

## ART REVIEW

## Empty Pages in a Show Filled With Words

By Karen Rosenberg

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Ed Ruscha has never been particularly precious about print. For him books — even his own artist's books — have always been disposable. His breakout work, "Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations," was a photo essay that looked more like a user's manual; it set the tone for much Conceptual art and was followed by other, equally deadpan compendiums ("Every Building on the Sunset Strip," "Nine Swimming Pools").

In an interview in The New York Times in 1972 he told the writer A. D. Coleman, "I know that my books are not thought of in the same way as my paintings are." He elaborated, "People get the pictures and look at the pictures, and they put it away and eventually somehow it just kind of ends up in the trash, which is O.K. — that's all right with me, it doesn't bother me that much, that they might decompose, or not be thought of as 'objects of art,' because they're definitely not."

To many viewers today they definitely are (and they're certainly priced as such in the art market). But at Mr. Ruscha's latest, self-titled exhibition at Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea he is still treating the book as a kind of empty Pop container or Conceptual signboard. And often he is doing it in the medium of painting, collapsing trash onto treasure.



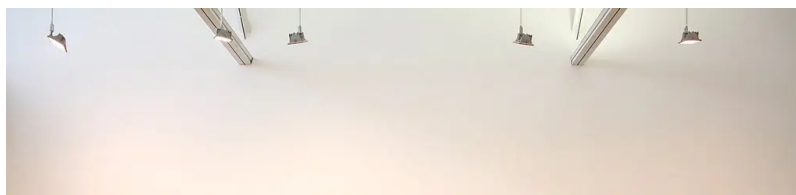
Among the Ed Ruscha works at Gagosian Gallery is a butterflyed volume from a luxurious library in "Gilded, Marbled and Foiled" (2011-12). Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

The show is derived from "Reading Ed Ruscha," a larger exhibition that appeared at the Kunsthhaus Bregenz in Austria this fall. It includes three marvelous new "vanitas" paintings made for that exhibition that subject a blank, open book to the ravages of time. (In the final canvas it's moldy, dog-eared, and riddled with wormholes.)

Here too are found-object works made by scratching and bleaching books, and painted works that foil or assault would-be readers with meaningless palindromes, redacted texts and profane titles.

Where others see printed matter that's more or less two-dimensional, Mr. Ruscha sees sculptural objects. Sometimes it doesn't even seem to matter what's between the covers, as when he photographs only the edges of closed books. In works like "Gilded, Marbled and Foiled" (2011-12), depicting a butterflyed volume from some luxurious library, he approaches books in the manner of a nose-to-tail chef, using parts of them that are often overlooked and underappreciated, the spines and endpapers and edging.

Certainly he does not treat books with kid gloves. An 1875 copy of "The Poetical Works of Thomas Moore" has a hand-drilled intaglio reading "INFO" on its gilded fore edge; a New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of the English Language (1988 edition) bears the message "OH NO." He attacks other books with bleach, painting single letters on their cloth covers. (The fonts vary, as do the titles; a medieval "M" on "Imaginary Gardens," a thin, elongated "C" on Richard M. Nixon's "Leaders.")





"A, B, C" (1987). Where others see printed matter that's more or less two-dimensional, Mr. Ruscha sees sculptural objects. Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

He seems to favor atlases, indexes, Bibles, dictionaries and other reference books (as in "Stock Market Technique, Numbers 1 & 2," a painting accompanied by the book that inspired it). These are not the first editions and other collectors' items favored by the gallery's other resident bookworm, Richard Prince. Literary fiction is scarce here, aside from two small drawings of Steinbeck novels.

Some works seem to divorce books from the act of reading, or to invent new ways to read. Among them are two paintings of open, blank books floating above palindromes (One says "STARBRATS"; the other "TULSA SLUT"), which complicate the usual left-to-right movement of English text with their strange symmetries. (They relate closely to Mr. Ruscha's "Mirror Paintings" of a decade ago that set palindromes against twinned mountain landscapes.)

In another series of paintings, rectangles arranged on plain backgrounds mimic the look of blacked-out text. (The missing words are suggested by the works' titles.) But this is not just an exercise in concrete poetry, à la Mallarmé and Broodthaers; each painting addresses the reader-viewer with the sneer of a film-noir mobster. The wall label for one warns, "TROUBLE YOUR WAY IF YOU INSIST ON RATTING." Another threatens, "LITTLE SNITCHES LIKE YOU END UP IN DUMPSTERS ALL OVER TOWN."

Like the palindrome paintings, these works make us hyper-aware of our penchant for "reading" artworks; we can't help moving our eyes from left to right. And as it happens, some of them are painted right on books; the cover of "The American Sporting Scene" (1941), for instance, has been bleached and retitled "EAT HOT LEAD."

Mr. Ruscha, unlike other artists of his generation, does not seem inclined to brood over the death of print; if anything, he is cracking wise at its funeral. But the most recent paintings, which include the three "Old Books" and another titled "History Book Laying on a Table," may be taken as modern-day memento mori. They invite us to lift our eyes from our tablets long enough to ponder the fate of once-grand tomes rotting away in the stacks. And yet the unsentimental rendering of worm-eaten pages, and the absence of text on them, reminds us that books are just paper; or as Mr. Ruscha might say, it all ends up in the trash.

"Ed Ruscha" continues through Jan. 12 at Gagosian Gallery, 555 West 24th Street, Chelsea; (212) 741-1111, [gagosian.com](http://gagosian.com).

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