A new Robert Rauschenberg show at Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea includes 49 works, most of them for sale, dating from 1950 to 2007. Above, Palladian Xmas (Spread), from 1980.

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Published: November 26, 2010

Robert Rauschenberg, the subject of a chock-a-block time capsule of a show at Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea, was an optimist and a doer. He not only did what artists normally do: make paintings, sculptures, prints and photographs. He also did the work of performers, musicians, philanthropists and career politicians.

He danced, composed, gave away money and initiated diplomatic missions, always on behalf of art. He believed that if he, or we, or anyone could just produce enough art, then art and life would be the same thing, and the world would change for the better. So, committed universal citizen that he was, he kept trying to make enough.
He made a lot. He was blessed with sunny energy, immense talent and an unstoppable creative flow, the equivalent of stream of consciousness in literature. For years on end, that stream rushed forward, turning whatever it swept up — childhood memories, art history, street junk, nature, the daily news — into gold. Then for stretches, and quite lengthy ones, it meandered and pooled. Even then, the flow never stopped. In a six-decade career, Rauschenberg turned out more than 6,000 works of art, some of preposterous size and ambition.

Gagosian Gallery thinks big too, and bigger than usual in its series of museum-style exhibitions in Chelsea over the last few years. In early 2009 there was a Piero Manzoni survey. No one knew it was coming, and there it was, a knockout, invaluable, a reminder of all the artists we should be looking at and aren’t. A year later, in what felt like another miracle of spontaneous generation, we got late Monet, an artist we look at very often, but rarely, as here, in sunset light.

“Robert Rauschenberg,” with 49 works dating from 1950 to 2007, the year before the artist’s death, is on the same scale as those shows, but different. For one thing, it doesn’t come out of nowhere: it follows hard on the news that Gagosian, in a commercial coup, would be handling the Rauschenberg estate. For another, most of what’s in the exhibition is for sale, which wasn’t the case with Manzoni or Monet.

So we have a career survey that’s also a marketing event, with negotiable values in terms of both dollars and critical status on its mind. Ideally, this shouldn’t affect the way we see art, but it does. In a museum, or even a no-sale gallery show, we’re looking at done-deal stuff, art with values fixed, economic histories at least temporarily closed. In the Rauschenberg show, we’re in the presence of deals being done. So the psychological dynamic is different. As we walk through the gallery, we can still ask the question: how is this work holding up? The decisions are still being made.

This is not to say you can’t take what’s here simply as prime historical data. You can, and as such, it’s rich. One of the earliest pieces, “Short Circuit (Combine Painting),” is a time capsule unto itself. It dates from 1955, when Rauschenberg was represented by Stable Gallery. Every year the gallery did a big group show to which new artists were invited. Rauschenberg recommended four: Jasper Johns, Ray Johnson, Stan VanDerBeek and Susan Weil. When the gallery said no, he decided to get them in, anyway, by inserting a work by each inside his own contribution, a cabinet-shaped construction with a hinged door.

Only Mr. Johns and Ms. Weil, Rauschenberg’s ex-wife, came through with work on time, so into the cabinet went a little painting by each And, with one significant change, those two paintings are still there: Mr. Johns’s picture, a mini-version of one of his soon-to-be famous flag images, was stolen in 1965 and replaced by an Elaine Sturtevant copy.

“Short Circuit” is a sweet reminder of Rauschenberg’s collegial generosity; he believed in art making as a communal endeavor, and acted on that belief. At the same time, the piece is a souvenir of an astonishingly fruitful period both in American art and in his own hyperkinetic career.
By 1955, some of his most radical work was already behind him: the all-white paintings, the all-black paintings, the “Elemental Sculptures” made from street finds. Gagosian has examples of all of these. By then Rauschenberg had designed stage sets for Merce Cunningham, performed with John Cage and invented the first of his “combines,” the hybrids of painting, collage and sculpture that would become his signature form.

Most major combines from the 1950s and ’60s have long since been secured by museums, but there are a few examples here, like “Dylaby (Combine Painting),” from 1962, with its stained canvas tarp, vintage Coca-Cola sign and metal shard resembling a conquistador’s helmet. Nothing could be further from the operatic high-mindedness of Abstract Expressionism, or from the spit-and-polish insouciance of Pop, but something of both is there. It’s as if a transition between them were taking place before our eyes.

Transition was Rauschenberg’s favored mode. As soon as his art seemed to be settling into one groove, he shoved it into another. The 1970s brought the “Early Egyptian” series, with bulky stacks of sand-coated cardboard boxes like sodden monuments. But the same decade also produced the ethereal “Hoarfrost” series made of photographic images printed on strips of gauzy fabric.

There are several examples from the series at Gagosian; they are far and away the most beautiful things in the show. Throughout the 1980s fabric pieces would have many — many, many — iterations. They grew large; their images increased in number, augmented by fields of abstract patterning, and with an assortment of materials and objects — newsprint, dishcloths, umbrellas — attached to the cloth surfaces. It was during this time that Rauschenberg, in response to global politics, created the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange, or ROCI, a self-financed good-will initiative.

Since the 1970s he had been giving grant money to artists; now he supported, and joined with, artists in 11 countries, from Cuba to Tibet, in the creation of large-scale projects that, thanks to his name, had international museum exposure.

Some of us who saw ROCI work in the 1980s, and other fabric work from the time (“Spreads,” “Salvages”) remember it as more than just disappointing; it was enervating, depressing. With its yards upon yards of undifferentiated visual information, this was art on automatic pilot, as buzzingly deadening as the sound of the television sets that the artist had constantly playing in the background as he worked.

Rauschenberg’s career, like Picasso’s, is a grand one in need of critical editing, though given the hungers of the market, this is unlikely to happen any time soon. Celebration sells.

The Gagosian show, organized by Ealan Wingate, the gallery’s director, partly finesse the matter of comparative evaluation of early and late career by dispensing with chronology and turning a survey into a giant combine, with big and small, strong and weak, 1955, 1980 and 2007 all mixed up.
This strategy points up thematic and stylistic links across a wide span, which is historically useful. It also creates — and this is useful too, though for quite different reasons — an impression of cornucopian fecundity that tends to divert attention from individual works and deliver instead a hit of sheer, awesome, wall-to-wall muchness, which was, or eventually became, the Rauschenberg Effect.

This is the way Rauschenberg marketing will probably go: associate the not-so-hot late work with the very hot earlier work, so that when the earlier work is gone, the late work will seem, by association, to shine. The process takes years but happens all the time. How else to explain the 2009 Gagosian exhibition of late Picassos, a puffy display treated as a wonder?

Whatever the packaging, though, Rauschenberg shines through. He was fantastic, a thriller, one who inspired generations of other artists — look around at Gagosian and you’ll see dozen of careers in formation — to be promiscuous in their approach to art and life but also to be formally exacting, to be cool-eyed in their thinking but morally tender.

Maybe “good” and “bad” doesn’t apply to such a figure? Maybe the simple fact that he did what he did, all of it, the totality, is what counts? We’ll see. Whatever the decisions, you’ll want to take in, and sift through, the almost all-of-it in this packed show.