

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**ED RUSCHA
UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE TO THE 51ST VENICE BIENNALE
COURSE OF EMPIRE**

51st Venice Biennale: June 12–November 6, 2005

Vernissage: June 9, 10 and 11

US Pavilion Press Conference: June 9, 3:30 p.m., at the United States Pavilion

Commissioner: Linda Norden, Associate Curator of Contemporary Art, Harvard University Art Museums

Consulting Curator: Donna De Salvo

Project administration: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

Venice, June 8, 2005—Ed Ruscha is representing the United States at the 51st Venice Biennale with an installation of paintings entitled *Course of Empire*, on view to the public in the Giardini della Biennale from June 12 through November 6, 2005. The Commissioner of the United States Pavilion is Linda Norden, Associate Curator of Contemporary Art, Harvard University Art Museums, in collaboration with Consulting Curator, Donna De Salvo. Project administration for the 2005 Biennale is provided by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.

Long considered the quintessential Los Angeles artist, Ed Ruscha now assumes the mantle of representative American artist with *Course of Empire*, a painting cycle based on his 1992 “Blue Collar” pictures. *Course of Empire* is both a site- and occasion-specific project. The United States Pavilion's structure and architectural symbolism and the international scope of the Venice Biennale are each central to the installation.

Inspired by the symmetrical neo-classical design of the United States Pavilion, Ruscha's installation comprises ten acrylic on canvas paintings, each roughly four and a half by ten feet in size, divided equally between the two sides of the building. In the pavilion's left-hand galleries are the original five “Blue Collar” paintings—black-and-white canvases depicting urban landscapes; in the opposite galleries are five new pictures painted in color. These new paintings mirror the black-and-white originals in both subject matter and placement. They depict, in Ruscha's words, “an accelerated, aged version of the same urban landscapes,” reclaimed, recycled, or abandoned. Between the two sets of galleries, the pavilion's entry rotunda will be left empty.

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Ed Ruscha's art is regularly discussed in relation to American habits, mores, and subject matter. His imagery and use of maverick words and phrases—such as the gas stations, the HOLLYWOOD sign, “Babycakes” or “Brave Men Run in My Family”—appear to confirm a familiar American landscape. But Ruscha's imagery invariably undermines and complicates any first impression.

Over the years, Ruscha has made a habit of revisiting earlier work, a process he has described as “waste and retrieval.” This approach informs his long-term commitment to tracking the changing architecture of the city in which he lives. In the “Blue Collar” paintings, Ruscha strays from the specifically American, Los Angeles–inflected idiom with which he has become identified. This may also account for his interest in retrieving the series and recycling it into his Biennale project.

Ruscha's project title, *Course of Empire*, derives from 19th century American artist Thomas Cole's famous painting cycle, *The Course of Empire*. Ruscha has seized on the concept of the cycle to make this new series of paintings respond to his earlier series. He has described the pairs within his own cycle as alluding to the anxiety that has grown up around the modernist vision of progress in a postmodern age, a sentiment that echoes, however indirectly, Cole's concern, circa 1835, that the United States not follow the “course of empire” that led its European ancestors to destroy their landscape in the name of an earlier notion of progress. Cole's skepticism about the value of progress distinguishes him from fellow Americans who were inclined instead to believe in the forward trajectory of progress and a vision of America as the final seat of civilization.

The very fact that *Course of Empire* exists as a cycle, however, implies movement and change. The variety of responses Ruscha conjures in this new group of paintings is itself an antidote to the specter of sameness that globalization tends to engender.

Artist's Background

Born in 1937 in Omaha, Nebraska, Edward Ruscha moved to Oklahoma City in 1941 and to Los Angeles in 1956 to complete his education at the Chouinard Art Institute. In 1963, he began showing at the progressive Ferus Gallery in L.A. In 1968 Ruscha had his first international show in Cologne, Germany, at Galerie Rudolf Zwirner. A few years later, Ruscha began showing with the legendary Leo Castelli in New York, and subsequently with the Gagosian Gallery.

Ruscha has consistently made the motifs of language and landscape communicate a particular urban experience. While he is considered both a pop and conceptual artist, and though his art encompasses photography, drawing, and painting, his early career as a graphic artist continues to

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strongly influence his aesthetic and thematic approach, as does his deadpan humor. Ruscha's first retrospective, organized in 1982 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, for example, was titled *I Don't Want No Retrospective – the Works of Edward Ruscha*, and there are many who consider it one of the most successful American retrospectives ever, in terms of the new attention it directed toward Ruscha's art.

In 1998, the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles organized a retrospective of Ruscha's works on paper. The following year, Gagosian Gallery, Beverly Hills, showed new paintings by Ruscha as well as "Metro Plots" in New York, a series in which Ruscha transformed city planning maps into landscapes. A major retrospective of Ruscha's career opened at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., in June 2000 and traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, The Miami Art Museum, and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas. In 2001 Ruscha was elected to The American Academy of Arts and Letters.

In 2004, The Whitney Museum of American Art exhibited a second Ed Ruscha drawing retrospective, *Cotton Puffs, Q-tips®, Smoke and Mirrors: The Drawings of Ed Ruscha*, which traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and then to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Ruscha's most recent gallery exhibitions in the United States have been at the Gagosian Galleries: the *Palindrome Paintings* were shown at the gallery's Chelsea space in May 2002, while a comprehensive display of the artist's photographs was shown at the gallery's Beverly Hills location in March 2003.

Venice Biennale

The Venice Biennale is the oldest and most prestigious contemporary international art exposition in the world. The United States Pavilion is one of more than 28 freestanding pavilions in the Giardini della Biennale.

Sponsors of the United States Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale

The leading sponsors of the United States Pavilion in 2005 are the United States Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs; The Broad Art Foundation; Lehman Brothers; The Ford Foundation; and Hugo Boss.

The Pavilion is also made possible through the generous support of the following: John and Frances Bowes; Melva Bucksbaum and Raymond Leary; Glenn Fuhrman; Kathy and Richard S. Fuld, Jr.; Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro; Henry and Marie-Josée Kravis; The Leonard & Evelyn Lauder Foundation; Aimee and Robert Lehrman; Margaret and Daniel Loeb; Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron

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Foundation; Stavros Merjos and Honor Fraser; John and Amy Phelan; Rosina Lee Yue and Bert A. Lies, M.D.; In-kind support is provided by Gruppo Bodino SpA, Torino, and Larry Gagosian.

Lenders to the exhibition are: Belgacom Art; Neda Young; Museum für Kommunikation Frankfurt; and, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.

Catalogue

A fully illustrated catalogue, with forewords by Joan Didion and Frances Stark and an essay by Commissioner Linda Norden and Consulting Curator Donna De Salvo, has been published on the occasion of the exhibition at the 51st Venice Biennale.

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