

# HOTSHOE

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**EXCLUSIVE - EUGENIE DOLBERG AT GROUND ZERO +**

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For him the camera was always a recording tool, rather than a means of making art, but those “artless” images, and the hugely influential books that were made from them, have changed the way

# ED RUSCHA

Ed Ruscha is best known for his paintings of iconic landscapes and monumental signs. Yet seminal works such as *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* (1963) have assumed a status and aesthetic sensibility, a narrative which Ruscha never intended when he drove down Route 66 from California back to Oklahoma, photographing twenty-six gasoline stations ‘worth looking at’. Only identified by their trade names and geographical locations, there is an ambiguity in the dead-pan imagery. When published in his machine made artist’s books, they extrapolate Duchampian humour, reversing expressionist sensibility. Ruscha is fascinated by the nature of photographic truth and the insidiousness of nostalgia, as banal settings are transposed by progress and signage transmutes. His first film *Premium* (1971) which he claimed was ‘a little rough around the edges’ is also a period piece. We enter the realm of sixties sensibility, with its traces of early performance art, innocuous objects and fragmented plot line. He is intrigued that with increasingly sophisticated digital technology, artists are returning to Daguerreotypes, gelatin silver prints and hand held cameras. The style cycle he quips is ‘out with the new and in with the old’. Citing Robert Frank as a major influence, Ruscha retorts that it wouldn’t matter what camera he was holding, he would still have taken great photographs. Having had his deadpan photographic records from ‘some Los Angeles apartments’ to Parking lots and his ‘caper’ with a Royal typewriter claimed by the pop artists to the post minimalists, Ruscha contends that the best labels are pressure sensitive ones that one can take off any time. He mischievously interjects that the one thing he knows he isn’t is a young British artist. He is of course West Coast laid back and cool. His mantra, the ‘number one rule is there are no rules’, makes me ‘want to hang out with Ed Ruscha’

**Jean Wainwright:** Landscapes, horizons, twenty six gasoline stations, I should like to talk about some of your photographic projects. The relentless horizon lines and your photographic influences.

**Ed Ruscha:** I have always given photography great credence and respect, even when it had no respect. I felt I was coming into the world, developing as an artist and discerning that the factual aspects of life had to be captured. This somehow all came together in the books I was doing. I was travelling, I liked to drive on the highway. Consequently I began seeing subject matter that almost had to be brought back and reported on. My introduction to the world of photography came through the work of Walker Evans who I greatly admired and Robert Frank, their work really moved me. I was also interested in the people from the W.P.A. like Margaret Bourke-White and Bernice Abbot and photography from the twenties, thirties and forties that was in a similar genre. However when I saw *Americans* by Robert Frank that sort of shook the foundations and encouraged me to shoot pictures, and be an artist. To develop without ever having been influenced by others is almost impossible, even artists that you don’t like influence you. So that’s the way I came to the world of photography. Then I took my first trip to Europe in 1961 and it was a profound place, I came away feeling I’d seen a little bit of history but I still wanted to get back to the U.S. There is something red blooded about it that I feel connected to. Anyway, I had taken a bunch of photographs in Europe, they were just odd little store window pictures, stand pipes, sand curves and odd things that I would see on the streets, trash in the gutter. They were too arty I felt. But my travels got me into the habit of taking pictures, and it happened to be gasoline stations in the Western side of the U.S. I photographed them for a couple of years really for the pure joy of having identified them and describing their locations. I was using the camera as a recording tool, rather than a means to a work of art. They were more snapshots than photographs. When you go into an art gallery and see a framed photo that was not what I had in mind

**J.W:** You claim that these were twenty-six stations worth looking at. You selected from a great number of images. In retrospect how has the

concept that you engendered changed now that history and nostalgia have infiltrated?

**E.R:** That was what I was afraid of when I photographed them. The furthest thing from my mind was to have those gas stations become objects of nostalgia. I didn’t want that. I wanted them to be ‘today, this is now.’ There’s no nostalgia in my selection. I find that’s often a crutch in the world of art, a lot of artists depend on nostalgia and things that have gone, its like ‘out with the new and in with the old.’ When I was making these photographs I did not treat them like vintage photographs or imagine that they would be ‘considered.’ Their purpose was to be assembled to be put inside a book, the idea of making that book was the most important thing, the photograph was actually secondary. The title of the book *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations* came to me before I even knew that there might be twenty six gasoline stations worth putting in it

**J.W:** So why twenty six.

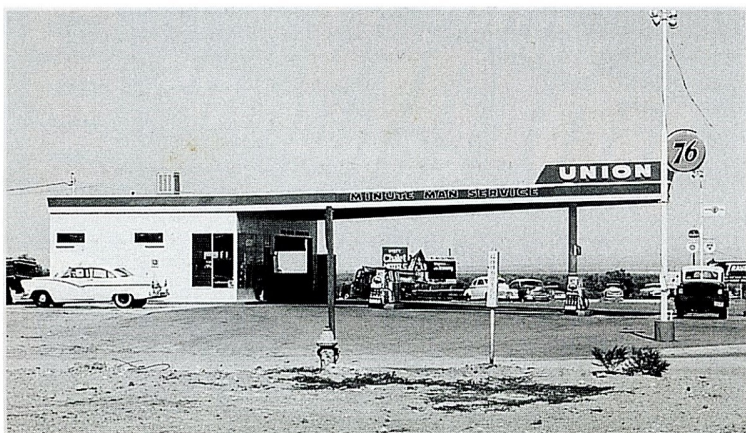
**E.R:** It had a roundness to it, a softness. I liked the sound of twenty six. I liked the idea of twenty six...

**J.W:** On Route 66...

**E.R:** ...not that there would be any riddle or anything that would lead you to get the punchline. I wanted to operate in neutral territory. I felt like the book was something that was never really approached by artists. Oh I mean, it had been, by the Futurists and by some artists that made leaved deluxe books, but I wanted mine to be nothing like that, rather something that was commercially produced. I wanted something that would make peoples’ heads scratch.

**J.W:** You have always worked on the West Coast and aligned your self with that area of America.

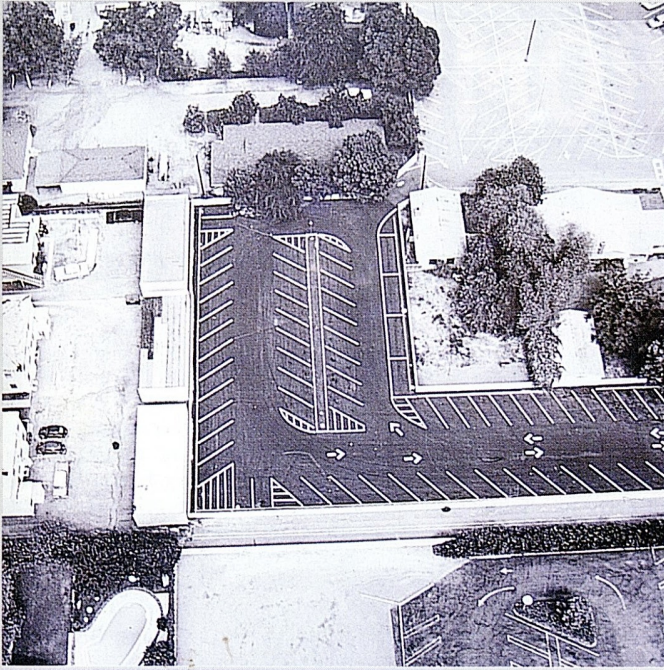
**E.R:** I was raised in Oklahoma, not much room for poets or artists. I wanted to go to an art school. I had visited L.A. and travelled to California, and I loved the drive between California and Oklahoma, simple things like palm trees and automobiles. Every time the sun shines there is a remote attachment to glamour and attraction to Hollywood. I found myself living there and I have been there ever since. I love to go to New York but the one thing I don’t have is a patriotism to California. It is not a part of my life, I don’t feel any loyalty, and yet my life as an artist has probably been affected since I didn’t live in a centre like New York. I think it is more that the act of living in America has had an effect on me, and I have probably had a little longer shelf life living in California. Now every time I get a review it is always California artist, it’s never artist, so in a sense saying that is almost like calling you a regionalist. There are many scholars and writers that I respect that sincerely believe that you are doomed to obscurity unless you live in the City of Manhattan.



Ed Ruscha  
*Union, Needles, California, 1962*  
Gelatin silver print  
From the book *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations*  
Courtesy Anthony D’Offay Gallery

**J.W:** You always had in mind that you would publish your photographs in book or





Ed Ruscha  
*Church of Christ, 14655 Sherman Way, Van Nuys, 1967*  
 Gelatin silver print  
 From the book *Thirty Four Parking Lots in Los Angeles*  
 Courtesy Anthony D'Offay Gallery

portfolio form rather than have them exhibited in a gallery.

**E.R.:** I was more interested in and fascinated by the the world of books. Maybe I needed an excuse to make a book and the gas stations were that excuse, so the book became the thing more than the snapshots as I like to call them. I numbered the first edition, but I realised I didn't want that either.

**J.W.:** Your photographs of landscapes are completely different from an artist like Jeff Wall although you have expressed admiration for his work.

**E.R.:** My photographic work has an entirely different narrative from someone like Jeff Wall His work comes from the world of performance or staged photograph. I think there are a number of photographers that are staging photographs that I really like. I like that idea of creating a photograph and I think that is a logical thing to come around to. For years photographers were obliged to take reality, capture life as they found it instead of creating pictures

**J.W.:** Do you see the portfolios and books you've made as completely separate from your paintings?

**E.R.:** Somehow they interconnect like little silver threads that are connecting between the two. But I don't know exactly where it fits. I have never been able to use a photograph in my art. I don't necessarily paint photographs, my mountains are painted from photographs that I haven't taken, so some staging of the picture is an important thing. Sometimes you can see an exhibition of portrait paintings and you can almost see what lens they are using in the original source material, even the cropping of the work is

Ed Ruscha  
*Liquor Locker, 1976*  
 Gelatin silver print  
 From the portfolio *Sunset Strip* (Patrick Painter Editions)  
 Courtesy Anthony D'Offay Gallery



Ed Ruscha  
*Pool #6, 1968*  
 Ektacolor print  
 From the suite *Pools* (Patrick Painter Editions)  
 Courtesy Anthony D'Offay Gallery

photographic. Photography affects all artists and most of the artists are smart enough not to show it, but too many artists coldly paint photographs.

**J.W.:** Other series of photographic works include your Sunset Boulevard pictures...

**E.R.:** I have been taking photographs like that for a for a number of years and I like the documentary aspect of it, the collection of facts, it's more archeological than aesthetic. Is that park bench still there, what is this parking sign? But although I do not want to be nostalgic I create instant nostalgia. It is hard to take a picture of anything and at some point not be nostalgic. A colour photo of the fifties always looks like colour photo of the fifties, the same with the sixties and the seventies.

**J.W.:** Is that why you use black and white, and you also keep your format small?

**E.R.:** I liked to watch black and white movies by John Ford I have always been drawn to black and white. The boxed editions and the books are small. I wanted some kind of bite-sized reference point and the book is the essential element and not the photographs standing on their own, not that they haven't been masterfully done! So it goes back to the fact that the book is the essential element. The vision is the name of the game.

**J.W.:** In 1967 you hurled a Royal typewriter out of a Buick doing nearly ninety miles an hour. Can you tell me about the resultant book, *Royal Road Test?*

**E.R.:** That started as a caper, developing out of something that was really spontaneous. We were driving down the highway at ninety miles and hour back to L.A. and we had a broken typewriter that we had no use for. We thought that we would just throw it out of the window. Reflecting back on the typewriter and its purpose we entered the realm of going and looking at its demise like a homicide. Then we started thinking 'book' and Patrick photographed every little piece. It was a mad cap event. In this case the event was an explosive moment that we thought we could capitalise on, recording what happened when it hit the road with great force. We were almost like forensic experts, photographing its exact location, examining the scene of the crime, all the typewriter parts everywhere, the traces of impact. We developed the photographs and we felt it was essential to have all the names of the typewriter parts recorded accurately so we have titles like 'tilt bar lever.'

**J.W.:** Dennis Hopper has said that when he looks at Los Angles he sees Ed Ruscha. He feels that your photographs helped enhance it and give it an aesthetic value.

**E.R.:** Well, photography has won a new respect as an art form that it didn't have in the sixties.