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(ADVERTISEMENT)

Transition: Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

Jesse Thorn: I'm Jesse Thorn. In a career that has spanned over half a century, Ed Ruscha has created classic paintings, photographs, and a room wallpapered in chocolate.

Do you like chocolate?

Ed Ruscha: I'm not a big chocolate fan, no.

Jesse Thorn: Have a favorite chocolate bar?

Ed Ruscha: What did I used to like? Baby Ruth.

Jesse Thorn: A classic.

Ed Ruscha: I don't think they make those anymore, do they?

Jesse Thorn: I think they do. Yeah, I think you can go get a Baby Ruth bar for sure.

Ed Ruscha: Really? Oh, okay.

Jesse Thorn: From MaximumFun.org and NPR, it's *Bullseye*!

Music: "Huddle Formation" from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

Jesse Thorn: This week, Ed Ruscha. I'll talk with the groundbreaking artist more about candy, about his time growing up in the Midwest, and the brand-new retrospective on his work that just opened at LACMA. It's all coming up on *Bullseye*.

It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. So, I want to talk about a painting. It is a painting that is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. It's by my guest, Ed Ruscha. Ruscha is an artist out here in Los Angeles. He was born originally in Omaha, raised in Oklahoma, the son of an insurance auditor. Late last year, he turned 86 years old, but if you saw a picture of Ruscha, you might think he was 20 years younger. Anyway. This painting. It's big. It's not like so big you couldn't fit it through a door, but it would be inconvenient to fit it through a door. Ruscha used only two colors, blue and yellow—sort of like the colors on a can of Spam. This painting is square, and the first thing you notice is a

word. “Oof.” O-O-F. Oof! Like what you say when the mechanic tells you what it's gonna cost to get that brake job you've been putting off. The edges around the letters are clean, taped off. It doesn't look handwritten, but it doesn't look machine printed either. If you look a little closer into the blue and yellow, you'll see the brush strokes. The same way maybe a good commercial sign painter might paint it.

Now again, this is in MoMA's collection—maybe the most famous museum in the United States. So, imagine seeing that in a big, fancy museum gallery next to whatever—Dali, Matisse, Van Gogh. Then, just there on the wall across the way, “oof”. Maybe a curator would call it playful. They'd file it broadly under pop art with, you know, Warhol and Keith Haring and stuff. But there's something different in that oof, something difficult to place. It is surprising, a little disorienting. It's also funny, but not jokey. “Oof” is one of Ruscha's classics. It's not the only kind of work he does, of course. He has made paintings of gas stations and restaurants, the 20th Century Fox logo, and—very famously—once the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, on fire.

And here's something interesting: that very same museum, LACMA, just launched a retrospective of Ruscha's work. *Now/Then* covers a career that has spanned over 50 years. There are his paintings, installations, photographs. It's an extraordinary exhibit covering an extraordinary body of work. I'm so grateful to be talking with a genuine legend, Ed Ruscha. Let's get into it.

Transition: Bright, upbeat synth with a steady beat.

Jesse Thorn: Ed Ruscha, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show. Thank you for taking the time.

Ed Ruscha: Thank you.

Jesse Thorn: My dad grew up in Kansas City, Missouri. But—and his folks were from Kansas, but when they talked to me about who they were and where they were from, they all of them identified themselves as Okies. And you grew up in Oklahoma City, mostly. What did you think of Oklahoma City, and what did it mean to you to be from there when you were a kid?

Ed Ruscha: I'd say a great place to be from, not a place that you want to live the rest of your life. Because there's very little room for poets or artists. And so, I had a great time growing up there and knew that I had to get out of there and go to an art school. And I had a choice.

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I could go to New York, Kansas City, Chicago, LA. And so, I decided on LA, because I had visited there before. And so, I got out of there like some character out of a Steinbeck novel.

Jesse Thorn: Did you think you were going to be a fine artist?

Ed Ruscha: Well, I thought maybe I wanted to paint signs and make some kind of advertising art or do something like that. And so, I learned how to paint signs with showcard lettering, and then I just thought the next logical step would be an art school. So, I ended up at a place called Chouinard Art Institute.

Jesse Thorn: Did you like LA as a place when you moved here?

Ed Ruscha: Yeah, I did. And I could see coming here, it was an accelerated culture. And there was just a vibrancy to it that seemed to have a comfort level to it that I liked. I mean, everybody was trying to, you know, economize and live. All my students that I went to school with. And people had a tough time, but it finally turned out alright.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, I feel like—as a native Northern Californian—when I moved to Southern California, I noticed an element of like Western-ness in LA that I didn't recognize elsewhere. And now, you're—you know, if you're from Oklahoma, you're a little more Western, or at least Midwestern, than I was growing up in the city in San Francisco. But like, is that something that you felt when you got down here? Compared to like you could have moved to Chicago or New York, that are not like that at all?

Ed Ruscha: No. And I don't know, the vegetation out here has got some extra element to it that I was attracted to. And whenever I think about it, I love San Francisco, and I think San Francisco is the most beautiful city in the world. Because it's got a kind of mystery that I was exposed to as a kid traveling with my folks and going to San Francisco and Chinatown and all that. And I was just wowed by it. And I never chose to live there, and I don't think I could live there, but every time I go there, I get good feelings. But I should say something about LA, shouldn't I? (*Chuckles.*)

Jesse Thorn: I mean, LA is like—(*laughs*) LA has this weird quality of—its most famous vegetation is these palm trees that are like a weird made-up Mediterranean, you know what I mean? Like, an imagined Mediterranean planted in a Southern California Desert. Like, it has a weird—like LA has a—its mystery is very different from the mystery of San Francisco.

Ed Ruscha: Oh yeah, yeah. It is. And it's a quicker moving—and I mean they're both dynamic cities, but LA 's got a little bit of the desert feel to it. I mean, it is a desert. And it's dry down here. I mean, we do have a lot of water via many points of history. But yeah, so LA has got—you know, I love it and I hate it. And I go back and forth between the two, and I'm back loving it again!

(*They laugh.*)

Jesse Thorn: Well, what did you hate about it when you were hating it?

Ed Ruscha: Oh, maybe bad times, or—and then things just didn't roll right. I don't know. But I choose to live here, and it's good.

Jesse Thorn: What do you love about LA when you love it?

Ed Ruscha: I've got an agenda every day, and I don't like interruptions to the agenda. It's kind of mysterious. That makes me think of Popeye, who says, "I don't like mysqueries." He spells mystery with a K. "I don't like mysqueries, on account of I can't understand them."

(They laugh.)

So, I've got to have a little mystery happening at the same time that I do anything else.

Jesse Thorn: This is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Ed Ruscha. The painter, photographer, and installation artist has a retrospective of his work on display now at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

What's the first time that you remember painting words?

Ed Ruscha: Oh, let's see. First time was probably 16/17 years old, and they were like hamburger signs, things like that, with French fries. And—

Jesse Thorn: Were you getting money for those?

Ed Ruscha: Oh, yeah.

[00:10:00]

Yeah, you know, you get three or four dollars for something like that, and that was easy money. *(Chuckles.)*

Jesse Thorn: People who are good at those can knock them out. It is incredible to watch somebody that's really good at that hand painting. What about on a canvas?

Ed Ruscha: Well, it kind of graduated to that, and I just said to myself I guess, well, why not just adapt that to an open field of thought, where you take a rectangular canvas—I got into canvas, alright. And that tied me to the history of art. And I thought, well, why not just develop things that I want to do in the form of words? And I was influenced by comics and cartoons and things. And so, monosyllabic utterings were throughout the history of comics, and so "pow" and "oof" and things like that. "Ace"—I don't know why ace fit in there. "Boss", those kind of guttural words. I ended up, well, why not make pictures out of those?

Jesse Thorn: I mean, I was just looking at the oof painting. I mean, there's a—in the LACMA store, there's a sweatshirt of your oof painting, which is pretty great. And it is those three letters in just an incredibly vivid color scheme, big block capital letters. When you like showed that to people, did they think it was silly?

Ed Ruscha: No, they—I'm sure they wondered "What's this guy about?" And maybe I was saying the same thing. What am I about? But I said I'm sure having fun doing this, you know, painting these big things here—with rounded and hard-edged letters. And it just became a way to approach whatever I thought art was about. And, you know, uh-uh. That's it.

Jesse Thorn: You have a lot of works that are—especially your photography, is square, casual. It feels like a recording as much as it does a composition, you know. Like, you famously—the Getty recently acquired this huge project and has been archiving this huge project that you've been doing of photographing storefronts in Los Angeles or buildings in Los Angeles—not just storefronts—across the length of Sunset Boulevard, for example, over many years. But then you also, when you were painting buildings—especially in those days, and sometimes other stuff—there's a really intense three-dimensionality that—you know, things that burst from one corner outward, that almost reminds me of—you know, it almost reminds me of like a particularly intense film composition. Like, it reminds me of motion and time as much as something being locked down.

Tell me about how you ended up painting things like gas stations or the 20th Century Fox logo or whatever in this way that feels like it is bursting from a far corner up towards you or up outwards.

Ed Ruscha: You know, I think that all these things are tied in together. And my initial response—well, I've watched movies when I was a kid, and one particular thing that I always remember—and they had this technique in a lot of movies, where the subjects are traveling on a train, and the train is out of view, except it's in the far-right side of the screen. And then suddenly, bang, the train is like up in the—wow, it's a zoom effect. And that's been used forever, countless times in movies. And I always loved that. And so, there's my painting right there. And I was just aping the 20th Century Fox thing; we'd see that in movies all the time, and really what that was is some kind of zoom effect that was happening from the lower right-hand side up to the upper left-hand side. And so, gas stations, same thing. My experience of driving across country and seeing all these gas stations—

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—and having particularly different feelings about every one of them, contributed to this. And so, that zoom effect began to seep into my thinking about gas stations. And so, architecture and all that thing, it's just—it's like a combined fantasy. (*Chuckles.*)

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. I mean, it's interesting. 'Cause like, especially with gas stations, they are very physically static, right? They're not going anywhere, but you're going somewhere if you're looking at a gas station, usually, or stopping at a gas station. Right? And I get the feeling from looking at your work that you like putting things in between those two states. Like, finding ambiguities between, you know—like I said, instead of putting those action words in action shapes, you put those action words in static shapes, and you put static gas stations in explosive perspectives. You know what I mean?

Ed Ruscha: Yeah, well, I mean every work of art—the way I look at it is, all artists want to open the gates to heaven, you know, with their work. And I just feel like every work of art is—no matter what you do, it's a theatrical construction. And so, every time I'm working on a separate project, I can't unify everything and make my history be easily understood. And there's—you know, I'm just ambling along, tripping on the way, and observing what I do. And then I'm affected by things behind me, ahead of me. And so, there doesn't seem to be a lot of logic to the whole thing, but the main thing is the activity of it is what I really love. And so, that's it.

Jesse Thorn: Did you have to defend your work being amusing? Like, the fact that often my reaction to one of your paintings is a smile, and that isn't—you know, that isn't always the top valued reaction in a museum or an art gallery, you know what I mean?

Ed Ruscha: Uhhh, well, I feel like I'm not—when I make a work of art, I mean, I don't need a belly laugh response. And that's—not at all. And so, each one has its own temperature and takes its own way to travel to the end. I mean, (*stammers*) that's my way of just making things official.

Jesse Thorn: We're going to take a quick break. When we return, Ed Ruscha made a lot of paintings of buildings on fire, including one of a conflagration at the biggest art museum in Los Angeles. Why did he do that? Well, we'll get into it. It's *Bullseye* for MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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Promo:

Christian Dueñas: Singer Miki Matsubara cut “Stay With Me”, a love song that hit big in her home country of Japan.

Music: “Stay With Me” by Miki Matsubara.

Stay with me...

(*Music continues under the dialogue.*)

Christian: The song has almost half a billion plays on streaming apps.

Yosuke Kitazawa: But Miki Matsubara didn't get to enjoy all that renewed interest. She died in 2004. In fact, she had burned all of her music. And she literally asked everyone she knew to forget her.

Christian: I'm Christian Dueñas.

Yosuke: I'm Yosuke Kitazawa.

Christian: On our new podcast, *Primer*, we celebrate unforgettable music from outside the English-speaking world, starting with Japanese city pop.

Yosuke: We'll cover Miki's work and others in conversation with Devendra Banhart, UMI, DāM FunK, and more.

Christian: Get *Primer* on MaximumFun.org, or wherever you get your podcasts.

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Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*, I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Ed Ruscha. For almost 65 years, he has been an artist—a painter, a photographer, an installation designer, a printmaker. His work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Whitney, the Art Institute of Chicago, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, or LACMA. LACMA just opened a retrospective of Ruscha's work. It's called *Now/Then*. Let's get back into our conversation.

How do you feel about beautiful landscapes and beautiful pictures of landscapes?

Ed Ruscha: Some people can do them pretty well. They've been done very well throughout history. And studying from history landscapes are—I think it also has a chair at the table. *(Laughs.)*

Jesse Thorn: How do you feel about it for you? I mean, landscapes are often a part of what you do. They tend to be pretty simple, but often the context of your words is some sort of landscape, sometimes a built-environment type landscape. But you know, you've made a lot of paintings of mountains, you know?

Ed Ruscha: Yeah, and you know, it's kind of a—it boils down to almost like a left to right kind of thing, like a sweeping back and forth. Take a broom, put some paint on it, go back and forth, left to right. And I think left to right, there you go. I mean, there's a platform for words, because words are on this left to right business. And so, maybe I've been trapped by the mysteries of landscape painting.

Jesse Thorn: Do you look at the horizon line in Los Angeles? Either up at the mountains or out towards the water?

Ed Ruscha: Well, whenever you can see, it can be magical, or it could be dull at the same time. *(Chuckles.)*

Jesse Thorn: You could say that of Los Angeles. *(Laughs.)* You know how in Los Angeles, it's famous wide streets with palm trees on either side, right? And it makes a very specific effect, because it seems like it goes on for—it's like railroad tracks, but that goes up into the sky because of the palm trees. And that is that same way. It is both very magical and kind of boring at the same time. *(Laughs.)*

Ed Ruscha: Yeah, yeah. But it's all part of the picture of art. And you know, it's a hot world for me.

Jesse Thorn: What do you enjoy painting the most?

Ed Ruscha: Well, when you say painting, I mean, I might make a bronze, or I might make a work on paper, and I might make a scribble that I think is pretty good, or I might make a painting. So, it's varied activity. And—

Jesse Thorn: I'm kind of thinking particularly of—you know, I guess I could include paper as well as canvas here, but I'm thinking about like what do you enjoy looking at an empty space and then filling it with?

Ed Ruscha: Well, you take nothing and make something. You have to start somewhere. And so, you have to commit yourself to be on the starting line and go from there. I'm not going to retire. I'm getting up there. But I'm not going to retire, because there's no chance for advancement.

Jesse Thorn: Do you think that being older affects your perception of and work that's about time?

Ed Ruscha: No, no. I mean, I have a pretty good idea about the way I view time and the way I stack these decades up to myself and go back and examine it all. But I've got a catalog of work that I look back on and it's—when I do look back on it, it's like being on a roller coaster in reverse.

Jesse Thorn: In what way?

Ed Ruscha: Well, it's just—you know, it's like an avalanche when I look back on it. And I wonder, where does it all begin to tell its story? Maybe I need another lifetime to make that story correct.

Jesse Thorn: Did you have to think about that when LACMA was preparing a giant retrospective? Did they ask you?

Ed Ruscha: Yeah, yeah, but that was just a natural thing. And I had been on this for a while, so.

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Yeah, it's a different kind of thing to make an exhibit out of the things that you make art of. You know, making an exhibit is another job, after you've made these works that also are compartmentalized into their own time frame. And there you go. There's more mystery.

Jesse Thorn: This is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest, Ed Ruscha, is a painter and printmaker. Much of his life's work is on display now at a retrospective inside the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Were there things that, when this retrospective was being prepared, you hadn't thought about in a long time that you were surprised by in some way?

Ed Ruscha: The only things that seemed incongruous or problematic were putting things together, in like looking at chunks of decades and what I was up to at that particular time and where we are from there and then moving from that to another thing. It's puzzling, but it's also part of my business, my interests. And so, making exhibits is really another thing to consider after you've made these works.

Jesse Thorn: You made some famous works that involved buildings on fire. When I look at them, on the one hand, I see, you know, the idea of burning things down to some extent. On the other hand, I find myself looking at them and thinking like, "But maybe just flames look cool? Like, maybe I just like the way flames look."

Ed Ruscha: Okay, now we're talking! Okay.

(They laugh.)

Jesse Thorn: 'Cause I'm a person, and you know, I want to look into a fire cause it keeps me warm and keeps me from dying or whatever. It's built into my...

Ed Ruscha: Yeah. And also fire has an activity to it that also has a zoom effect. Often I've put the fire coming out of a zoom effect. And so, you know, I've painted a picture where I want the left side of the painting to be angry and on fire, and the right-hand side of the picture, I want to put you asleep.

Jesse Thorn: It does feel like those fires have a—I was about to say an oddly hypnotic quality. Actual fire has a not-oddly hypnotic quality, but it's a different hypnotic quality that I'm talking about in the pictures. *(Laughs.)* There's like a weird quiet to the fire in the pictures where you have things on fire.

(Ed agrees.)

Did you choose that?

Ed Ruscha: Well, I've dawdled with this concept of various small fires in a lot of my things. I made a book called *Various Small Fires*, and it's an adventure in poetry for me. And so—and I painted fire where it's almost like a secondary element, but we know that fire can consume an entire thought. And I mean, fires burn things down for good and for evil. So, but the fires that I've used mainly have been little incidental use, incidental applications, where there'll be almost like a coda in music. You've got this pretty scene here, and then finally over here, leaving the picture almost, is this burning fire. And it's just—it sure is graphic, and it's got a sort of a potent message to it that I'm just illustrating.

Jesse Thorn: Do you keep a notebook? Do you write down words?

Ed Ruscha: Yeah, I do. I keep a journal—not a regular one, not a diary per se, but I do a lot of chicken scratches on paper. You know, where things come to me, and I hear something that I think is interesting and valuable, or maybe I can use that, maybe I—eh, I don't want to use that, you know. It's just—but I do a lot of that.

Jesse Thorn: Do you go to work every day?

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Ed Ruscha: Oh yeah, I do. Almost every day. I don't always accomplish something every day, and I don't have an agenda where I have to get something done by 3:45 tomorrow afternoon.

Jesse Thorn: Where do you go? What is going to work?

Ed Ruscha: Well, I go to my studio, and then I sometimes kick the side of a cabinet, just for the fun of it and see what overtakes me. And I've got a scrabble of—you know, like it's a—it's like bolts in a blender. If you can imagine what that sounds like, that's what it is. It's just like a lot of dissonant sounds and dissonant ideas that are scrambling and screaming for attention. And they fall into place, and I guess I feel like maybe it's time to grab some of these things and make something out of it.

Jesse Thorn: It's cool in a blender when the chunks turn into that vortex.

Ed Ruscha: Or they turn into a gumbo!

(They laugh.)

And we all like gumbo, right?

Jesse Thorn: Eh, I'm not a big seafood guy, to be honest with you. I like the sausage, but I'm just going to be frank. Ed, I'm not going to lie to you about gumbo. I'm not here to lie to you about gumbo.

(Ed chuckles.)

It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with artist Ed Ruscha.

When you came to LA, you came with a pal from Oklahoma City who became a legendary comedy writer, among other things. Mason Williams. He was head writer on the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* and wrote on *Saturday Night Live* and also was a musician who made all kinds of music, but also won a bunch of Grammys for classical gas. And I wonder if you guys—did you guys know each other as kid-kids?

Ed Ruscha: Oh yeah. Yeah, I knew him from third grade on. We were neighbors and had very similar thinking patterns and drove together out from Oklahoma City to LA. Rented this room in a boarding house on Sunset Place, Lafayette Park, and then I attended that school there. But one thing that Mason said is—and we kind of had a pact, a gentleman's pact, where there'd be something, someplace you know that you will never go in your lifetime. And I said, "I think my—for me, that's going to be Disneyland. I don't think I'll ever go to

Disneyland.” Not that I don't want to go, it's just that it didn't work out for me. And I had kids too, and I never went to Disneyland with him. They would go.

And then one day I get a call from Mason who said, “Look, New York City is the place I'll never go in my life.”

I said, “Okay, well good. That's a pact between us.”

And so, one day, out of the blue, I get a call from Mason. He says, “You know what? Remember that pact we had where I said I'd never go to New York City?” And I said yeah. He said, “Well, I'm sorry, but I'm here.”

And I said, “Well, okay. Well, what's it look like?”

And he said, “Well, I'm looking out on the tail of a big airplane, and I'm in a motel type place.”

I said, “Mason, you're a John F. Kennedy Airport in the hotel.”

(Jesse laughs.)

So, he never really made it to New York City. Later on he did, because he went on to, with his job of writing for *Saturday Night Live*. And, anyway, that's just a little story to add to it.

Jesse Thorn: Was it wild when he became a show business success? Like, a classic show business success in the just straight-ahead, regular type of show business success?

Ed Ruscha: Well, he was maybe blindsided by it, and he was on this creative rollercoaster that he was really milking and loving it at the same time. And so, he was having a good time and at the same time, managing to pull up all this stuff and create things. So, he had it together.

Jesse Thorn: You created this typeface for some of your pictures of words, called Boy Scout Utility Modern, and I wondered if you had been a Boy Scout.

[00:35:00]

Ed Ruscha: Briefly, I was a Boy Scout. I didn't get much beyond Tenderfoot, but—and I was a Cub Scout too. So, I didn't go to—I was not an Eagle Scout, and I didn't quite go along that far. But yeah, no, I mean, there's no real connected definition for Boy Scout Utility Modern. I mean, that was just my thought of making up a typeface that had no curves to it. Everything was a little choppy and hard-edge and rectangular. And so, I just—you know, that seemed to be a logical font for me.

Jesse Thorn: Do you have any Boy Scout skills?

Ed Ruscha: (*Chuckles.*) Uuuh, hiking? I don't do much, uh, whittling.

Jesse Thorn: I was about to ask you about whittling. Whittling was the word that was in my head.

Ed Ruscha: (*Laughs.*) See, we're talking the same language.

Jesse Thorn: What about like field dressing a wound? Starting a campfire?

Ed Ruscha: Well, I suppose I could do some of those things. And I don't do them to remind myself that I can, but given the proper disadvantage, I guess I could do something like that. But I don't—I'm not much of a camper these days, but I could rise to the occasion.

Jesse Thorn: We'll wrap up with Ed Ruscha soon. Ruscha is 86 years old. He has made art for over 60 years and is nowhere near ready to wind that down. He, in fact, wants to make new stuff in new media. Lots to choose from, though there is (*chuckles*) one form he definitely doesn't want to pursue: the violin! What does Ed Ruscha have against the violin?! The answer, after the break. It might surprise you! It's *Bullseye* for MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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Promo:

Music: Cheerful music.

Emily Fleming: I'm Emily Fleming.

Jordan Morris: And I'm Jordan Morris.

Emily: We're real comedy writers.

Jordan: And real friends!

Emily: And real cheapskates.

Jordan: We say, why subscribe to expensive streaming services when you can stream tons of insane movies online for free?

Emily: Yeah, as long as you're fine with 25 randomly inserted, super loud car insurance commercials.

Jordan: On our podcast, *Free With Ads*, we review streaming movies from the darkest corner of the internet's bargain bin.

Emily: From the good to the weird to the “Holy! Look at VanDamme's big ol’ butt.”

Jordan: *Free With Ads!* A free podcast about free movies that's worth the price of admission.

Emily: Every Tuesday on MaximumFun.org or your favorite pod spot.

Music: *Free with ads!*

(Music ends.)

Bullseye: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is artist Ed Ruscha. His work has been shown in museums all over the world. He was a former Guggenheim Fellow. He is—look, if you search the internet for great Los Angeles artists, he's probably first. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art on Wilshire Boulevard in LA is displaying a huge collection of his work in an exhibit called *Now/Then*. You can see it now. Let's get back into the rest of our conversation.

Los Angeles changes so much, because it's so wide open, because there's room for it to change, maybe. And because there's not that much that's made by humans more than a hundred years ago or so.

[00:40:00]

And you've done these projects where you photograph whole roads in Los Angeles, with mechanized cameras—you and your brother—over many years. So, you'll shoot it all at once, all the way down the road, and then shoot it again years later, and again years after that, and again years after that. Are you more interested in fixing it, like stabilizing it, or are you more interested in seeing the way it moves?

Ed Ruscha: Well, seeing the way it moves or doesn't move, that's what I guess it's all about. And I started driving up and down Sunset Boulevard when I first came here, saying, “Well, what's so special about this street?” But it's a mythical kind of street. And so, I thought the storefront plane of this street has got something speaking to me, and I think it needs to be captured. Why not do it with a camera? And then if I'm going to do that, why not do it in a regular fashion, where this whole thing is like a ribbon? You know, this Sunset Boulevard is like a ribbon, and I'm just going to capture the north and south side of it. And then from there on, I thought, ohhh, I got to do something else. I'll do a response to that. And the response is to do the same thing again. And then I'm having an amusing time by saying, “Look at the difference, how that's changed, or how that has not changed.” So, I'm in this rolling habit of photographing streets.

Jesse Thorn: When you're doing a new set of them, have you looked at the last set or sets before?

Ed Ruscha: Oh yeah, I do that all the time. And I mean, that's where the music starts. I mean, I do like that. And I've tended to concentrate on inner-city—you know, Los Angeles inner city. And I mean, I don't go down as far as Watts, but I have—I mean, I've done all of Figueroa Street, I've done all of Wilshire Boulevard, Hollywood Boulevard. I mean, and, Melrose, Beverly, you know, and to downtown. And I've captured a lot of it, and it's got an unstated message for me that I like to keep working at.

Jesse Thorn: It's sort of the opposite of that call and response or shouted part of the Randy Newman song, “I Love LA”. Like, Randy Newman just picked the most banal major streets in all of Los Angeles to list and yell out. (*Chuckles.*) I talked to him about that one time. He's like, “Yeah, well, you don't hear much about Santa Monica Boulevard.” He like starts listing all the streets.

I'm like, “Yeah, I guess it never occurred to me that song is not about Sunset Boulevard. It's about all the sort of B- streets in LA.” (*Laughs.*) You pick the stars.

(*Ed chuckles.*)

You're listening to *Bullseye*. I am Jesse Thorn. My guest is artist Ed Ruscha.

You made a piece about 50 years ago now that has been put back up for or recreated for the retrospective at LACMA, called “Chocolate Room”. Can you describe What “Chocolate Room” was when you first made it 57 years ago?

Ed Ruscha: Ummm, so—well, chocolate is just a substance that you can put down on paper or canvas or anything. And it begins—

Jesse Thorn: And you were like putting a lot of different stuff on canvas at the time.

Ed Ruscha: Yeah, yeah. I was using unconventional materials. I got sort of fatigued by oil on canvas, or acrylic on canvas. And I thought I've gotta do something else here. So, I started using axle grease and caviar and things like that, that would make—

Jesse Thorn: (*Laughs.*) That's a phrase that doesn't come up much on this show or elsewhere, “axle grease and caviar and things like that”.

Ed Ruscha: But so, I was making some prints in London at a workshop there. And then I was invited to go to the Venice Biennale and do something, you know, with a printer there. And I thought, well, here I'm doing these prints in London made of chocolate.

[00:45:00]

And so, I'm just—I'm going to extend that to this room that they have given me in the Venice Biennale. And so, I mean it was just a logical thing that I would make—it's almost like either laying bricks or putting shingles up and, very simply, printing out these sheets, large sheets of paper with chocolate on them and then hanging them like shingles. And then being in a room

with it, that contains this built-in aroma. I think that was it. And I was—I felt like I—you know, it was something that was a little step aside from things that I had always done before. So, it was a different kind of venture for me, and it became an established work of art for me, and we've recreated it in several different places. I mean, maybe eight or nine or ten different places, and it's always a little different. Sometimes there are two—an entrance and an exit. And if there's an entrance and an exit, the aroma kind of gets swept through, and you don't have the aroma much. But now I'm realizing that a single entrance where you come in and you go out the same entrance contains that aroma.

Jesse Thorn: Does it get gross?

Ed Ruscha: No, not at all. No.

Jesse Thorn: It doesn't go rancid? Because there's a lot of fat in chocolate, right?

Ed Ruscha: Yeah, but we've worked out a good recipe. And—

Jesse Thorn: What was the process?

Ed Ruscha: Well, I mean, I just like the idea of being surrounded by this dark confection that doesn't necessarily have to have any great political or emotional message or reality. But it's just—you know, it's something that—maybe architecture fits in there somewhere, I'm not really sure. But every time I do it, it's a little different.

Jesse Thorn: Do you like chocolate?

Ed Ruscha: I'm not a big chocolate fan, no.

Jesse Thorn: Have a favorite chocolate bar?

Ed Ruscha: Uh, what did I used to like? Baby Ruth's.

Jesse Thorn: That's a classic.

Ed Ruscha: I don't think they make those anymore, do they?

Jesse Thorn: I think they do. Yeah, I think you can go get a Baby Ruth bar for sure.

Ed Ruscha: Really? Oh, okay.

Jesse Thorn: Peanuts and caramel, isn't it, Baby Ruth? And nougat, maybe?

Ed Ruscha: I don't hang around confection stores. I—

(They laugh.)

Anyway, I like that, you know, you'd be inside this room—maybe the size of this room here; this is a typical kind of size of room that we would use. And it would have a—

Jesse Thorn: And we're in a studio at NPR West that's a pretty good size. It's a sort of—it would be a—

Ed Ruscha: 20x20 or something like that. And you would have some kind of—you'd be surrounded by some kind of silent hum. I like that too. And that's, you know, not something that you have to build on and make. It doesn't have to go off into any other direction. I mean, it's just—it's a thing in itself.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Los Angeles artist Ed Ruscha.

Do you like the backwards rollercoaster feeling of retrospecting? That's a verb, right? Retrospecting? Maybe.

Ed Ruscha: Could do, I guess. You know, rearview mirror—I mean, I have to admit, when you make a retrospective show of all the past works, it's like looking in the rearview mirror. And you want to evaluate things, but then you also, “Hey, I'm busy too. I gotta do something else. You know, I don't want to dwell too much on this.”

Jesse Thorn: Does it remind you that you have, you know, 65 years behind you and 5 or 10 or 20 or 25 ahead of you?

(Ed laughs.)

I'm giving you 25.

Ed Ruscha: Thanks! Yeah, I'll take it.

Jesse Thorn: Does it remind you of that when you look back?

Ed Ruscha: Yeah, it's an accomplishment that I've just kept at for a long time and—but there are other things to do.

Jesse Thorn: What do you think you still are going to do? What's the other things?

Ed Ruscha: I don't have any master plan, and I don't know where it'll take me. And I'm happy with that state of being.

Jesse Thorn: Is there a new skill you'd like to learn?

[00:50:00]

Ed Ruscha: The violin is not for me, and musical instruments. I used to play a trumpet. I could do bugle calls; I can still do that but—and I'd rather listen to music than make it. I mean, there are too many great musicians out there that are worth listening to and worth learning from than getting involved in it myself.

Jesse Thorn: What are you doing the rest of the day?

Ed Ruscha: Probably a lot of thumb twiddling. (*Laughs.*)

Jesse Thorn: Well, I wish you good luck in that. I'm sure you'll do a great job. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me and come out here. I really appreciate it.

Ed Ruscha: Okay. Thank you.

Jesse Thorn: Ed Ruscha. *Now/Then*, his career retrospective, is on display now at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It is a breathtaking collection from an extraordinary artist. See it now, don't see it then.

Transition: Cheerful, upbeat synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created out of the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. Here in my shed where I am sitting right now, I had a little bit of a storage crisis. But you know why that crisis passed? Because I remembered I had \$148 in store credit at let's just call it a popular store for containers. Took care of business over there. And hey, listen, at our office we have been getting ready to launch this brand-new show that, by the time you hear this, will be out. It is called *Primer*. It's a music show that was created by my colleague Christian Dueñas, with a lot of help from the senior producer of this show, Kevin Ferguson.

Primer is basically—well, each season of the show is a guide to a certain type of music, a genre of music from somewhere in the world, a genre that you might not be familiar with. And the first season is about city pop, which is a very particular kind of—gosh, light pop music that became very popular in Japan in the '70s and '80s. Sort of jazz inflected—I don't know, maybe a little Steely Dan-y or—it's a little hard to describe, but you know what? There's a whole podcast about it. *Primer* is what it's called. It is so cool. We got everybody from Devendra Banhart to DāM FunK to talk about city pop. Along with Yosuke Kitazawa, who is Christian's cohost on the show and is an expert in city pop. It's a really amazing show. We're so proud of it. I hope you will give it a listen and learn something and enjoy some awesome music. Again, it's called *Primer*. Anyway.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers, Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun, Daniel Huecias. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our thanks to the folks over at NPR West for hosting us as we recorded our interview with Ed Ruscha this week. Nice to get out to Culver City. Thank you also to them for letting me and Richard and Kevin use your break room to eat fried chicken. Very good fried chicken. Had a great time. Ran into Tonya Moseley from *Fresh Air*. A lot of fun. Our interstitial music is by DJW, also known as Dan

Wally. Our theme song is called “Huddle Formation”, written and recorded by The Go! Team. Thanks to them. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries. *Bullseye* is on Instagram with pictures from behind the scenes and videos and more [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#). You can also find me on Instagram, [@JesseThornVeryFamous](#). We are also on Twitter and YouTube and Facebook, so go like us and follow us in all those places, and you’ll make sure to not miss out on any new episodes. Okay, I guess that’s about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](#) and is distributed by NPR.

(Music fades out.)

(ADVERTISEMENT)

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