

Art

Robert Rauschenberg, 1925–2008

The optimist who used a bald eagle to challenge America's idea of art



Larry Ellis/Express/Getty Images

BY R.C. BAKER

“I actually had a kind of house rule,” Robert Rauschenberg said of the period in the 1950s when he was living in a ratty building in downtown New York and working on his found-object “Combine” paintings. “If I walked completely around the block and didn’t find enough to work with, I could take one other block and walk around it in any direction—but that was it. The works had to look at least as interesting as anything that was going on outside the window.”

This reliance on serendipity and litterers to provide materials for his vibrant hybrids of sculpture and painting was typical of the optimism and insight of this rangy ex-sailor from Port Arthur, Texas. In 1949, at age 24, he arrived in a city dominated by the macho romance of abstract expressionism, but soon discovered that he wanted to move beyond America’s house style. First came paintings made with dirt and growing grass, followed by monochrome black and white canvases. Then, in 1953, the little-known Rauschenberg, a big admirer of Willem de Kooning’s roiling abstractions, knocked on the Dutchman’s studio door. After

some drinking and small talk, Rauschenberg asked if he could have a drawing, throwing in that he wanted to erase it.

De Kooning knew of the younger artist’s monochromes, but also saw the audacious Oedipal challenge. “I want to give you one that I’ll miss,” the older artist finally replied. By his own reckoning, it took Rauschenberg three weeks to eradicate that dense, mixed-media image, but the ghostly palimpsest of *Erased de Kooning Drawing* signaled an artist who understood the power of such Dada stunts as a way to break through to new art forms.

Working as stage manager for Merce Cunningham’s dance troupe, Rauschenberg created flats from swatches of bright fabric splattered with paint drips, around which colorfully garbed dancers moved—an action painting come to life. The stage set provided an impetus for taking his work into three dimensions. In the Combines—collages of comic strips, printed fabrics, news photos, signboards, and cast-off sundries bound together with thick ropes of paint—he mined beauty from the slag heap of American culture. Jeff Koons, an artist who knows his kitsch, has said, “I can’t think of an image that has more power than *Canyon*—

From De Kooning eraser to roller skater: Rauschenberg in 1966

Rauschenberg’s 1959 Combine starring a stuffed bald eagle salvaged from the dingy apartment of a recently deceased member of Teddy Roosevelt’s Rough Riders. The wing-flared raptor juts forbiddingly from the bottom of the canvas, perched

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above a rumpled pillow suspended from a frayed cord. Among the many collage elements, the canvas includes a photo of distant galaxies below a rusty, flattened steel drum, and a print of the Statue of Liberty, which is mimicked by the waving arm of a toddler (Rauschenberg’s son from a short marriage to a fellow student at Black Mountain College). These literal and metaphorical gulfs—flight and gravity, cosmic forges and industrial detritus, national ideals and uncomprehending citizen—conjure a multifaceted America that, while scarred and sagging far short of its promise, remains

wonderfully weird and exhilarating.

That same year, *Monogram* shocked many viewers, with its stuffed Angora goat, the head slathered with paint, squeezed through an automobile tire. At the close of the conformist Eisenhower years, the love that dare not speak its name was still best communicated through such visual conundrums: The Combines used pictures as words and objects as pictures to create poetics of form and meaning.

Like his onetime lover Jasper Johns, Rauschenberg often revisited motifs in his art, and did it with a gusto few could match. An untitled work from 1955 features a toy parachute flattened out in the lower corner of the canvas, listless cords drooping below the frame’s edge. Most of the canvas is thinly painted, a beige expanse as desolately beautiful as a desert, with scattered oases—a wrinkled sock, a wan photo of grazing cows—for the eye to wander among. Set this next to the 1963 performance *Pelican*: Rauschenberg on roller skates, careering about to a score he collaged from radio, music, and television sounds, a huge parachute stretched over wooden slats radiating from his back. *Pelican* was one of numerous pieces the artist choreographed as he pushed beyond the success of the Combines into an exuberant realm previously reserved for dancers and athletes.

As with Icarus, though, there came a crash. In the seven-foot-high 1964 silk-screen *Retroactive I*, the largest image is one of JFK stabbing a finger at two figures derived from a photo parody of Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* and cropped to resemble Massacio’s Adam and Eve expelled from the Garden. In an upper corner, an astronaut descends by parachute, a forlorn messenger too late to halt America’s latest loss of innocence. When Rauschenberg’s series of silkscreen paintings won the International Prize at the Venice Biennale that year, he called an assistant in New York and told him to burn the screens; there were to be no cushy landings for this continuously searching artist.

In the ’70s came a series created with flattened cardboard boxes, which lacked the earlier rough magic. The ’80s brought a quixotic quest, the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange, in which he collaborated with local artists in countries such as Mexico, Chile, and the USSR, an endeavor idealistically conceived and roundly panned, and that Rauschenberg wryly conceded had not led to “any excess of world peace.” To be sure, there are gems among the later work, but they sometimes seemed more prose than poetry.

In his last years, despite a crippling stroke, and with the help of his longtime companion Darryl Pottorf, Rauschenberg continued to send assistants out to shoot photos for massive collages, such as spare juxtapositions of ancient marble columns against plastic drinking straws. His primary instruction, to those who lacked his gift for discovering beauty in banality, could also be the artist’s epitaph: “If you think something would be a bad shot, take it.”