

SURE, BABY, MAÑANA. IT WAS ALWAYS MAÑANA.

FOR THE NEXT WEEK THAT WAS ALL I

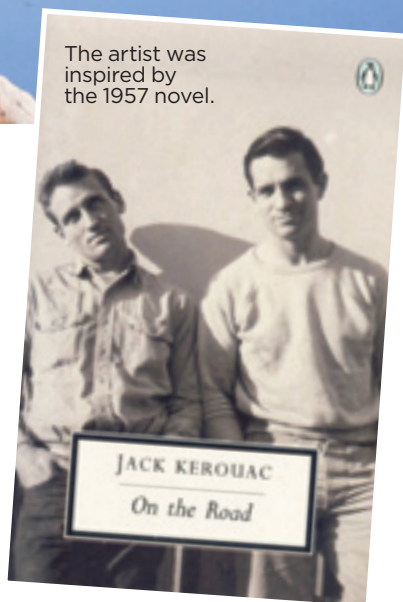
HEARD—MAÑANA, A LOVELY WORD AND

ONE THAT PROBABLY MEANS HEAVEN

Mañana (2009),
from Ruscha's
On the Road
exhibition



The artist was
inspired by
the 1957 novel.



painting the open road

ED RUSCHA'S WRY HOMAGE TO JACK KEROUAC THUMBS A RIDE TO MIAMI'S MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART. BY BRETT SOKOL

“The only people for me are the mad ones,” Jack Kerouac famously declared in his loosely autobiographical novel, *On the Road*, beckoning readers to take to the open road and seek out “the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn....” Artist Ed Ruscha is just one of the many devoted fans who took Kerouac’s proviso to heart. But when he was first passed a copy of *On the Road* shortly after its 1957 publication, its author’s fevered travels came as less of an epiphany than an affirmation: “I read that and I felt like, Wow! This is very much what I’m already doing!” Ruscha recalls with a chuckle.

Indeed, in 1954, at the tender age of 16, Ruscha had already set off hitchhiking from his Oklahoma City hometown without much of a plan beyond spending the summer in South Florida. “It took 26 rides to get to Miami, and it took 26 rides to get back,” he says matter-of-factly. In between, he landed jobs as a busboy at restaurants a few blocks from the ocean and seemingly a galaxy away from Oklahoma. The work was hardly glamorous, but Ruscha says that horizon-expanding summer—from exploring the

Everglades to the anything-but-buttoned-down surfside scene—made it clear that his future was neither in the Midwest nor in his father’s insurance trade.

Two years later, immediately after graduating high school, Ruscha lit out for Los Angeles and enrolled in the first art school that would accept him, Chouinard Art Institute. The rest, as the saying goes, is (art) history. Present-day critics consider him the progenitor of “California Cool,” as well as the West Coast’s answer to Andy Warhol. The art market heartily agrees: Sales of his paintings have fetched more than \$21 million at auction in the last 12 months alone. (And that’s not even counting the private sales brokered by his dealers at the heavyweight Gagosian Gallery.)

On that note, call his new show at North Miami’s Museum of Contemporary Art an aesthetic homecoming: Ruscha’s *On the Road* exhibition marries imposing landscapes with choice snippets of prose from Kerouac’s
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*Call his new show
at North Miami’s
MOCA an
aesthetic
homecoming.*

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF ED RUSCHA AND GAGOSIAN GALLERY (MAÑANA)

Ruscha's circular mural *Words Without Thoughts Never to Heaven Go* (1985), inside downtown Miami's public library



Ruscha in his studio

“The lawyers ruled it was a work of art, not a sign for the men’s room.” —ED RUSCHA

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signature novel. “That book has always been important to me,” he explains. “I just needed an excuse to go back to it. I was doing paintings of mountaintops, and I began to see them as fractions of scenery—as though you would spot them driving down the road. I already had some favorite statements that are verbatim from the book, things I had marked that I wanted to spotlight. It all fell into line.”

Devotees of Ruscha’s iconic text paintings won’t be disappointed with this latest series. Like the best of Ruscha’s canvases from the past five decades, these *On the Road* paintings have both a visceral visual pop and a lingering air of wry contemplation. They’re also a reminder of Ruscha’s sincere love of inventive wordplay.

That much has been clear to Miamians since Ruscha installed his circular mural inside downtown’s public library, a commission he says is still dear to him. Erected for the library’s 1985 opening, it consists of eight 16-foot-long panels mounted around the lobby’s soaring rotunda, invoking a line from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: “Words Without Thoughts Never to Heaven Go.” It’s a message all the more profound in our type-now-think-later Internet era.

Yet when it was first proposed, members of Miami-Dade County’s Art in Public Places Trust rejected Ruscha’s design, questioning the abstract nature of its Shakespeare quote, Ruscha’s professional standing, and not least, the \$140,000 cost. (Note to today’s budget-stretched county commissioners, perhaps eyeing the seven-figure sums being paid out for Ruscha paintings a fraction of the size of the library mural: Don’t get any ideas.) Fortunately, art-world advisors to the Trust refused to budge on their support of Ruscha; after months of wrangling and with the library’s grand opening looming, he was finally given the green light to drive the finished

IN CALIFORNIA YOU
CHEW THE JUICE
OUT OF GRAPES AND
SPIT THE SKIN AWAY,
A REAL LUXURY

California Grapeskins (2010)

panels from his Venice, California, studio across the country to Miami.

A similar dustup in 1987 nearly spiked the expansion of Ruscha’s work onto 56 lunettes scattered throughout the library’s interior arches. Ruscha had incorporated several Spanish words into his proposal, an idea he felt only natural for a city where Spanish was quickly becoming the norm. But he hadn’t counted on that era’s anti-Latino backlash and the County Commission’s contentious passage of a now-repealed “English-only” law for all official signs.

Back in Miami, Ruscha watched as arguments broke out during a heated meeting of the Art in Public Places Trust. “Ironically, the people who protested were Cuban Americans,” Ruscha says of the staffers likely looking to force the issue. “There was a pause for a few days, and the lawyers ruled it was a work of art, not a sign for the men’s room,” he explains dryly. “So they relaxed on the notion of using Spanish words.” Still, Ruscha sounds more bemused than hurt by the memory of the flap. “I’ve always invested a lot of interest in painting pictures of words,” he says, so what could have been more appropriate—or even flattering—than to have his exact choice of words so furiously debated? *Ed Ruscha: On the Road* is on exhibit from May 24 through September 2 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 770 NE 125th St., North Miami, 305-893-6211; mocanomi.org; e-mail: brett@oceandrive.com **OD**