Ed Ruscha
*Standard Station,
Amarillo, Texas*
1963
Oil on canvas
165 × 315 cm

Ed Ruscha's *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* are like notches marking the progress of his teenage urge in the 1950s to escape

white photographs of petrol stations, each taken from across the street. *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) is a 27-foot accordion-fold strip of photographs that give you exactly what the title promises, with one part of each building at the top of the page and the other upside down at the bottom, as if the middle is the asphalt along which your eyes are driving. The *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* – all located along Route 66, which connects Ruscha's home town, Oklahoma City, with LA's Sunset Strip – are like notches marking the progress of his teenage urge in the 1950s to escape the provincial world for southern Cali-

fornia's promises of space, mobility and sun. This subtle correlation of serialization and emotional investment is embodied in the medium of the book, a reproducible yet sensual object to be touched and personalized through use. Ruscha points to this quality of books precisely by wryly suppressing other functions we expect them to have such as offering extensive information, or great narration, or glossy images. It would have been worth the effort to make reprints of Ruscha's artist's books, allowing visitors to leaf through them rather than displaying original copies in showcases. Ironically, this very tendency of the museum to pre-

serve the serial as singular while putting desire under glass was evident in the display of Ruscha's famous painting *The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire* (1965–8). The building is set against a surreal, venomously yellow background; devoid of people and surroundings, it looks like an architectural model. At the back left wild flames and smoke are rising, but it appears as if the proud new museum is trying to keep a straight face. It seems to be saying 'Don't worry, just a minor problem; everything is under control.'

In Romanticism buildings and nature were understood as mirrors of the psyche, but what if the psyche enters the hall of mirrors of mass media? In Ruscha's paintings from the 1970s and 1980s words are written over panoramic views like film credits or advertising slogans. In *Sea of Desire* (1983) the words of the title descend like a flight of stairs from a dark blue stratosphere into a cream-coloured thicket of clouds, as if they were the drunken afterthought of a B-grade screenwriter. In *Boy Meets Girl* (1987) the title is superimposed in happy white handwriting over a nocturnal LA grid of glistening car headlights and streetlamps, like Hollywood stars caught in a net of pearls.

Since the 1980s Ruscha's sloganeering scenes have been conveyed by taciturn blackness: the bandwagons of *The Uncertain Trail* (1986) are like a funeral procession sucked up by a dark sandstorm, and a white stripe in the upper left corner of the painting indicates the place where a cynical com-

ment may have been muted. At the Kunstverein Wolfsburg a simultaneous exhibition paired Ruscha's late 1990s 'Metro Plots' – maps of abstracted street grids sprayed with grey acrylic paint like a layer of acid rain – with works by Silke Otto-Knapp. Ruscha is tough competition for anyone, especially a young German painter based in London, but Otto-Knapp manages to carve out her own distinctive viewpoint on LA's ocean of light. She uses watercolour, which bleeds into the canvas with the controlled swerves and taps of a dancer. The work recalls Helen Frankenthaler more than Ruscha's own early 1970s 'stains', where he applied words with cherry juice or egg yolk onto *moirë* fabric. *Große Aussicht (Griffith Park 4)* (Expansive View, 2001) is a cheerful choreography of yellow, red, orange and pink dots: traffic lights and hoardings blinking in the sun turn into jewels sprinkled on to a sea of cream. In *Elyria Drive (Mount Washington)* (2001) a few bold strokes delineate houses, trees and telegraph poles on a hill whipped by wind and rain, turning a potentially terrifying storm into an uplifting moment of rapture. Seen through Otto-Knapp's eyes, LA's grid layout has been overgrown by the energy rush it produces, blurring its rigid structure into a flexible mesh. At a point when Ruscha's own oeuvre seems to trace a line from the 1950s high of Modernity to the hangover of the Millennium, Otto-Knapp's canvases send the pilgrim home with an antidote for depression.

Jörg Heiser

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2002 Whitney Biennial

Judith Schaechter
*Bigtop Flophouse
Bedspins*
2001
Stained glass,
lightbox
71 × 97 cm

Two disembodied heads, both made from silicone and sharing a cardboard box, are having a conversation. While somewhat halting, it is unmistakably a dialogue, and one with a decidedly existential bent. Never less than maddeningly inconclusive, it is also somehow compelling. The voices of the heads sound inexpressive at first, but gradually come to suggest a melancholic mood not inappropriate to their apparently hopeless position. In *If/Then* (2001) Ken Feingold applies 'artificial pseudo-intelligence' software technology to the construction of a Beckett-like tableau, the language of which

recalls the lost art of computer poetry. Veering from the fundamental to the fundamentally absurd, appearing at times rather clever and at times utterly at sea, Feingold's players might easily stand in for the curators and audience of the Whitney's most recent biennial.

The largest show in the series since 1981, this year's survey included some 113 artists and collectives and was as troublesome as ever; but how could it be otherwise? Lawrence Rinder and his team travelled to 43 towns and cities in the process of researching their selections, knowing all the while that most Americans would still find reason to complain. And sure enough, for every move they have made in a new and potentially exciting direction, there is a trait or tendency in which they have persisted, seemingly in a calculated attempt to annoy. So, for example, we have an overdue and for the most part sympathetic presentation of sound art, but also

another superfluous and premature bash at Internet art, still a work in progress by any reasonable standard (and at its least effective in a museum environment). It's hard not to feel a momentary twinge of sympathy for these artists; of course their

careers will be enhanced in the long term, but at the cost of their current output being explained away by vacuous wall texts or forced into superficial juxtapositions.

That said, the overarching concep-

Stan Douglas

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tual structure of the show is at least tol-
erable. Each of the three main floors of
the museum that it occupied was made
into one part of a thematic triad – Beings,
Spaces and Tribes – that was loose
enough to avoid being prescriptive and
even afforded the occasional nugget of
meaning. This biennial was the first to
include architecture (a comprehensive
presentation by The Rural Studio, a radi-
cal training programme based in Hale
County, Alabama, being the outstanding
display), and it looked more at home than
much of the art. Considering the scale of
this year's event, most works certainly
didn't suffer from lack of space, to the
extent that some even felt isolated. At its
worst this resulted in a tendency towards
'installationism' – the gratuitous expan-
sion of a work to fill the available space
(stand up, José Alvarez) – but at its best it
allowed the audience to immerse itself
fully in an artist's work without having to
indulge a curatorial will to experiment
that may or may not add to our apprecia-
tion (score one more for Jim Campbell).

However, stuff enough art into one
space and connections are bound to
occur, the most interesting of which will
generally have little or nothing to do with
the vision of the institution responsible. A
renewed commitment to the handmade
and the lo-fi reminded me, this time
around, of nothing more than Squat Art.
ABC No Rio, a Punk-driven community
centre on the Lower East Side, recently
staged its own biennial. While not con-

sciously intended either to compliment
or to critique, a number of its inclusions
would have fitted in rather well alongside
the Whitney's. The ramshackle aesthetics
of Chris Johanson, Margaret Kilgallen
and Hirsch Perlman plainly have their
roots in untutored practice. Rinder and
Co. have also been boning up on their
underground comics; Chris Ware, creator
of the masterly *Jimmy Corrigan, The
Smartest Kid on Earth* (2001) was a
smart inclusion, even if his genius is best
appreciated in book form (since original
drawings for comics have the same dis-
tracting aura of memorabilia as cells
from cartoons).

It was tough for quieter work to
make itself heard amid such a hubbub of
competing voices, but when it did so it
lingered in the memory. Painter Vija
Celmins and quiltmaker Rosie Lee Tomp-
kins may appear incongruous selections
among so many younger artists, but the
unhurried intensity of their work spoke
volumes. Sculptors Evan Holloway and
Vincent Fecteau are arguably on their
way to a similar achievement, working
subtle magic with unpromising materials
and impure ideas. By contrast, this year's
crop of whizz-bang special effects works,
which included the likes of Robert Laz-
zarini's *Payphone* (2002) – in which the
eponymous street fixture is bent and
stretched in digital space before being
reintroduced into the physical world –
and Tim Hawkinson's *Emoter* (2002) – a
grotesque mechanically animated photo

collage of the artist's face – are mostly
entertaining one-liners.

It is probably just as well that the
selections for the show were made
before 11 September. A mountain of work
has been made in response to the events
of that day, but to assess its quality
remains a problematic task. Conor
McGrady's terse charcoal vignettes of life
in Belfast and Stephen Vitiello's contact

Robert Beavers
Still from the Ground
2001
35mm film stills

microphone recordings of the World
Trade Center creaking in the wind (he
had a studio on the 91st floor) were the
only two hints at impending disaster. As a
whole, the 2002 biennial was mercifully
optimistic – energetic even where it
lacked discipline, and forward-looking
despite the conventional nature of its
greatest triumphs.

Michael Wilson

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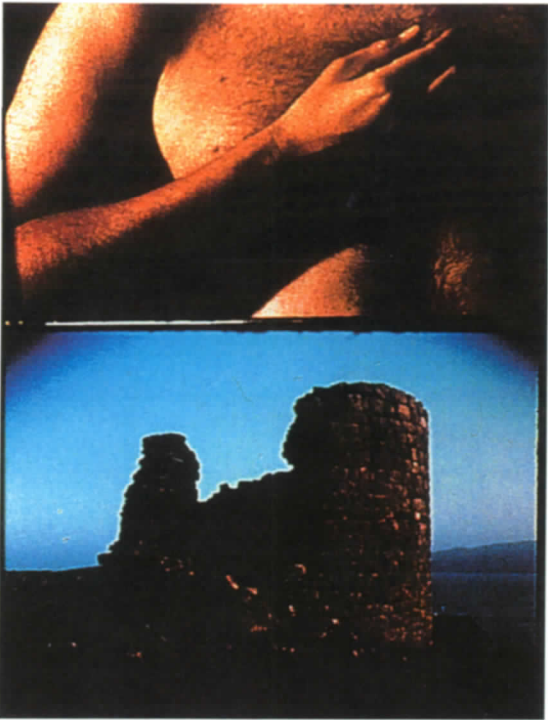r forced into superficial juxta-

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Stan Douglas

Serpentine Gallery, London

As any anthropologist or movie mogul
will tell you, there are only a handful of
stories in the world. The newest narra-
tive will owe something to time-worn
tales and if there's a common thread to
the three films screened at Stan Dou-
glas' Serpentine show, it's that they're
all haunted by older, dustier texts. While
his acclaimed *Der Sandmann* (1995)
draws Sigmund Freud and E. T. A. Hoff-
man into its dandelion-clock rotation,
the ghostly dual projection of *Le Détroit*
(2000) is rooted in 19th-century urban
folk tales. Premiered here, *Journey into
Fear* (2001) sees Douglas swap his pre-
vious works' elegiac elegance for some-
thing more urgent. Although sections of
its dialogue are lifted from Herman

Melville's *The Confidence Man* (1857),
the piece takes its name and premise
from a 1940s gun-running movie,
remade in 1975 as an oil-smeared finan-
cial thriller. There's a lot of water
between Melville's paranoid parable and
the politics of petroleum, between war-
torn Europe and the sunny Vancouver
dockyards Douglas snaps in his accom-
panying photographs. But if there are
only a handful of stories in the world

then, like a bad penny, the one about
greed will always turn up.

Superficially, Douglas' film is pure
Hollywood: a guy, a girl, a dramatic
location and the usual scent of sex and
violence. The guy is Möller, employed to
guard a container ship's precious
freight. His foil is Graham, a pilot
retained to steer the vessel through
stormy waters and ensure its punctual
arrival. Möller and Graham inhabit a 15-

Stan Douglas
Journey into Fear
2001
Film still

minute drama divided into four scenes:
two breathy chase sequences on the
rain-splattered deck and two fractious
face-offs inside Graham's wood-pan-
elled quarters. So far, so shipshape –
until we begin to consider the sound-
track. Douglas input 20 taped slices of
dialogue into a computer, which then
plays them in random clumps over the
scenes shot in Graham's cabin. The
duration of the 625 combinations of the