

On the Road With Painter Ed Ruscha

BY KELLY CROW

A FELLOW ARTIST once praised Ed Ruscha's rocky cliffs, parking lots and gas stations as "postcards gone wrong." On Jan. 23, the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas, will open "Ed Ruscha: Road Tested," an exhibit exploring the artist's lifelong fascination with the American highway.

The 73-year-old, Los Angeles-based Mr. Ruscha is known for adding cryptic phrases to his austere landscapes of the West, such as his 1983 depiction of a flat horizon laced with red letters that read, "We would have a travel agency except no one in this town travels." Earlier this week, the artist spoke about his love of the road.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL: Tell me about your first family car.

ED RUSCHA: My father, who was an insurance auditor, had a big 1948 Plymouth. He used to take our family all over, to Yellowstone National Park, Los Angeles, San Francisco. We kids would cram in the back for hours with a big jug of lemonade and take sips off it.

When did you first travel on your own?

When I was 14, a friend and I hitchhiked to Miami. It took us 26 rides to get down there, and when he stayed on, it took me 26 rides to get back. I got a real taste for travel and highway culture.

There's an expense log in the exhibit for a trip you took from Oklahoma to Los Angeles in 1956 with former "Saturday Night Live" writer and songwriter Mason Williams.

We both graduated from high school



'STANDARD STATION, Amarillo, Texas (1963)' is one of the most famous works in the exhibit 'Ed Ruscha: Road Tested.'

that year, and Hollywood was the place to be. So at the end of the summer, Mason and I headed out, and it took us so much oil to keep my [1950] Ford going. We were constantly thinking about oil.

Jack Kerouac's "On the Road" was published a year after you moved to California.

I could relate to the way the book described that relentless need to be in a

certain city by a certain time and then feeling desperate to get back to where I started.

How did you find that Amarillo gas station that became the source for one of your most famous works, "Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas (1963)."

There was something new and clean about it, and the architecture had a zoom to it. I liked the idea that this

metal building could be put up anywhere, a pre-fab gas station. So I began concentrating on gas stations after that, and I took pictures of them all the time, those way stations. I don't know if the one in Amarillo still exists. I hope so.

People often avoid the roads these days, thanks to airplanes.

Going to the airport makes me ner-

vous, but when I set out to just take a leisurely drive, it's blue skies and puffy clouds and time. I draw and write a lot as I drive, and I know that's dangerous, but I manage to do it off to the side, with my notes on the seat. By the time I finally look down, my notes are usually illegible.

I think we call that art.
Exactly.



(clockwise from top) Philippe Serreant; Charles Duprat; Walter Schweinödter

In the Art-World Universe, A Place for the City of Lights

HOW DOES AN ARTIST get to the Louvre? British sculptor Tony Cragg says the key was his well-connected art dealer, the gallery owner Thaddaeus Ropac.

Mr. Cragg, a creator of monumental pieces, based for many years in Wuppertal, Germany, says that his longtime relationship to Mr. Ropac was instrumental in getting his "Versus" placed at the museum. The red sun-like sculpture of zigzagging wood was specially commissioned for the Louvre Pyramid, the museum's main entrance area. After the work's Jan. 28 unveiling, it will stay for a year, and there will be a related exhibit of several Cragg works. (Mr. Ropac didn't disclose the details of his gallery's negotiations with the Louvre, but said preparations took 2½ years.)

Mr. Ropac, age 50, has charted an unusual course in the European art market. Other major galleries, like Zurich's Hauser & Wirth and Cologne, Germany's Sprüth Magers, have recently chosen to expand or to relocate entirely to Europe's presumed contemporary art capitals, London and Berlin. But Mr. Ropac, a native Austrian who began in Salzburg in 1983 and seven years later expanded to Paris, has stayed put.

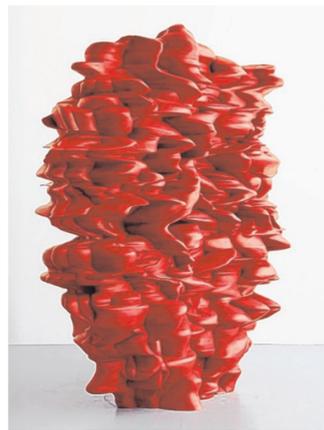
Paris is now "one of the main capitals of contemporary art again," said Mr. Ropac in a phone interview from Salzburg.

The dealer has attracted many of the world's most important artists, including German painter Georg Baselitz, German painter and sculptor Anselm Kiefer, and the collaborative duo Gilbert & George.

When he opened his gallery in the heart of Paris's Marais district, Paris was largely seen as a second-tier city for contemporary art. "I had the feeling



TWO 2010 Erwin Wurm pieces, top: 'Big Psycho 8' and 'Big Suit'; above, Thaddaeus Ropac and client Tony Cragg's 'Versus,' slated to show in the Louvre.



that things were moving on in other places and not in France," he says.

The emergence of important local art collectors has helped to restore the city's art-world status in recent years, he says. Businessman François Pinault, whose holding company Groupe Artémis owns Christie's auction house, and Bernard Arnault, chairman of LVMH, the French luxury conglomerate, have become civic tastemakers, Mr. Ropac says. He also cites the re-emergence of FIAAC, Paris's art fair, which he places in importance just behind fairs in Basel, Switzerland, and Miami.

Christian Ehrentraut, a gallery owner based in Berlin, says Mr. Ropac runs the "ideal blue-chip gallery." He admires the way Mr. Ropac's gallery can intermingle younger, edgier artists, like the Brooklyn-based French painter Jules de Balincourt, with "super-big" figures like Mr. Baselitz.

Mr. Ropac's artists emphasize another aspect: his predilection for paying promptly. "With other galleries you sometimes have to fight for money," says Erwin Wurm, the Austrian sculptor. Mr. Wurm, whose profile has risen sharply since he allied himself with Mr. Ropac a few years ago, opened his first show at the Paris gallery last week. "An artwork can breathe there," he says of the gallery's large second-floor space.

Mr. Ropac wants to expand in Paris but is also cautiously eyeing the Internet. "We are participating in the so-called VIP Art Fair," says Mr. Ropac, of the late-January event in which around 140 galleries will show their wares simultaneously online. "It's impressive," he says, but he remains attached to the old combination of live art and real people. "I still push our collectors to use the gallery as their main tool."

—J.S. Marcus

OBJECT OF DESIRE: SAINT SEBASTIAN CARVING

An Ivory Saint Resurfaces

AFTER SEVERAL CENTURIES out of the public eye, an ivory carving of Saint Sebastian that's impressed experts with its emotional power and large scale is about to make a reappearance. The scholar-dealer offering the work, created around 1638 by an obscure Germanic artist, is asking \$4.75 million.

At 25.2 inches from right foot to left index finger, the carving is "amongst the largest ivory figures ever made" in Renaissance and Baroque times, writes ivory expert Eike Schmidt, head of the Minneapolis Institute of Art's Department of Decorative Arts, Textiles & Sculpture, in an essay commissioned for a catalogue on the work. It's "a powerful, expressive work invested with an extraordinary understanding of anatomy," says Nicholas Penny, director of the National Gallery in London.

The curvature of the raw material, elephant tusks, crimped the ambitions of ivory carvers, and only about a dozen ivories of this size and period are known to exist. Most were crucifixes made for princes or other wealthy patrons.

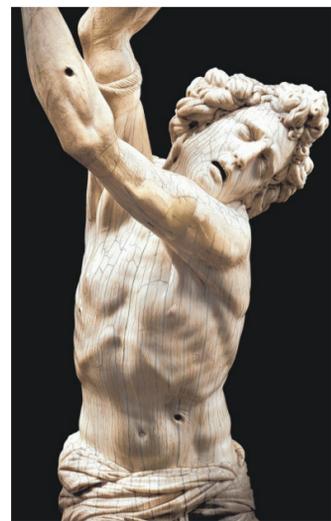
Where this Saint Sebastian has been for the last few centuries is unknown, but dealer Andrew Butterfield, who is offering it, bought it from a South American dealer last year. (Mr. Butterfield declines to say what he paid for it.) It was unattributed and needed cleaning. Mr. Butterfield, a Renaissance and Baroque scholar, researched the sculpture, pinning the attribution to Jacobus Agnesius, and paid New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art to clean it.

Only two other works by Agnesius, who was known to have worked in Italy for much of his life, have been universally recognized by historians: Another

"Saint Sebastian" is owned by Paris's Louvre museum, and the "Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew," is in a museum in Albi, France. Both are much smaller. The known record for an ivory, a private sale, is about \$7 million.

Size alone would not make the work desirable, of course. In carving this nearly naked martyr-saint, who was tied to a tree and shot with arrows in the third century, Agnesius used the curvature of the tusk to create an arched, anguished body, supplementing it with two pieces for the arms. The piece will be on view, Jan. 26 through Feb. 4, at Moretti Fine Art in New York.

—Judith H. Dobrzynski



THIS CARVING by Agnesius, seen in a detail, is offered for \$4.75 million.

DON'T MISS: JAN. 15-21



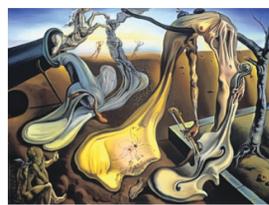
A MASTERPIECE LIVES AGAIN

The Menil Collection, Houston, through Jan. 30
During World War I German artist Kurt Schwitters used train tickets and candy wrappers for his Dadaist collages. World War II bombs destroyed his signature work, a room-size sculptural installation built over 15 years in Hannover. A replica of the room is included among the 100 items in "Kurt Schwitters: Color and Collage."



WORLD ENDS IN MASSACHUSETTS

Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass., through March 13
"The Strange World of Albrecht Dürer" displays 75 of the Renaissance painter and printmaker's works (the museum owns 300). One highlight: the Apocalypse series, which chronicles the end of the world in 15 woodcuts full of monsters, devils and angels.



DOUBLING DOWN ON DALÍ

The Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, Fla.
The museum that opened this week is twice as large as its predecessor, allowing all 96 of its Salvador Dalí oil paintings to be shown at once, including "Daddy Longlegs of the Evening—Hope!" (at left). Local architect Yann Weymouth led the design team for the museum, which owns about 2,400 works.

Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College

Maggie Nimkin

(c) Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute; The Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, Fla.



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