

Ed Ruscha *Ribbon Words*

Edward Tyler Nahem, New York 6 May–1 July

AUTOMATIC PUSSY. Or SKYTOWN 3 FORKS
QUIT EYE CHOP. Or LIQUIDS POLICY PALM.
Or, my favourite, CYCLE ULTRA OXIDES.

These are words from Ed Ruscha's *Ribbon Words* drawings, each word a drawing unto itself. The combinations aren't Ruscha's but Dieter Buchhart's, who curated this show at Edward Tyler Nahem and so deserves credit for the combinatorial poetics. One imagines it – the show – is destined to reappear, almost fully formed, in some future Ruscha retrospective, gathering as it does more than 40 of the artist's word-drawings dating from 1966 to 1973.

'Poetics' is a key term, or problem, that Ruscha has always contended with, because he has never simply offered words alone – when he offers words, and not, say, books, photographs or stains; or books of photographs, or photographs of stains – but words thickened up by paint and pigment, or in closeup, or given dimension, as he does in this series of drawings, by rendering the words as if they were constructed from a band of some kind of tape

(masking?) or ribbon (of paper?) that has been bent and folded to form letters.

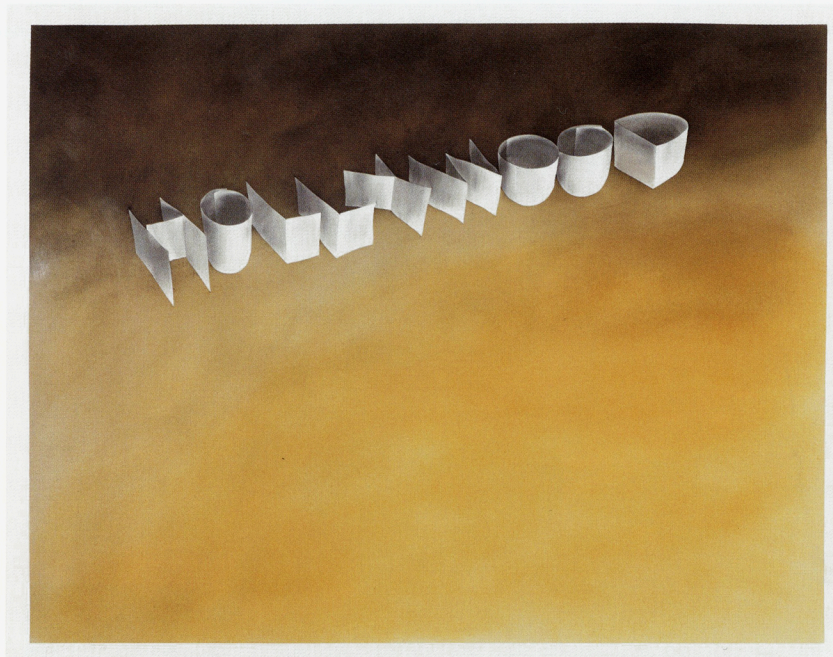
Which isn't entirely true. The earliest works in the show, *AUTOMATIC* and *PUSSY* (both 1966) don't appear as trompe l'oeil ribbons, but as single lines of script, yet they don't look as if they have been simply written either. For example, the dark graphite script of *PUSSY* is thick against its gradient of grey background; it has been rendered, or drawn, as in 'drawn out' – attention, in other words, has been paid. *AUTOMATIC* is more awkward, its script more handwritten, or handmade, and less well looped. *PUSSY* could have been machined, but ironically, *AUTOMATIC* could not.

Almost all of the other words in this series are ribbons that appear as if they are resting upright on a surface, such as a tabletop (whose edges are invisible), so that we see and read the word from above (and often to the left) but get a sense of its dimension from below, because we are seeing what amounts to the bottom of the letters rather than their tops. If nothing else,

rendering the words this way positions us, or situates us, the viewers, in a particular place with respect to the words. It gives them a physicality, which conflicts with their capacity to signify as the words that they are.

And that's the point. Ruscha's words are never themselves, never transparencies to meaning or significance – this is their poetics. They are at once too alone and too accompanied by extratextual visual incident, at once too much and not enough. *ULTRA* and *CYCLE* (both 1970), for example, appear to rest on luminescent pastel surfaces across which they cast shadows (here Ruscha is using gunpowder instead of graphite). *CYCLE* is rendered a bit larger, and so appears closer to the picture plane, but *ULTRA* is shown with a lot of room around it, and so there is some distance between us and it, but not so much as to be extreme, which 'ultra' would certainly suggest. The word drawings, in other words, are never illustrative, and that's much of their appeal.

Jonathan T.D. Neil



Hollywood, 1970, gunpowder and pastel on paper, 58 × 74 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Edward Tyler Nahem, New York