The Quest for Ed Ruscha's Secret Artwork Inspires a Film

Christie Chu, Friday, January 23, 2015

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A screenshot of *Where is Rocky II?*'s press clip.

Pierre Bismuth wanted to find Ed Ruscha's hidden artwork—a fake rock called *Rocky II*—that the artist planted in the Mojave desert in 1976. Along the way, he stumbled on some intriguing leads and unexpected characters, notably a man who partly inspired "the Dude," the legendary character in the Coen brothers' film, *The Big Lebowski*. Bismuth's search eventually became the basis for his first film, *Where is Rocky II?*, which is set for release in December 2015. The artist and Academy Award winner answered artnet News' questions about his wild and quirky journey.

How did *Where is Rocky II* come about? What inspired you to make a film on such an obscure piece of art?

It started I would say about 10 years ago, or maybe even longer, someone gave me a VHS tape. On the tape was a 1980 documentary from BBC on Ed Ruscha. It was 28 minutes. I thought it was an amazing documentary, it was very well done. You could see Ed Ruscha working on different things, you see him working on this fake rock, and driving to the desert, taking one from the desert, and then putting one back. I showed the film to my friends, and none of them knew about it [the art piece]. Even friends and professionals around him didn't know about it. I was lucky enough to have the VHS because it showed I wasn't crazy. Of course, it was intriguing because what is an art piece that is invisible to everyone?

When I became closer to Ed Ruscha himself, he was amused and surprised I knew about it but he would categorically refuse to give any information about it. This kind of secret attitude, it seemed for me an invitation to do something serious about it. In 2009, when he had a major survey of his work at Hayward Gallery in London, I went with two cameras and pretended to be a journalist. I was the first to ask a question out of the blue, I said "Mr. Ruscha, I would be interested to know—where is *Rocky II*?" Everyone thought it was a joke, because everyone thinks *Rocky II* is a film with Sylvester Stallone. But Ed Ruscha was very surprised I knew it, and he elegantly understood that he and I were the only ones who knew what I was talking about so he explained what it was to the other journalists and finished with saying "so it's out there in the Mojave desert somewhere, but I'm not going to say where."

How are you incorporating these two types of footage —part documentary, part fiction—into one feature film?

From the start I was curious about two questions, the first question is where is the piece, and is it possible to find it? The second question is why did Ed Ruscha do this? I realized very quickly the two questions should not be answered by the same person. The "where" should be dealt by a professional private eye whose job is finding things and the second question, "why", was more interesting to ask or be resolved by someone who is a professional in telling stories, like a screenwriter. Nothing is made up, the whole film is about a search. My idea is in order to discover the truth about where the piece is, the private investigator will have to go through a series of speculations that would start with pure fantasy. For example, the private investigator starts to imagine that [Ruscha] had something to hide. On the other hand, I know how screenwriters work. In order to create fiction, they have to start from real fact. Interesting enough the screenwriters and the private investigator were doing the same thing, meeting in the middle, but starting from opposite directions.

You feature several big art world names such as Eli Broad and Michael Govan, how did you pick these people to be featured? Are they somehow linked to Rocky II?

No, they are just extremely famous people from the art world, and they are all from Los Angeles. The logic was that one thing leads to another. You go to the first person you're thinking of, which was LACMA director, Michael Govan, then this person gives you another name, and so on. People all have their own interpretation. The funny thing about this movie is that I didn't ask the private investigator to ask specific questions to the interviewees, so he asked funny questions that I would never ask like "where does Ed Ruscha spend his weekends?"

When did you first become interested in film-making?

Never. I always had a strange relationship with film, it's more by accident then by interest. I was always receptive to film, but I was never into it professionally. I used film in my visual work early on, I needed something moving and making noise and film was a perfect medium.

Well, you also won an Oscar in 2005.

That's true. Because my work seems to have connection with films, I was connected to certain people. And some of those people like Michel Gondry liked my ideas and he liked to talk to me—we had good brainstorm sessions. We started to talk a lot together and that's how (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*) came about. It's funny because in a way, in my art world career, when I succeeded to get out of the loop of being in exhibitions about film, I won the Oscar.

Is it true that the concept for *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* grew out of a casual conversation.

Right, I had a conversation with a friend who was ashamed she had an affair with a guy, and she said if she could forget it, she would be happier. And I explained it wouldn't be so simple, if it was possible.

Do you eventually find *Rocky II*?

[laughs] I tell you, the search led us to very interesting results. Not only did we find very good leads to the rock, we discovered a guy called Jim Ganzer. This is the guy who helped Ed Ruscha build the rock in 1976. Ganzer is a surfer who owned a surf wear brand, Jimmy Z's, in the 1980s. We discovered that he happened to be one of the source of inferences to create the character of the Dude in the *Big Lebowski*. I was already in shock when I encountered this guy, his voice is amazing, he has a fantastic personality, charming, super cool. He says he is the laziest person in the world, he smoked pot all day, but he is the nicest guy and clever. His friend John Milius, the director and screenwriter, told the Coen brothers they had to meet Ganzer. And that's how the whole thing happened. But of course, there are several other people who greatly inspired the character of the Dude.

You are launching an Indiegogo campaign to crowd-fund to finish *Where is Rocky II*. Can you tell me what the $150,000 you need will go towards?

So we have to fund the hiring of a detective and the screenwriters. And then with the hired screenwriters, they must produce a 10 minute trailer, and the crowd-funding will help with producing this trailer.

Support the funding for *Where is Rocky II?* here and look out for it in theaters near you this December.

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