



ED RUSCHA: STANDARD DIDACTIC

Philosophers have long pondered the relationship between words, things, and ideas. Is all language arbitrary and abstract? Do objects have an essence we can capture in words? This is not merely a theoretical conundrum; it is an everyday occurrence. Words adorn buildings and hillsides, shout from billboards, or flicker on movie screens. In Los Angeles words have a heightened, physical presence. Glowing in the region's famous light, gigantic signs serve as the city's voice, speaking to the solitary drivers who incessantly traverse L.A. While they claim to provide pure information, these signs are often entertainingly equivocal as to content and meaning.

Ed Ruscha plays with this paradox in his art, depicting words, wordlike symbols, logos, and signs with wit and skill. "I like the idea of a word becoming a picture, almost leaving its body, then coming back and becoming a word again," he has remarked. Consider the word "standard," for example. A standard in medieval times was a banner or flag, marking a rallying point and often bearing a heraldic device. Today we think of a standard as an established model or level of quality. In the lexicon of the American landscape, Standard is the oil company founded in 1870 by John D. Rockefeller, broken up by a historic antitrust ruling in 1911, but carried on by smaller subsidiaries in to the 1980s. In *Standard Station* of 1966, with its oversize white-on-red block letters marching into the composition from the upper-left corner, Ruscha highlighted each of these definitions and more. In his most recent iteration of the motif, *Ghost Station* of 2011, color is absent, and only a low-relief imprint remains.

Ruscha works confidently in many mediums, including painting, photography, printmaking, drawing, and film. His influence can be seen in graphic design, cinema, architectural theory, and urban history. Recognized as one of the most important artists of our time, he is represented in LACMA's collection by more than three hundred works. Truly, he sets the standard, showing us the city as word, thing, and idea.