

# KOHN GALLERY

## Interview

### Seven Decades: Joe Goode x Ed Ruscha

By Ed Ruscha, Alexandria Symonds

Artists Ed Ruscha and Joe Goode grew up together, in every possible respect. They shared Southern childhoods in the 1940s; California art-school educations at the end of the '50s; trips to New York in the '60s. "In those days, you couldn't think of making a living as an artist," Goode told us, on the phone with Interview and his friend Ed Ruscha a few weeks ago. "Nobody made a living as an artist, unless you taught."

"We were just out to impress our friends and work for each other, and basically, that was it," Ruscha agreed. Goode elaborated: "Nobody ever sold out or a show or anything like that. And even if they had, it wouldn't even pay for the materials they used."

Much has changed, obviously, but Ruscha and Goode's friendship hasn't: the two of them have navigated the southern California art scene, and the development of their own work, ever since. Their art isn't often stylistically similar—Ruscha is known for his often irreverent text-based paintings, while Goode has historically focused on color-field paintings, often incorporating either rips and tears or everyday objects. But their respect for one another's work is obvious in conversation, and both are included in the permanent collections at institutions including MoMA, the Whitney Museum, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

On the occasion of an exhibition of new works by Goode, "Flat Screen Nature," at Michael Kohn Gallery in Los Angeles, the two artists discussed their work and their rich history together. In tone, it wasn't so different from a conversation they might have had over lunch, which they do often—with one major exception. "Honestly, I don't think we ever talk about art when we go to lunch," Goode said. —Alexandria Symonds

ED RUSCHA: Well, hey, I think we ought to talk about our background, huh?

JOE GOODE: That's a good idea.

RUSCHA: We grew up in Oklahoma together.



GOODE: Bosom buds! Met in the Catholic Church.

RUSCHA: Met in rosary school, second grade, and you were sort of a typical altar boy, I remember that.

GOODE: That was pretty amazing, when they'd hold their head back, close their eyes and stick out their tongue to receive the Holy Communion. That was pretty sexy for a seven-year-old. [laughs]

RUSCHA: And then what'd you do? You went to St. Gregory's, Shawnee, Oklahoma, right?

GOODE: Yeah, that was a boy's school. That was something like 32 miles away from Oklahoma City, and at that time I really enjoyed playing sports, particularly baseball and basketball, and they had always really a very active sports program, so I tried that for a year. But then you kind of realize that there's no girls around and sports aren't that much fun compared to going out and going to a movie with a girl or something like that. I kind of quit after a year.

RUSCHA: Then you got through high school and you headed out to California. We ended up at Chouinard Art Institute.

GOODE: Yeah, that's right. I came out about, I think, two years after you did. Something like that, and yeah, I kind of fell into this thing because you and Jerry McMillan, who was also a friend of ours in high school, the three of us kind of knew each other in high school. The two of you had been at Chouinard before so I came out, so I was kind of the last one.

RUSCHA: But you hit the ground running in all these fine arts courses, and that's where you decided to stay.

GOODE: I was lucky, because Chouinard was a pretty flexible school, and I didn't happen to graduate from high school, so I wasn't interested in any kind of degree or anything like that. Really, all I wanted out of art school was more information on how to paint, how to make pictures, things like that. So I kind of concentrated on that, and I would take classes that were reserved for seniors when I wasn't a senior, and they would say, "Well, you're not going to get credit for it," and I would say, "I don't really care, I want the class." [I was there for] a year or so, and I left after that.

RUSCHA: You studied with Robert Irwin, too.

GOODE: He was the guy that really encouraged me to focus on what I wanted to do. He was a very dynamic speaker. I mean, the guy could talk you into anything, including, you know, "Get to work." [laughs]

RUSCHA: And then there were these sort of mythical characters like John and Billy Altoon.

GOODE: That's right, all these guys—they were kind of like movie stars to us when we were in school. We looked up to those guys, because they were trailblazers in Los Angeles. They were the ones who instigated and helped start the first art gallery in Los Angeles, which was Ferus Gallery. They were the first recognizable artists in Los Angeles that were fairly close to our age, and it kind of made it a possibility or a reality to kind of do something like that.

RUSCHA: Yeah, and then we also went to school with Larry Bell...

GOODE: Oh yeah, he was a classmate of ours, and Llyn Foulkes.

RUSCHA: Yeah, he was hot on the subject back then, Llyn Foulkes.

GOODE: Yeah, he was. He was probably the most advanced artist that I knew at that time.

RUSCHA: Probably so.

GOODE: I mean, this guy was doing paintings in art school that are in museums now. I wasn't doing anything like that in art school.

RUSCHA: But we were in a good place in the art school, because it was the bohemian school and they allowed anything to happen, and you could go as you were.

GOODE: Yeah, that's right. Wear anything you want.

RUSCHA: The instructors sort of guided us along, but I felt like it was the competition between the students that really got us moving.

GOODE: I think to a certain degree that I felt that way as well. But mostly, at that time, I felt like I had so much catching up to do— there was so much I didn't know that I wanted to know—that I didn't focus on competing with other people so much as I did just trying to get as much information as I could. I had to support myself working three jobs a day while I was going to school, and I just didn't feel like staying there any longer than I had to. So that's why I took the classes that I felt were most valuable to me, and just rejected the other ones and got out of there as soon as I could.

RUSCHA: Yeah, and then once we got out, we found out that the art world was miniscule. [Goode laughs]  
] I mean, tiny little art world. No promise out there like they have today.

GOODE: No, that's right. There was that one art gallery, Ferus Art Gallery, and there was one called Huysman Gallery that Henry Hopkins was the gallery director of. And that lasted about six months.

RUSCHA: But then Rolf Nelson and Nick Wilder...

GOODE: Yeah, then followed Rolf, and then followed Nick. And then, once Nick got here, they got more galleries, and Los Angeles as an art scene started to grow a little bit.

RUSCHA: Yeah. And then we got out of school and you sort of took on art and wine and women and horses, and where did you go wrong? [laughs]

GOODE: I don't know! I guess I stopped watching where you were going! [both laugh]

RUSCHA: We took a break there and hitchhiked to New York.

GOODE: That was a highlight of my time.

RUSCHA: That was a highlight of my time back then, too. And we had many rides to get to New York, and then we called Andy Warhol and went by and saw him.

GOODE: He said, "I'll take you to my favorite restaurant," and we thought, "God, man, this is great, New York, favorite restaurant, this guy's got money," and everything. We go to Walgreens.

RUSCHA: Walgreens, yeah!

GOODE: For grilled cheese sandwiches.

RUSCHA: And then he took us to Jim Rosenquist.

GOODE: Yeah, that's right.

RUSCHA: And we went to the aluminum-walled studio he had in the firehouse. And then he had this apartment and he had this music playing. [singing] "I will follow you," you know, "I love him, I love him." And he played it on that little 45-rpm record player.

GOODE: That reminds me of the movie I saw last night, Jersey Boys.

RUSCHA: And then we ran into Ivan Karp, remember, and he said, "You guys are hitchhiking back? Let me find you a car." And we said okay, and he had this car: "But the only thing is, it doesn't have a license plate." And that didn't sound so good, did it? Trying to drive out of New York City in a car with no license plate. So we just hitched, didn't we?

GOODE: Yeah, and I can't remember if it was when we were going to New York or coming back that we were hitchhiking and this girl stopped and picked us up. It was a Saturday, four or five o'clock, and she said, "Why don't you guys stay here, wait for me, I'll go get my girlfriend and we can go out to this bar?" I thought, man, we had kind of died and went to heaven, you know? She said, "Jump in that pond and get you guys cleaned up," because we were all sweaty and everything from hitchhiking. It was in the summer. And so we go in there, we get all cleaned up. Hour goes by, mm, no girl. Mm, two hours go by, whoa. [both laugh] We ended up hitchhiking again and that just turned out to be a fabled dream, I guess.

RUSCHA: We could have written a song about it, but we didn't.

GOODE: That's right. Instead we just used it for motivation to paint the rest of our lives. [both laugh]

RUSCHA: Do you ever feel like religion or the Catholic Church ever creeps into your work?

GOODE: You know, I really don't, but that doesn't mean it doesn't sneak in there whether I realize it or not.

RUSCHA: Every so often I feel like it does, in my work.

GOODE: Well, I can see it sometimes in your work. Those drawings you did, those rays of light coming from church windows, stuff like that.

RUSCHA: It is, it is. It comes from the pictorial side of the church, I guess.

GOODE: I don't think so, in my case.

RUSCHA: At least we're not deep believers, are we?

GOODE: Well, we might be deeper than we think. I'm waiting for the day I get so old that I start to believe. I don't think I was ever much of a believer, even though was an altar boy and stuff. I would go to confession on Saturday night—because I had to receive Holy Communion, if you're going to be an altar boy—and the sins that I did commit, like playing around with a girl or something like that, I was too embarrassed to tell the priest, so I'd just say, "I stole three candy bars at the drug store." [laughs]

RUSCHA: [laughs] And that was a worse sin.

GOODE: Yeah, that was bad enough to get the same penance.

RUSCHA: Let's stay agnostic, right. [laughs]

GOODE: Why not!

RUSCHA: Hell, I hate to talk about art as much as you do, but if I had to put your feet to the fire, how would you describe these works that you're going to have over at Michael Kohn's gallery?

GOODE: Well, I'd say they are images of water and sky that have been trimmed around the edges that look like they're coming out of the wall.

RUSCHA: Okay! You might be stepping into the world of the unknown, I don't know.

GOODE: I have a feeling some people will see something else in them, but that's sort of par for the course. My feeling, basically, is whatever somebody sees is what it is.

RUSCHA: Yeah, good thought. And other than that, you just want to open up the gates to heaven.

GOODE: Yeah, right. [laughs] That's about as far as I could carry that question. I don't even know how to talk about my work, to tell you the truth.

RUSCHA: Sometimes I feel my thinking is ahead of my painting, and sometimes I think my painting is ahead of my thinking, and I don't know which way I'm going with it. I'm the least [likely] person to understand what's going on in front of me. You almost want to call in a stranger and say, "Tell me about this, tell me what I did."

GOODE: Do you find it this way? I try to do something I've never seen before or I don't know about, and that's the reason I want to do it. But if I find out I know the reason and I see it and I know what it's going to look like, then I kind of want to go on to something else; I'm bored with it.

RUSCHA: Yeah. And while you're at it, you just hope an accident happens.

GOODE: A lot of times, that's what happens. That's how I get started in a new direction that I previously never thought of. But I am no Josef Albers, I know that.

RUSCHA: You can't create mistakes—they just sort of have to happen, and you seize the moment.

GOODE: That's right. The way I paint, you almost can't even cover them up, because I paint so directly that if there's a problem in there I just have to start all over.

RUSCHA: And then historical things will come in mind. The milk bottle comes from your history, that's an early memory of yours that you revisit, and it makes instant logic to pursue that.

GOODE: In retrospect, I kind of think of it as an icon of mine—because it's become much more important to me than the object itself is. Just a bottle of milk is pretty common and ordinary, but to me it has a much more significant place, because of the paintings I've done and also the way I relate to it. I think of it as a kind of image that is fragile, can spill, it's nourishing, it's all of these different weird things in one image. It's easy for me to play around

with that and spread it out over a canvas.

RUSCHA: It could have triggered Walter Hopps describing the “New Painting of Common Objects.”

GOODE: Everybody else was calling art of that nature “Pop Art,” and Walter was really aware of the fact that my work was not Pop Art. I think largely because he saw the way I worked; I worked in his house for two years. He had a studio in Pasadena that was attached to his house, and I rented that studio and rented it for a couple years. I was doing Milk Bottle paintings at the time, as well as the House paintings that I started.

RUSCHA: I was just going to say, then you went on and you started making sculpture, you started doing those staircases. Was that ‘64, ‘65, or earlier?

GOODE: When did I do those staircases? Christina will look it up, she’ll find out for us.

RUSCHA: Yeah, we have to have things looked up for us these days.

GOODE: Well, 70 years, what the hell. [both laugh]

RUSCHA: So one of these days, we’ll get to see a show of those staircases.

GOODE: Yeah, maybe. I did three series of them. The first series was the ones that came out the wall around the corner, and the second was that series of staircases that paralleled the wall. And the third series, the last series I did, came out of the wall and went back into the wall.

RUSCHA: That middle one, that’s the one I think I saw at the MoMA in New York.

GOODE: Yeah. 1964 is when I first started the staircases.

RUSCHA: Many decades ago.

GOODE: And I don’t even have one! I guess I could make one.

RUSCHA: Yeah, make one. [both laugh]

GOODE: The work that I’m doing today wasn’t hard for me to place in the line of work that I’ve been doing, because it was clouds. The thing that really intrigued me about reinvestigating this is I was combing two series at one time, the Water series as well as the Sky paintings, and painting on this fiberglass really intrigued me because this fiberglass has a surface that’s kind of like digital. It looks like digital images when you paint on it, because it’s a modular surface with a pattern in it.

RUSCHA: You see that architectonic pattern underneath.

GOODE: So that really kind of intrigued me, to think of it in terms of digital image, hence the title.

RUSCHA: Well, you had the destruction thing going all along the line—you did those tissue tear things, and the slashes in them, and all that, so these new works you’re doing are somewhat similar.

GOODE: It’s like just chipping at the edges of destroying it. [laughs] Maybe I’m too old to destroy them. But they’re fun to do.

RUSCHA: You've got it going over there.

JOE GOODE'S "FLAT SCREEN NATURE" IS ON DISPLAY AT KOHN GALLERY IN LOS ANGELES JULY 12 THROUGH AUGUST 29. GOODE WILL ALSO BE THE SUBJECT OF A RETROSPECTIVE AT THE CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM IN ST. LOUIS IN JANUARY 2015. "ED RUSCHA: PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS" WAS RECENTLY EXTENDED AT GAGOSIAN GALLERY, 980 MADISON AVENUE, IN NEW YORK, AND IS NOW ON VIEW THROUGH SEPTEMBER 27.