage of ideas. They're really instant responses to something from a movie or a lyric or something heard or seen on the street. So the struggle is not in how to perfect the combination of these things, it's in how to make a picture. It's an intuitive thing and an exploratory thing at the same time."

How, then, does he recognize a failure?

"If I'm working on something and I feel it's too mundane, doesn't have enough engine behind it or is just not moving along on its course, then I consider it a failure," Ruscha said. "I do get involved in little failed attempts at things."

Occasionally I'll get something going that may make even the halfway point and I see it just isn't happening. Then I'll rip it up. Rip it up rather than repair it," he said with an uncommonly demonstrative gesture.

People wonder about Ruscha's interest in poetry, as some of his words and phrases have an oddly flatfooted poetic flavor.

"Certified poetry is fine," Ruscha said, "but I often prefer the accidental poetry you find in the street."

When SFMOMA gave Ruscha -- who pronounces his name rew-SHAY -- a retrospective more than 20 years ago, he designed the catalog cover. Across a pink panel that floats against a night sky run the words in white "I don't want no retrospective."

The phrase makes a backhanded salute to the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction, " but it also neatly expresses the ambivalence many artists feel about career surveys: "Nah, I don't want no retrospective" and "Wait, I don't want no retrospective."

Long ago Ruscha began experimenting with unusual materials. For the red painting on silk "Evil" (1973) at SFMOMA, he used his own blood. He made a number of the drawings on view using gunpowder.

"I can't even recall why I had a canister of gunpowder in my studio," Ruscha said, "because I'm not into guns." But he thought it had potential as an art material.

"I could see that it had a kind of color I liked," he said. "I could easily make corrections on it. For the time it seemed like a perfect solution."

American viewers have made little of the medium's potentially political associations, but Ruscha ran into difficulty the first time he tried to ship a gunpowder drawing to Japan, which prohibits firearms. "I had to make special declarations about its safety before they'd let it in," Ruscha said.

In person, Ruscha has the cool manner of someone who knows that much will come to him if he stays alert and waits.

Much has.

In May, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York will open "Cotton Puffs, Q-Tips, Smoke and Mirrors," a retrospective of Ruscha's drawings that will travel later to Los Angeles and beyond. Painting retrospectives in 1995 and 1982 solidified his reputation as a contemporary art luminary.

"I guess I'd been painting about a year and a half," after moving to L.A. from Oklahoma, "when I sold my first painting," Ruscha recalled. "I was stunned. I never imagined people could make a living doing this. I had a Christmas job at the time, putting children's names on gift items with a brush. I just thought I'd go on having jobs like that. I had no expectations or game plan. I was content with being in my studio and I really still feel the same way I did at 18. So in a sense you can say, 'he's an artist who never grew.' "

Despite his obvious good humor, Ruscha believes that "there's more to life than symphonies and roses. The most serious artists -- their work springs from worry and misfortune, the negative aspects of life."

Yet he shares none of the fashionable postmodernist pessimism. "People feel like everything's been done," he said. "I don't feel that way at all. I feel there's so much that's untapped by artists."

Pop! From San Francisco Collections Paintings, drawings, sculpture and prints. Through Sept. 19. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., San Francisco. (415) 357-4000, sfmoma.org.