

California’s Dreams of Coolness: the art of Eddie Ruscha

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Sapling Gallery, Mayfair, installation shot

Nestled among the red bricks of Mount Street Mews – not far from the splendour of the Church of the Immaculate Conception, where Evelyn Waugh sought solace – there’s a new light filled gallery in London’s Mayfair, called Sapling. With potted plants outside, its sizeable glass façade provides a first glimpse of recent spray paintings by Eddie Ruscha, many of them made specifically for this solo exhibition, his first in the UK.

Based in Los Angeles, Eddie Ruscha’s paintings emanate California Cool. Not the gas stations and flaming sunsets, beset by text and steeped in irony of Ed Ruscha, Eddie’s father, or the experiential, perception bending installations and sculptures of the Light and Space movement, that originated in Southern California in the 1960s. And yet, Eddie Ruscha has absorbed many of the same influences as his West Coast colleagues – Op Art, Colour field painting, advertising, and the use of a spray gun to apply paint – combining them with the dizzying graphics of psychedelia, and the type of fractal patterns found in nature.



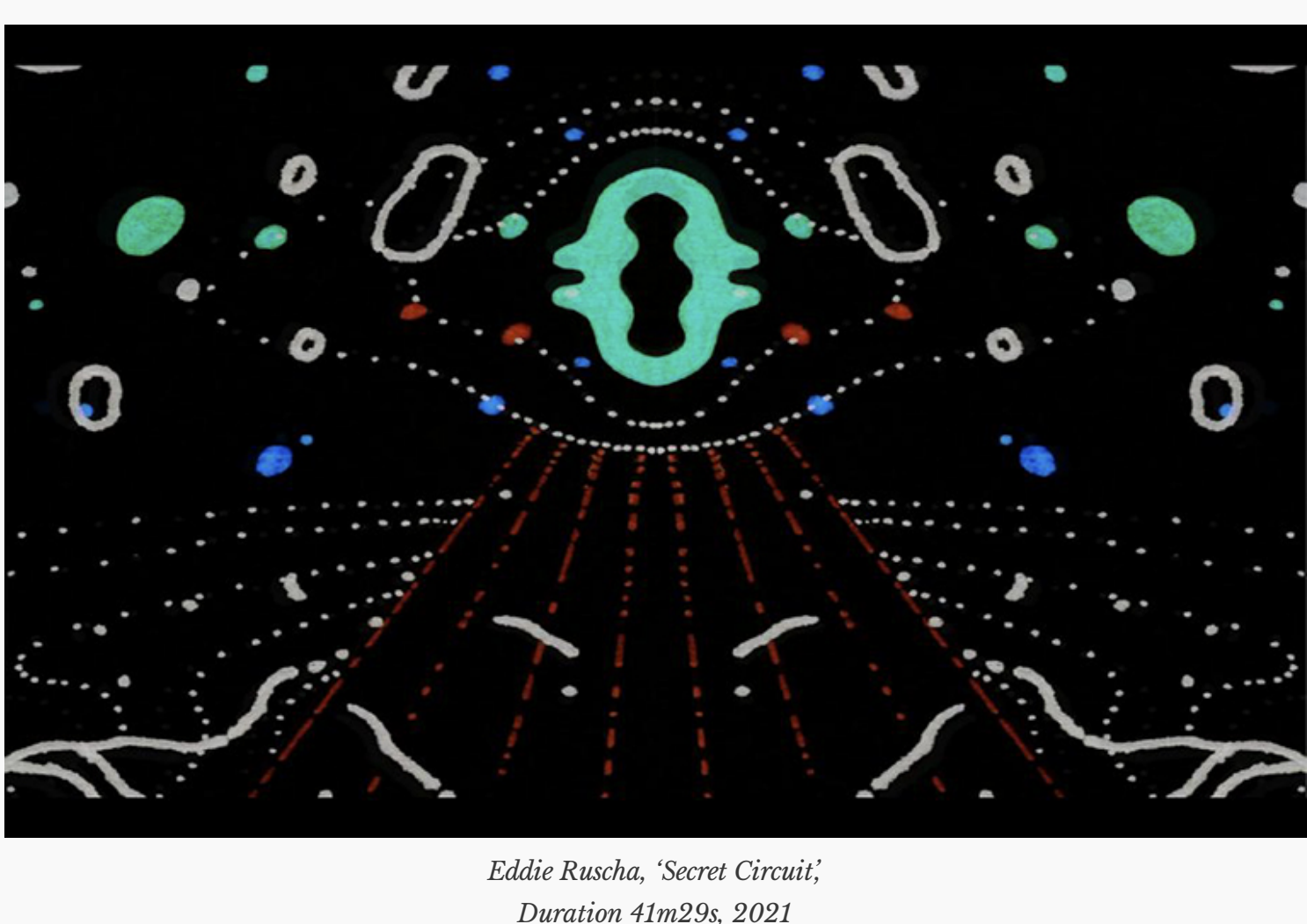
*Eddie Ruscha, 'Kiki', Acrylic on paper
43 x 36 cm, 2021, all images ©Eddie Ruscha, 2021*

In a series of pristine spray paintings, each occupying a sheet of paper 43 x 36 cm, biomorphic shapes orbit an invisible centrifugal power source, poised at a moment of dissolution and reformation. As if Aldous Huxley had directed Disney’s ‘Fantasia’, calling forth a mesmeric portal into aspects of the post-World War II American psyche. Forms lap and lick, and the implications of movement are enhanced by the titles. Taken from early Busby Berkeley films – ‘Kiki’, ‘Bird of Paradise’, ‘Gold Diggers of 1937’ – they help conjure waves of supine bodies, with limbs moving like myriad grains of coloured sand in a kaleidoscope.



*Eddie Ruscha, 'Fast and Furious', Acrylic on paper
43 x 36 cm, 2021*

When forms in the paintings are not rotating, they might be mirrored across a vertical axis, as they are in ‘Secret Circuit’, a video piece playing on a flatscreen in the corner of the gallery. Lines and shapes emerge from the void, morph, and replicate along a central pole, recalling a Rorschach test – the inky black tool of psychoanalytic associations.



*Eddie Ruscha, 'Secret Circuit',
Duration 41m29s, 2021*

Music is an essential part of Eddie Ruscha’s practice. In a sound piece that accompanies the video work, a low rumbling beat gives way to layers of sonic flora, as if growing on a distant lunar desert. There’s a satisfying synchronicity between sound and vision, as the music appears to power the systematic break up of a fragile metaphysical world. It’s a process of dispersion, also alluded to in a series of ‘LP paintings’, each one sharing the size and proportion of the protective sleeve of a long play record.



*Eddie Ruscha, 'Alibi', Acrylic on canvas board
30.5 x 30.5 cm, 2016. From the 'LP paintings'*

In bringing together works that span the breadth of Eddie Ruscha’s practice, curator Cedric Bardawil has shown how individual pieces can coalesce and gain strength. The video piece and the sound work seem ripe for an immersive experience, something that the artist has done before. He handles colour with skill and finesse. And if the spray paintings were enlarged in scale – so that we could almost walk into one of them – then the finely honed layers of spray might drift further still. Encouraging us to move, slowly but surely, toward a buoyant, weightless state of being.

It’s all a bit trippy. It could be even more so.

Paul Hodgson

Eddie Ruscha: Cosmic Harmonics is presented by Cedric Bardawil at Sapling, 124 Mount Street Mews, London W1K 3NR until 7 August 2021.

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