

# Eddie Ruscha on his mesmerising, psychedelic, immersive art experience

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY - Q+A

We speak to the LA artist about his latest exhibition, his compulsive need to create art, and the influence of his legendary father

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As the son of Edward Ruscha, one of the world's most influential living artists, Eddie Ruscha has grown up amid the cultural milieu of Los Angeles and worked closely with his father since his teens. While Ruscha Jr – himself a magnetic artist and musician – is grateful for his unique experience and his father's influence, he isn't defined by it. "It's been a blessing to witness that firsthand and I don't take it lightly." he tells Dazed. Comparing their artistic sensibilities, he says of himself and his dad, "I feel in a lot of ways there is a crossover but, at the same time, I gravitate towards things he wouldn't totally condone."

His first UK solo exhibition, <u>Cosmic Harmonics at London's Sapling gallery</u>, is a transcendent audiovisual experience; a synthesis of Ruscha's fascination with mythical worlds, nature, and pop culture, soundtracked by his explorations into the "vast universe" of music.

His dreamy, psychedelic compositions are inspired by the kaleidoscopic choreographed dance sequences in films made by old-time Hollywood great, Busby Berkeley. Drawing on abstraction, op-art, and the California light and space movement, his spray paintings possess the same mesmerising, mystical quality of <u>Judy Chicago's</u> lithographs and they're radiant with the sunsets, energy, and mythology of Southern California. "I would say that California has always had me in its grip. It's really the end of the line before time starts again. It's got a sunset embedded in it."

Above, take a look through the gallery to take a look at some of Ruscha's visual artworks currently on display in *Cosmic Harmonics*. Below, we talk to Eddie Ruscha about harnessing creative energy and embracing the future, what he's learned from his legendary artist father, and the lure of counterculture – from the occult to 1980s clubland.



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Eddie Ruscha, "Layer" (2019), 12 x 12 inches Courteey of the artist and Sapling

## For those readers unable to visit *Cosmic Harmonics*, please could you talk us through the audio-visual experience of the exhibition?

**Eddie Ruscha:** The idea of the show was to combine my visual works with a live recording of a show I did a year before alongside a video I projected behind me when I played. It came together very naturally and <u>Cedric Bardawil</u> and <u>Sapling</u> gallery really helped realise it. Overall, I would say I'd consider the show to be 'escapist'. I titled the new drawings after titles of Busby Berkley films and one of the inherent features of those films is escapism from the realities of the time. We're in a different situation now but history is always echoing.

### I find your work very spiritual. To what extent do you find making art a spiritual pursuit?

**Eddie Ruscha:** I often think there is some form of energy mass of life in this universe and I feel it connects all living things. I feel honoured that somehow my soul was chosen to inhabit this place for the time being. All I can do to honour that is create things while I'm here. It's the language of involvement I've chosen and it comes naturally to me so I have to heed the call. That said, I don't subscribe to any formulated doctrine.

#### Were you surrounded by art as a child? And did your father teach you to paint?

Eddie Ruscha: I was absolutely surrounded by art and music as a kid but it was never forced on me. was definitely encouraged but I was so driven to draw and create scenar os, it was pretty much all I did. My dad never officially taught me how to paint but I undoubtedly picked up a lot from working for him over the years. I also picked up a lot from observing how he operates as well as his work ethic in the studio. It's been a blessing to witness that firsthand and I don't take it lightly. We work really well together and are very close. All we have to do is give each other a sly smile and there's an understanding.

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Music is an incredibly important influence and features as a key element in the experience of your *Cosmic Harmonics* exhibition. Could you tell us more about the role of music in your life and your work?

**Eddie Ruscha:** I've always been drawn to music. In some ways, it's the thing I go deepest with. It feels like the truest art form to me. From when I was a kid I would create worlds inside records like Stevie Wonder's *Songs In The Key Of Life.* It was like a vast universe that spoke even louder than movies because it was partly my own movie in my head and it could change with each listen. At the same time, I'm an extremely visual person so I have always expressed that as well.

#### How has Los Angeles and its cultural milieu influenced you?

**Eddie Ruscha:** I would say that California has always had me in its grip. It's really the end of the line before time starts again. It's got a sunset embedded in it. It also was symbolically the birth and death of counterculture starting with the acid tests and ending with Altamont (the infamous music festival which broke out into violence, resulting in one homicide and several deaths by misadventure) and the Manson Family murders. I suppose all that stuff has seeped into what I do since way back. *Zap Comics*, cult mythology, and Jack Parsons (rocket engineer and part of an occult movement founded by English occult writer and practitioner Aleister Crowley) all form a West Coast brew I find intoxicating.

Los Angeles always felt like an underdog city to me, like it was never getting its due. I've always been drawn to that aspect as well in that it seems like history is always getting erased here. On one side it's extremely frustrating but on another side I find that to be a good place for me to be because I like moving forward.



Eddie Ruscha, "Easy to Love" (2021) Courtesy of the artist and Sapling

#### Where did the name Cosmic Harmonics come from? It's a great title!

**Eddie Ruscha:** Thanks! It's kind of a riff on these tapes I did based on the cosmic tapes of <u>Daniele</u>. <u>Baldelli</u>. He's a legendary Italian DJ who, in the early 80s, played a huge variety of music at varying speeds on top of each other. All this from inside a space pod that hovered over the dance floor. He was a huge influence on me. His club was called Cosmic and he sold tapes and it's kind of like the Grateful Dead tapes in that they have cryptic numbers attached.

I found the whole world so appealing partly because I never got to go, so I have to resort to my imagination. 'Cosmic' doesn't need to be taken literally at all. It's a word that can mean anything to me. Like a lifestyle choice.

As far as the harmonics angle, I would say that humans naturally are drawn to harmony. That's why now we've reached this era where so much music uses auto-tune. I think auto-tune is a forced harmony whereas a true harmony is like the country and gospel duo the Louvin Brothers. I still like both. The sound of space I feel would be non-harmonic and dissonant. We need that at times as well to remind us how nice harmony is.

#### Could you please tell us about your relationship with your father's artwork?

**Eddie Ruscha:** I've worked on and off with him since I was a teenager so I would say that it's very much a part of me. I understood the humour even when I was very young. I used to draw words in these ridiculous fonts, not trying to be like him but it just felt like 'that's what ya do'. I feel in a lot of ways there is a crossover but at the same time, I gravitate towards things he wouldn't totally condone, like poorly crafted decorative art from 1983 or hideous Las Vegas wallpaper from 1997.

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### futuristic. Where do you envision your paintings to be located?

Eddie Ruscha: I guess a small part of me always thinks about the future and what perceptions may be like but, like anything, I find overthinking something takes away from the final result. Miles Davis said something about always going forward but with one foot in the past. That stuck with me. I think the idea of 'timeless' is something that I find intriguing as well. Like the music of Jon Hassell is something one may deem as timeless. Of course, I would love it if my output seems timeless but I don't have time to think about it.

Do you have any rituals that help keep you inspired? How do you get in touch with creativity? And, if such a thing exists, what does a typical working day look like for you?

**Eddie Ruscha:** One thing I'm thankful for is that I never seem to run low on inspiration. I often wondered what it would be like if, like Turner from the movie *Performance*, my demon abandoned me. I found it scary to ponder. I would feel lonely, as if my friend for life left. That's why I keep making stuff to honour whatever that force is and not take it for granted.

Typically, I'm kind of a nine-to-five-er but even after I leave my studio I'm still working until I fall asleep. I'm either listening to things I've done recently or drawing ideas for paint ngs. If I can't find time to make stuff I literally start to lose my mind and I've always been like that. I guess you'd say I'm a lifer.

Eddie Ruscha's Cosmic Harmonics is on display at London's <u>Sapling</u> gallery until August 7 2021