Robert Rauschenberg

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Rauschenberg’s Revolution

Indefatigably inquisitive and inventive, the American artist Robert Rauschenberg forever changed modern art; now, a major retrospective examines his achievements and legacy.

By Edward M. Gómez

A visitor strolling into the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo a few seasons ago would have encountered, in an exhibition of emblematic works from that institution’s holdings, an ordinary large, corrugated cardboard box hanging unframed against a wall, flattened and spread out like a dried, stretched animal skin. That work, dating from the early 1970s, was one of the American artist Robert Rauschenberg’s found-object creations in his Cardboards series. As a physical object on display, never mind as a work of art, nothing could have been plainer or seemingly more unaffected.

Except, of course, that for all of the familiar art history that had informed it (and whose aesthetics it decisively rebuffed) and the modernist principles in which it was knowingly rooted, it felt unmistakably fresh. Seen in Japan, where traditional aesthetics have been influenced by the animistic Shinto religion, Zen Buddhism, and a sometimes bittersweet appreciation of the old and, where a more modern sensibility has long savored the sleek, shiny, seductive new, Rauschenberg’s repurposed-box-as-art felt simultaneously radical and right at home.

That palpable tension between the familiar (all those found and reused car tires, furniture scraps, umbrellas, stuffed chickens, 1 kg light bulbs, printed calendars, Coca-Cola bottles, and other unexpected objects) and the seemingly new (the genre-busting forms in which he brought them all together in mixed-media “paintings,” sculptures and more) is one of the aspects of this prolific artist’s vast, multifaceted oeuvre that are examined in “Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends,” a comprehensive survey of his creations and ideas that recently opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and will run through September 17. (The exhibition will move on to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where it will be on view from November 4 through March 25, 2018.)

“Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends” has arrived at MoMA from Tate Modern in London, where it attracted a large, enthusiastic audience. In London, the last major Rauschenberg exhibition took place at Tate

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Robert Rauschenberg with John Cage, Walter Pread (detail), 1963, tire tread mark (tire wheel) and tire tread mark with house paint (rear wheel) made by Cag’s Model A Ford, driven by Cage over twenty sheets of typewriter paper fastened together with library paste, mounted on fabric; Mishka Shubaly, Glacial Decoy, 1979, with costumes, set, and lighting (with Battery Kinhouse); by Rauschenberg, this performance at the Minsky’s Manhattan College Theater, New York, June 20–24, 1979, left to right: Brown, Nira Lendis, and Lisa Krakus; Robert Rauschenberg, Chalken, 1984, oil, charcoal, printed reproductions, newspaper, wood, plastic mirror, jeans, underwear, umbrella, tire, ribbons and other fabrics, and metal on homonaut, mounted on wood, with electric light. This paper: Robert Rauschenberg, Pollock Jolt, 1987, studded metal street signs.
After leaving high school—and requesting his first-ever store-bought shirt as a graduation gift—Rauschenberg enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin, where he briefly studied pharmacy before being drafted during World War II. He served as a medical technician in the U.S. Navy's hospital corps in San Diego, Calif., and during that period saw paintings for the first time ever at the Huntington Art Gallery (now the Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens) in San Marino, near Pasadena, not far to the north of his base. That encounter with art was fateful; it gave him the idea that he could become a painter. (Among the memorable oil-on-canvas pictures he saw at that museum: Thomas Lawrence's Sarah Goodin Barrett Montron: "Tintype" (1794) and Thomas Gainsborough's scene The Blue Boy (1770), both of which he already had seen reproduced on the backs of playing cards.)

Thanks to the G.I. Bill, Rauschenberg went on to study fashion design at the Kansas City Art Institute and art at the now-defunct Académie Julian, a private school in Paris that focused on painting and sculpture. (He also changed his name to "Roberts," believing that it sounded more artistic than "Milton.") In Paris, disappointed by the French school's training, he made the rounds of museums and galleries instead. There he also met and spent many hours conversing with Susan Weil, a painter from New York who was planning to attend Black Mountain College, a progressive art school near Ashe-
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ville, N.C., where the painting program was overseen by Josef Albers.

Before immigrating to the United States in the early 1930s, Albers had served as an instructor at the legendary Bauhaus art school in Germany, alongside such other artist-teachers as Oskar Schlemmer, Wassily Kandinsky, and Paul Klee. In 1946, Weil and Rauschenberg made their way to Black Mountain, where Albers, a strict modernist who became known for the hard-edged geometry and color-theory experiments of his Homage to the Square paintings, encouraged his students to experiment with different materials and techniques. Back in Germany, Albers had described the fundamen-
tals course he had taught at the Bauhaus by noting, “First we seek contact with material.... Instead of pasting it, we will put paper together by sewing, buttoning, riveting, cyping, and pinning it [...]
[We do not always create ‘works of art’ but rather experiments; it is not our ambition to fill museums; we are gathering experience.” MoMA curator Dickerman explains that, similarly, at Black Mountain, Albers “coached his students in collage-making procedures,” adding, however, that Rauschenberg “regarded his own efforts as more than merely student exercises from them, he developed collage-making strategies and an egalitarian approach to his materials that would serve him throughout his life.” Later, Albers would eschew his former student’s art-making efforts and even deny that he had ever known him, while Rauschenberg would remember his Black Mountain instructor as “a beautiful teacher and an impossible person.”

From top: Robert Rauschenberg, Cy + Relief, Rome, 1952, printed 1980s, Gatelle silver print; Dolly Standard, 1964, Oil, paper, printed reproductions, clock, cardboard box, metal, fabric, wood, string, pair of man’s boots, and Coca-Cola bottles on gold folding Japanese screen, with electric light, rope, and ceramic dog on bicycle seat and wire-mesh base.

From left: Robert Rauschenberg, Overstove, 1963. Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas; Monogram, 1955–59, Oil, paper, fabric, printed reproductions, metal, wood, rubber shoe-heel, and tin foil on two conjoined canvas with oil on tinsel-dipped Angora goat with brass plaque and rubber tire on wood platform mounted on four casters.
In New York, Rauschenberg’s numerous artist friends included Jasper Johns and Cy Twombly, with whom he had romantic relationships and would go on to maintain lasting, meaningful artistic dialogues; others included the avant-garde composer John Cage and the dancer-chorographer Merce Cunningham and Trisha Brown. Rauschenberg had met Twombly at the Art Students League and, in 1952, the two embarked together on a trip to Italy, Morocco and Spain during which they pursued some of their earliest experiments in drawing, photography, sculpture and other genres.

Art historians often note that the work of Rauschenberg and Johns anticipated Pop Art, one of the dominant styles of the 1960s. However, whereas many pictures or sculptures by Pop’s recognized leaders, Andy Warhol, tended to focus on single subjects, usually with a detached sense of irony that ultimately felt more nihilistic than cynical, Rauschenberg’s collage-oriented works, full of emotional heat and engagement with the real world, regularly mixed up imagery from newspapers, television, everyday consumer culture and art history—in notable contrast with the hermetic feeling works of anger-ridden Abstract Expressionist painters.

Meanwhile, Johns’ paintings of American flags and his painted-bronze Ballantine Ale cans felt cool and cerebral, and curiously more matter-of-fact than ironic, as they both depicted familiar objects and effectively made the nature of such depictions their compelling, quintessential subject.

“Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends,” makes clear that, as Rauschenberg’s career progressed, his ideas evolved and his fame grew internationally—by 1964, he had won the grand prize at the Venice Biennale—there was no material or art-making technique he encountered that he did not wish to explore. Rauschenberg became well known for using the silkscreen printing method to bring photographic images into his mixed-media “paintings” on canvas, ceramic tiles or fabric; he also made lithographs, photographs, and all sorts of small and large assemblage sculptures. He designed dance-stage sets and choreographed and performed in his own dance works, too. Then there was Rauschenberg’s The 12 Mile or 2 Farlong Piece (1981–98), a 190-element work the artist hoped would become the world’s longest painting. (It is, in fact, nearly 1,000 feet long.) “There is no reason not to consider the world as one gigantic painting.”

Rauschenberg had said in 1961. Similarly, two years earlier, in one of his most often cited statements, he observed, “Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. I try to act in that gap between the two.”

In 1984, the artist launched his Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (or ROCI, pronounced “Rocky,” after the name of his pet turtle), an ambitious program of travel and extended working stays in various countries, including China and Japan. During these sojourns outside the U.S., Rauschenberg worked with local artists and craftspeople to learn about their indigenous art making traditions and techniques in turn, he shared with them the spirit of his open-minded, collaborative approach. At the end of each residency period abroad, Rauschenberg presented an exhibition of the works he and his collaborators had created in a particular host country in what became another way of encouraging cross-cultural creative dialogue among artists and their audiences.

“Rauschenberg’s work expresses a very democratic ethos,” Dickerman says. “It proposes that art should be open to everything that can be found in the world; that spirit could also be felt in his dance performances. He believed that a brushstroke in a painting was no more important than, say, an old shoe. His ROCl collaborations resonated deeply with artists in those parts of the world where freedom of expression was limited. To this day, for example, artists in China who were involved in or influenced by Rauschenberg’s visits there in the 1980s still regard him as a role model.”

Rauschenberg expressed that joie de vivre himself when he remarked, looking back at his earliest forays into painting, “At the time, I found it too distant to even use a brush. I needed the immediate contact. If I could have been the canvas, too, that wouldn’t have been close enough for me.” That feeling of excitement and urgency is as much a subject of “Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends” as the wide diversity and inventiveness of the remarkable works on view.

In these times of fear and uncertainty, it offers an affirmation of a creative spirit that remains unsinkable, unmistakably, irresistibly inspiring and fresh. IJ