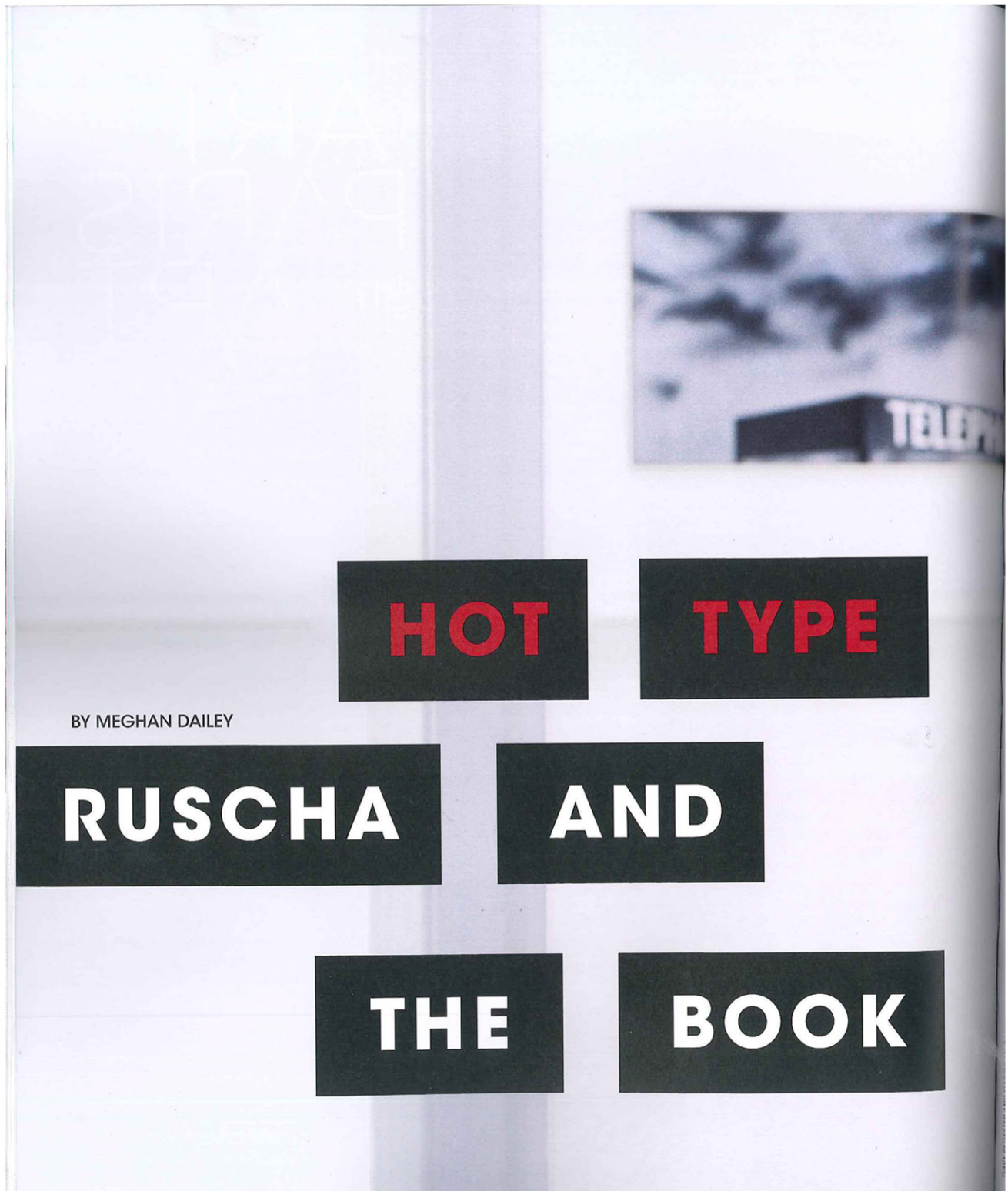


Modern Painters
April, 2013

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

MODERN PAINTERS



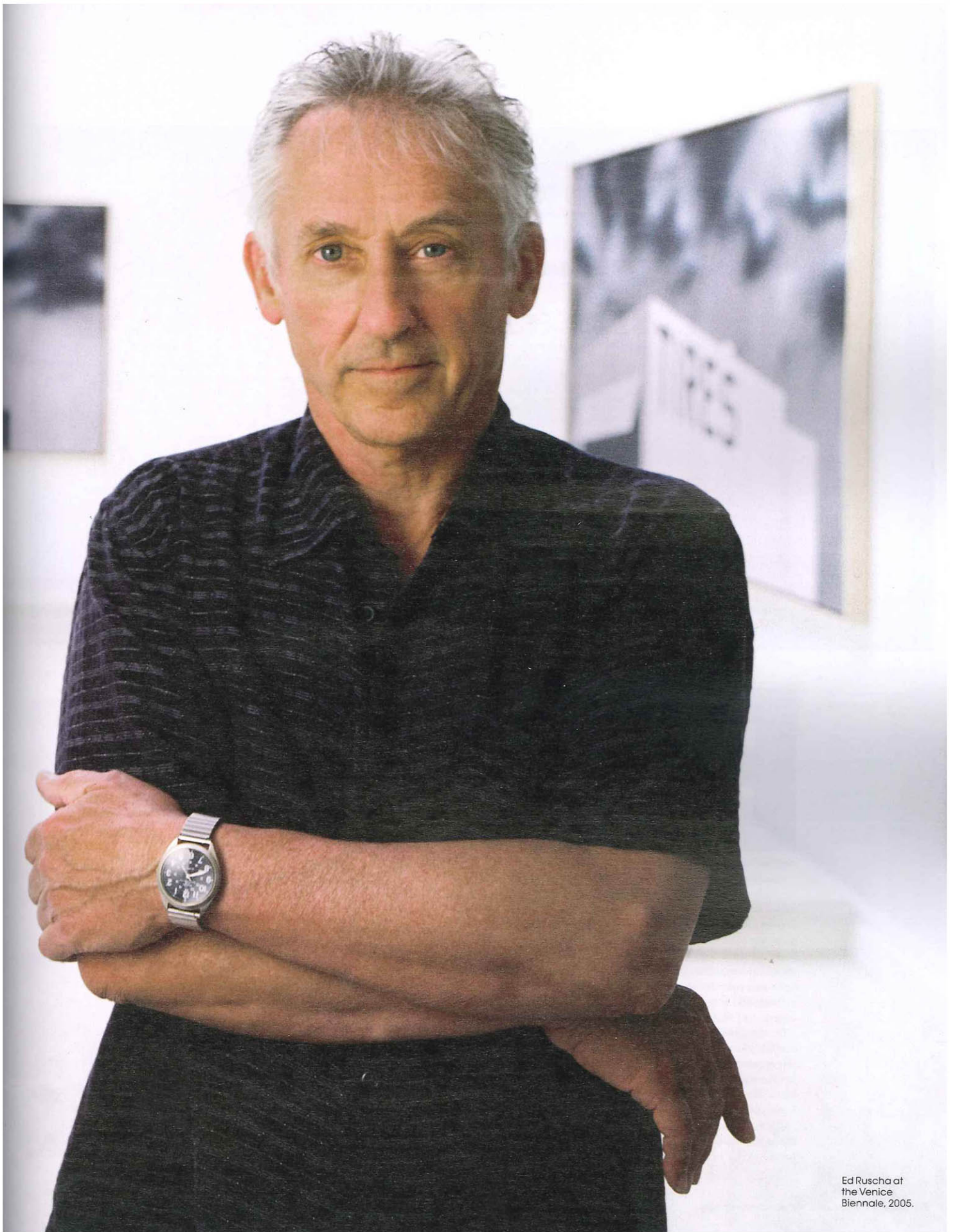
BY MEGHAN DAILEY

RUSCHA

AND

THE

BOOK



Ed Ruscha at
the Venice
Biennale, 2005.



Ed Ruscha's pictures typically play with the products of language: letters, words, phrases, logos, puns, double entendres, commands, palindromes, advertising-like bromides. Whether floating against backgrounds of muted color, stretching across commercial signage, or superimposed over mountain landscapes, Ruscha's ambiguous phrases crackle with nonspecific but tangible associations: "Jaggy Daggers," "Guacamole Airlines," "Wash, then dance," "Hydraulic Muscles, Pneumatic Smiles," "Fox Index," "Baby Jet," "It's only vanishing cream."

So it's no surprise that Ruscha has also worked with words in their most expected context: the book. He started out making artist books and ended up deconstructing just about every aspect of the book as a physical and cultural object in paintings, photographs, and found-object sculptural pieces. Books have been a career-long obsession for Ruscha. But that's not to say he's made up his mind about them. His work seems to say, Sure, a book is a fine thing; sometimes even a great thing. It's a record, a cherished story, a set of facts. But let's not forget that those volumes of facts may be destined to become obsolete, forgotten on a library shelf, and eventually tossed in the discard pile. A book can very easily be defaced, subverted, censored, even destroyed: His work puts that ambiguity right out front.

For Ruscha, books are at once trash and treasure, and he likes that they can be both. But as an artist who willingly fosters contradiction and ambiguity, he also questions the assumed cultural value attached to things based solely on their context. He wants us to ask, Is this art or not? And it seems that he's been asking himself the same question over the years. Take, for

example, two of his comments about his much-admired artist books of the 1960s and '70s, such as *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, *Thirtyfour Parking Lots*, *Various Small Fires and Milk*, and other deadpan progressions of black-and-white photographs that perfectly synthesize elements of Pop, Conceptualism, and Minimalism. "Personally I like the idea of working with books because it deals with an almost nonexistent audience," he told Diane Spodarek in a 1977 interview. Books attracted him, he said, because "they would be worthless to people." It's typical of Ruscha to introduce a streak of gleeful Dada nihilism to temper his artistic sincerity, but from his responses during a 1990 interview with French curator Bernard Blistène, he makes it clear that he understood the value of what he was doing: "My books were very hot items; it was hot art to me. Almost too hot to handle," he said. "They were very powerful statements, maybe the most powerful things I've done."

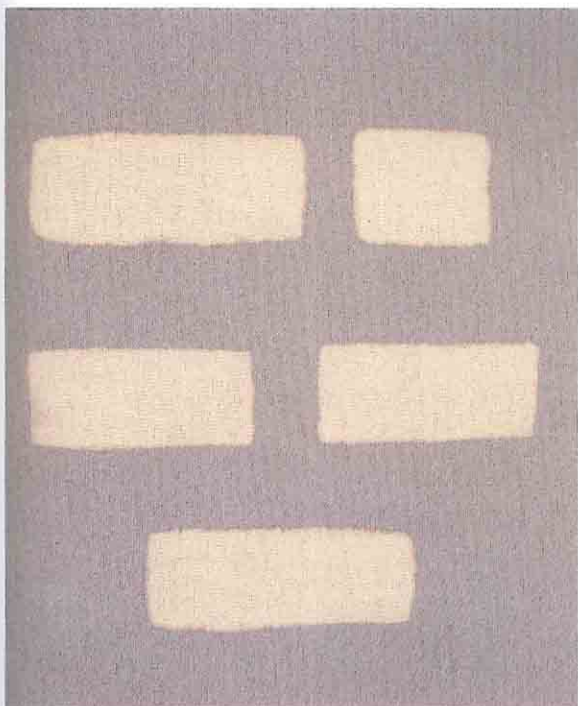
By now that's the consensus, and Ruscha's artist books are much obsessed over by critics and artists alike. "Ed Ruscha: Books & Co.," on view at Gagosian's Madison Avenue space through April 27, speaks to the influence of his books by showing copies of them as well as work created by nearly 100 other artists in response. Some of the same artists are included in the recent (and unrelated) publication *Various Small Books* (MIT Press), a roundup of Ruscha homages and tributes.

When his books first appeared, not everyone fully understood what he was doing, but Ruscha knew he was on to something. Those early books generated significant creative heat for the artist; he has described them as "a can opener that got into something else," meaning, perhaps, a pile of ideas that he hasn't yet used up. A recent show at the West 24th Street outpost of Gagosian in Manhattan offered an opportunity to see the various

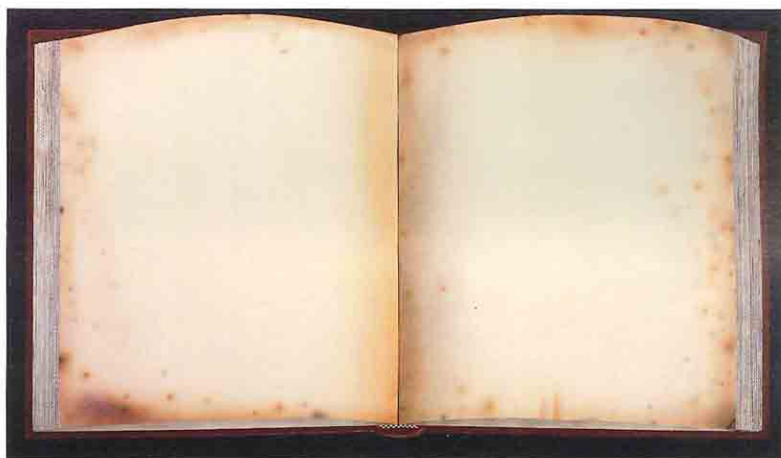
directions Ruscha has taken those ideas. The exhibition was a condensed version of last fall's "Reading Ed Ruscha," the survey by the Kunsthau Bregenz in Austria of the artist's career-long preoccupation with books. Though smaller than the Bregenz show, Gagosian's presentation similarly comprised examples from different series, organizing varied mediums, approaches, and periods into a tidy anthology: the book treated by Ruscha as an object, in photographs, paintings, drawings, and sculptural pieces using found volumes.

The juxtaposition of diverse treatments of the same subject inevitably prompts comparisons. Ruscha's most satisfying works are those that undo our expectations of what books are and also those in which the artist sharply undercuts the readily presumed authority and cultural value of the text. Generally, doing so involves fucking with something held sacred by the Establishment. This includes but is not limited to minimally but effectively defacing copies of the classics or frequently consulted sources of knowledge: The words OH NO have been carved into the edges of the pages of a huge Webster's dictionary, and a battered volume of the collected writings of Thomas More is identified simply as INFO. He takes aim at the myth of modernism as well, bleaching in the words *The End* in elaborate script on the linen cover of something called *Mainstreams of Modern Art*. In a series of paintings from the 1990s, text is covered by rectangles meant to resemble blocks of blacked-out text in censored documents as well as Kazimir Malevich's abstract compositions. The "blocked" words from the canvases appear as wall text that reads like a page ripped from a hard-boiled crime novel: "I can't take it no more" and "You cross me I wanna see blood." The works put Suprematism, a high-minded abstract system of painting that emphasized pure aesthetic form, on the same level as 1940s pulp fiction.

Ruscha's fondness for the American vernacular is reflected in what little we know of his own literary enthusiasms. For an artist so readily associated with books, not much has been said about what might be found on his shelves or if he's even an avid reader.



For Ruscha, books are at once **TRASH and **TREASURE** and he likes that they can be both.**



We know Kerouac's *On the Road* has been a touchstone for him. In 2009 he created a limited edition of the novel illustrated with his own photographs or images he chose, and all 26 gasoline stations documented in his 1962 chronicle were located along Route 66, which Ruscha drove from Oklahoma to Southern California in 1956. And like Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty in the Kerouac novel, Ruscha turned his back on the New York establishment ("the East Coast was starched clothing and heating oil," he observed) in favor of the openness of Los Angeles. (Ruscha has always been alert to the rivalries and resentments between East Coast and West Coast artists.) And for the quintessential L.A. artist to admit a fondness for a European writer like say, Vladimir Nabokov, would seem like a betrayal.

But then Ruscha has never confined himself to predictability or a single approach to anything. Three new large-scale paintings of open books from the last Gagosian show offer a glimpse of Ruscha in a rare elegiac moment. The works, titled *Old Book Back Then*, *Old Book with Wormholes*, and *Old Book Today*, are monumental in scale and painted with a trompe l'oeil realism that's impressive but that also makes them seem a little bit hokey—not a typical Ruscha mode. It's as if, when confronted with the current decline and possible eventual disappearance of print, he felt compelled to reclaim some territory for the book (though one imagines he would keep making art about books even if they were to disappear completely). These memento mori traffic in nostalgia, but they also fit into Ruscha's overarching gambit: His withholding, erasure, or dislocation of text and information can be read as melancholic critical reflections on the erosion of cultural meaning. It's been worn down, perhaps, but I think he would hesitate to declare the complete absence of cultural meaning. He is, after all, still making work. And by consistently and convincingly asserting the material aspects of both paintings and books, Ruscha gives art the last word. **MP**

FROM TOP:
Old Book Today,
2011–12.
Acrylic on canvas,
72 x 124 in.

*Stick Up Don't
Move Smile*, 2001.
Bleach on fabric-
covered board,
20 x 16 in.

OPPOSITE:
*Gilded, Marbled
and Foibled*, 2012.
Acrylic on canvas,
48 x 84 in.