

WHITNEY

Press Release

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November 2005

WHITNEY IN ASSOCIATION WITH HARVARD UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUMS TO PRESENT ED RUSCHA'S *COURSE OF EMPIRE*, WHICH REPRESENTED THE UNITED STATES AT THE 2005 VENICE BIENNALE



Ed Ruscha, *The Old Trade School Building*, 2005
Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York

Course of Empire: Paintings by Ed Ruscha, the United States' contribution to the current 51st Venice Biennale, will have its only US presentation at the Whitney Museum of American Art, where it will be on view from November 17, 2005 through January 29, 2006. Other Venice Biennale projects that have been brought to the United States have included those of Jasper Johns (Philadelphia Museum of Art) and Louise Bourgeois (Brooklyn Museum of Art).

A contemporary master and one of the most influential artists at work today, Ed Ruscha has redefined our vision of the American landscape. In her foreword to the catalog that accompanies the Biennale installation, author Joan Didion writes of Ruscha's art, "His works are distillations, the thing compressed to its most pure essence."

The exhibition of Ruscha's *Course of Empire* was organized for the 51st Venice Biennale by Commissioner of the United States Pavilion Linda Norden, Associate Curator of Contemporary Art, Harvard University Art Museums, in collaboration with Consulting Curator Donna De Salvo, Associate Director for Programs and Curator of the Permanent Collection at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Project administration for the 2005 Biennale was provided by the Solomon R.

Guggenheim Foundation. *Course of Empire: Paintings by Ed Ruscha*, the United States' contribution to the 51st Venice Biennale, is presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art in association with the Harvard University Art Museums. Support for the Whitney Museum of American Art presentation is provided by Norman and Melissa Selby, the Donald B. Marron Foundation, and Jack Rudin in honor of Beth Rudin DeWoody. Additional support from the Harvard University Art Museums is provided by the David S. Howe Foundation.

For its Whitney presentation, the Biennale project – which was conceived in response to the symmetrical plan of the US Pavilion in Venice – has been reconfigured by co-curators De Salvo and Norden, working with the artist.

Dealing with the theme of “progress, or the course of progress,” Ruscha’s Biennale installation was inspired by 19th-century American artist Thomas Cole’s painting cycle, *The Course of Empire*, from which Ruscha’s title derives. The Cole paintings will be on view at the New York Historical Society through February 6 as part of an exhibition, *The Hudson River School at the New York Historical Society: Nature and the American Vision*.

In his *Course of Empire*, Ruscha revisits his own 1992 *Blue Collar* series of five black-and-white paintings and paints five new color pictures in response to each of the original five. As described in the curators’ brochure, written for the Venice exhibition:

“Much about the new works is in keeping with Ruscha’s previous portrayals of Standard stations, Hollywood signs, or mountains. The paintings are photographic in feel, depict urban landscapes at once familiar and remote, and manage to make mundane structures monumental...Like Cole, Ruscha makes progress his subject. The new series pictures his old buildings and former sites retooled, repossessed, abandoned, enlarged, and made obsolete, not necessarily in that order. But whereas Cole chronicles the ravages of an overcivilized culture on an untrammelled American landscape, Ruscha’s images quietly remark on how ‘change comes over things.’...Unlike Ruscha’s earlier depictions of American gas stations or Sunset Strip facades, these buildings speak to obsolescence, loss of industry, and anxiety. What they foretell probably depends on which highway you happen to be viewing them from.”

Reporting from Venice in *The Washington Post*, art critic Blake Gopnik noted that “Cole’s series of paintings documents the birth, rise, flourishing and death of an imaginary realm, so just by borrowing its title Ruscha evokes a falling away from grace. But what makes that evocation take

effect in the paintings themselves is the light that Ruscha – and Cole, for that matter – owes to the Venetian painters who worked after their empire had begun its slide.” And writing in *The New York Times* about Ruscha’s installation in Venice, art critic Michael Kimmelman commented, “Mature, laconic and strangely grave, the work conveys an acute attention to place and light, and an almost wistful sense of time past.”

Artist’s Background

Born in 1937 in Omaha, Nebraska, Ed Ruscha moved to Oklahoma City in 1941 and to Los Angeles in 1956 to complete his education at the Chouinard Art Institute. In 1963, he began showing at the progressive Ferus Gallery in L.A. Ruscha’s first international show took place in Cologne, Germany, in 1968; he began showing with the legendary Leo Castelli in New York only a few years afterwards. Ruscha is currently represented by the Gagosian Gallery in New York and Beverly Hills.

Throughout his career, Ruscha has drawn equally on language and landscape to communicate a particular urban experience. While he is considered both a pop and conceptual artist, and though his art encompasses photography, drawing, and painting, Ruscha’s early career as a graphic artist continues to influence his aesthetic and thematic approach, as does his deadpan humor. Ruscha’s first retrospective, for example, which many consider one of the most successful American retrospectives ever, was titled *I Don’t Want No Retrospective – the Works of Edward Ruscha*. Organized in 1982 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the retrospective also traveled to the Whitney.

The Whitney first exhibited Ed Ruscha’s work, however, in the 1967 Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Painting, and it has since featured Ruscha in several group exhibitions and collected his art extensively. In 2004, the Whitney presented a Ruscha drawing retrospective, *Cotton Puffs, Q-tips®, Smoke and Mirrors: The Drawings of Ed Ruscha*, which traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and then to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., through mid-2005. The Whitney also premiered *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, an exhibition of more than seventy original photographs, many of which had never been published or exhibited before.

In 1999–2000, The Harvard University Art Museums (HUAM) inaugurated their Sert Gallery in the Carpenter Center for Visual Arts, a new gallery designed for the exhibition of contemporary art, with *Landmark Pictures*, an exhibition curated by Linda Norden that featured Ruscha and the German photographers Andreas Gursky and Berndt and Hilla Becher. HUAM’s commitment to

Ruscha also extends to collecting: Over the past twenty years, they have acquired all of Ruscha's artist books; numerous prints and portfolios; several exceptional drawings; a series of recent photographs and a major painting.

Catalogue

A fully illustrated catalogue, with forewords by Joan Didion and Frances Stark and an essay by Linda Norden and Donna De Salvo, was published on the occasion of the exhibition at the 51st Venice Biennale, and will be available at the Whitney and Harvard University Art Museums.

About the Whitney Museum

The Whitney Museum of American Art is the leading advocate of 20th- and 21st-century American art. Founded in 1930, the Museum is regarded as the preeminent collection of American art and includes major works and materials from the estate of Edward Hopper, the largest public collection of works by Alexander Calder, Louise Nevelson, and Lucas Samaras, as well as significant works by Jasper Johns, Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, Bruce Nauman, Georgia O'Keeffe, Claes Oldenburg, Kiki Smith, and Andy Warhol, among other artists. With its history of exhibiting the most promising and influential American artists and provoking intense critical and public debate, the Whitney's signature show, the Biennial, has become a measure of the state of contemporary art in America today.

About the Harvard University Art Museums

The Harvard University Art Museums form one of the world's leading arts institutions, with the Arthur M. Sackler, Busch-Reisinger, and Fogg Art Museums, the Straus Center for Conservation, and the U.S. headquarters for the Archaeological Exploration of Sardis, an excavation project in western Turkey. The approximately 250,000 objects in the art museums' collections range in date from ancient times to the present and come from Europe, North America, North Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia.

The Harvard University Art Museums are distinguished by the range and depth of their collections, their groundbreaking exhibitions, and the original research of their staff. As an integral part of the Harvard community, the three art museums serve as resources for all students, adding a special dimension to their areas of study. For more than a century, the Harvard University Art Museums have been the nation's premier training ground for museum professionals and scholars and are renowned for their role in the development of the discipline of art history in this country.