“Standard Station” (1966), a screenprint from the exhibit “Ed Ruscha: Standard” at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University.

WALTHAM — A dry, hot breeze seems to waft through the gallery at Brandeis University’s Rose Art Museum housing “Ed Ruscha: Standard,” and it’s not just the artist’s trademark Southern California scenes that place us in desert conditions. Ruscha has an arid sensibility – deadpan and inquisitive, crisp, and coolheaded.

An Omaha boy (born in 1937) who went west to study art, Ruscha came up in the fizzy Pop Art years of the 1960s. The culture of Southern California propels his art: cars, billboards, film, and the cartography of Los Angeles.

The show comes to wintry New England, which has never seen the likes of a Ruscha museum exhibit before, from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It wasn’t
intended to travel, but the Rose’s director, Christopher Bedford, used to work at the Los Angeles museum, and greased the wheels to get it here. Ruscha fits well at the Rose, with its strong postwar collection. A few of the works on view come from the Rose’s coffers.

The show’s opening gambit, the 1966 screenprint “Standard Station,” features an iconic Ruscha image of a gas station that reprises throughout the show in a variety of colors. The artist has referred to the building’s “zoom architecture” — it’s built to catch your eye as you drive by. The station and its bold, red-and-white sign thrust diagonally across the picture plane under a smoggy, blue-orange sky. The juice that runs America sits waiting in red pumps in the foreground.

Ruscha loves words. He has compared them with landscapes in their horizontality. His words waver between text and thing. “Standard” reads like a banner carried into battle, strong and brave. Then, of course, it refers to John D. Rockefeller’s oil company dissolved by an antitrust ruling in 1911. It also denotes a marker of quality. Taken together, the meanings flood this image with hope, pride, and irony. This body of work, to which Ruscha continues to return, comments on our society, with the gas station as America’s standard-bearer.

As the meanings pile up, they grow nuanced. The artist loves puns and double-entendres. The large painting “Sin-Without” shorthands Jesus’s admonition: “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.” Then, “sin” is the Spanish word for without.

Ruscha emblazons the word in different-sized white letters across an operatic sky, dark with clouds and shot with sunbeams, evoking a fickle deity who could strike a sinner down or

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**ED RUSCHA: STANDARD**

Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University,
415 South St., Waltham 781-736-3434.
http://www.brandeis.edu/rose

Closing date: June 9.

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*Ed Ruscha is a wily experimenter anda technique whiz, off the canvas as well as on. He draws with gunpowder, as in ‘L.A.,’ depicting waffly sheets of paper folded into letters on a mostly gray ground.*
shower the miscreant with mercy. Or perhaps, if sin here means without, then there is no God at all.

The painting looks cinematic, like a movie’s title sequence. Ruscha plies film and graphic design strategies to imbue even small images with monumentality. Look at the screenprint “Hollywood,” another of Ruscha’s go-to works. He’s moved the iconic sign from its actual perch nestled along the side of Mount Lee to the peak’s rim, and dramatically angled the perspective so that the word appears to shoot out of nowhere toward us, sunny gold against the simmering glow of an orange sky.

I wish there were more paintings on view; there are only eight among the more than 60 works in the show. The canvases are grand, spare, and imposing. “Blue Collar Tech-Chem,” made in 1992, and, painted more than a decade later, “The Old Tech-Chem Building,” trace the fate of a low, boxy industrial building, stirring a bizarre nostalgia for an especially ugly vernacular architecture, or the way of life, and the economic means, it signifies.

In the first, the concrete structure squats under a smoky black sky, with the mildly fathomable words “Tech-Chem” in block letters across its face. In the second, under a smudgy, unbreatheable red sky mottled with black, “Tech-Chem” has been rubbed out, and the even less fathomable words “Fat Boy” run across the building’s other side.

The artist often works in black and white, but when he uses colors, he doesn’t hold back — they’re saturated, giddy yet deliberate. In the bewitchingly teal monochrome painting “The Future,” those tiny words strive for significance beneath a vast sky drawn in luxuriant horizontal strokes.

Ruscha’s a wily experimenter and a technique whiz, off the canvas as well as on. He draws with gunpowder, as in “L.A.,” depicting waffly sheets of paper folded into letters on a mostly gray ground. He’s been known to use other odd materials, such as blood, bleach, and wine, although this show doesn’t go down that road.

It makes passing reference to his obsession with books (not a surprise, given that he’s a word jockey) with a splendid 2009 edition of Jack Kerouac’s “On the Road,” which
Ruscha illustrated with his own photos and found ones. The pictures don’t relate directly to the content. Rather, like his multilayered text pieces, they open fresh vents of meaning.

For all the artist’s wit and wordplay, landscape provides the show’s anchor. One series of wordless etchings are, like many of the works here, aggressively horizontal. In “Three Daughters,” the women, each no more than an inch tall, stand in silhouette at equal intervals across the ragged land, dwarfed beneath an angry sky scratched with red. The land itself and the gritty sense of place are grounding, if inhospitable.

Remarkably, though, if you spend enough time with Ruscha’s work, you may find yourself not just looking at the landscapes, but reading them. He opens pathways among art, sign, and language, and our brains go along for the ride.

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