

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Slate THE ART OF ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

Robert Rauschenberg was the epic artist of the Postmodern era, splashing in every medium and style, sometimes all at once—a trait on clear view in his first major show since his death in 2008, put on by his estate at Gagosian Gallery's West 21st Street branch in New York City. Rauschenberg came to New York in 1949, at age 24, as the Abstract Expressionists were on the rise, and though he emulated their brash brushstrokes and dynamic use of color, he rejected their grimness, their sense of art as an isolated struggle. Art, he thought, was serious, but it was also playful, and a way of merging himself with everything around him. He once said, "Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)" The critic Leo Steinberg, who saw Rauschenberg as the most inventive painter since Picasso, wrote, "What he invented above all was ... a pictorial surface that let the world in again."



Caryatid Cavalcade II/ROCI Chile, 1985. Acrylic on canvas, 138½ x 260¾ inches. © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg/Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y./DACs, London. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Robert McKeever.

Rauschenberg's most boisterous, original works were the "combines"—painting-sculpture combinations splattered not only with streaks and drips of color but also with familiar objects: scraps of fabric, strips of wood, a necktie, newspaper clippings, a Coke bottle, metal signs, a zipper. Rauschenberg would walk around his block in Lower Manhattan and pick up street trash that he found interesting, then take it back to his studio and fit it into his art. From 1955-62, he made more than 60 combines. (The most notorious, *Monogram*, is built around a stuffed goat with a tire around its neck.) Many slightly younger artists were excited by the idea that ordinary objects and pop-culture artifacts could be suitable subjects for art. Andy Warhol's paintings and screen prints of Campbell's soup cans and Coca-Cola bottles, Roy Lichtenstein's riffs on comic-strip panels, Claes Oldenburg's transmogrifications of humdrum objects into luscious

sculptures—the whole movement of Pop Art that enlivened the '60s and beyond—stemmed directly from Rauschenberg's works and sensibility.



Dylaby (Combine Painting), 1962. Oil, metal objects, metal spring, metal Coca-Cola sign, ironing board, and twine on unstretched canvas tarp on wooden support, 109½ x 87 x 15 inches. © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg/licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y./DACs, London. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Robert McKeever.

The combines were inspired mainly by Marcel Duchamp, who'd caused scandals decades earlier by turning mundane objects—a bicycle wheel turned upside down on a stool, a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* marked with a moustache, a urinal (which he inscribed "R. Mutt")—into art objects. Rauschenberg was first exposed to Duchamp in 1953, when he went with John Cage to see a gallery show of Dadaist art. Cage, an old friend of Duchamp, was a major avant-garde composer who, after immersing himself in Zen Buddhism and the *I Ching*, turned away from 12-tone serialism toward music

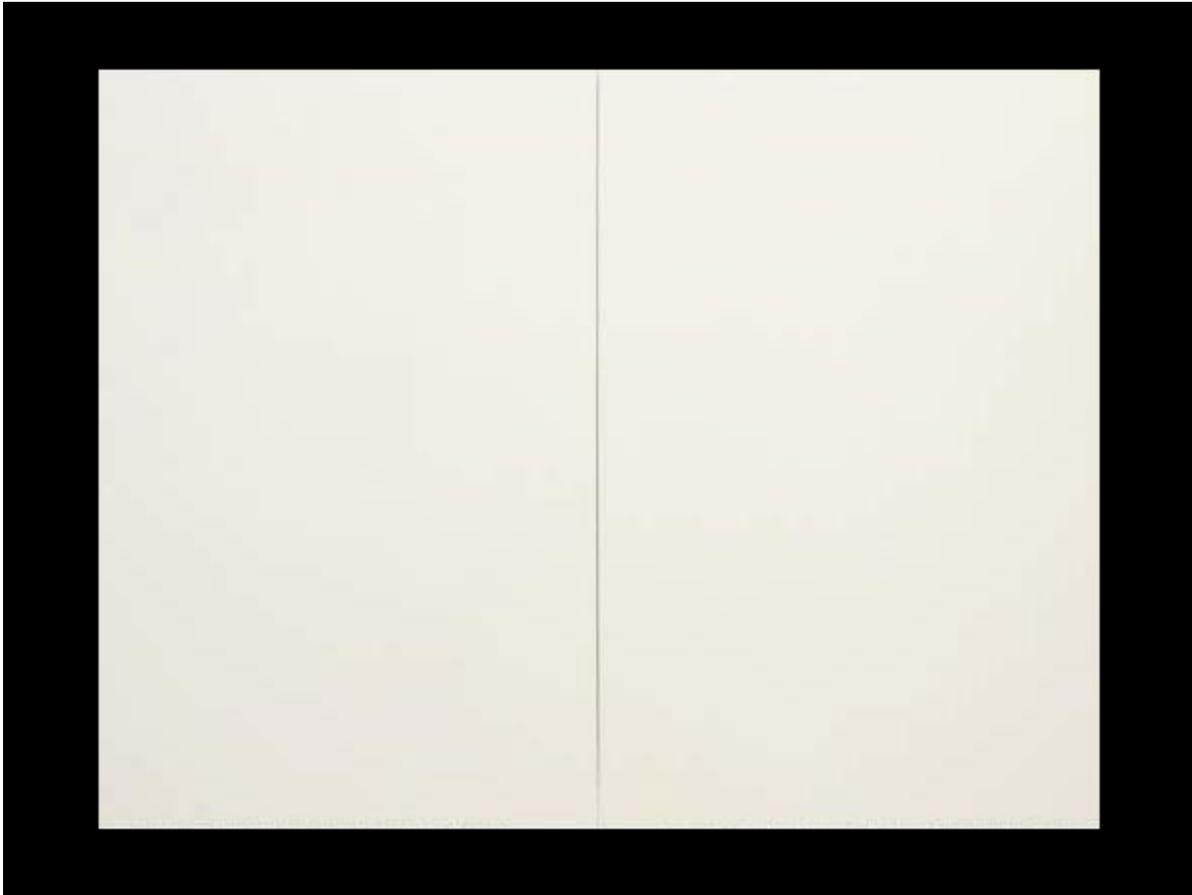
emphasizing chance and playfulness. To Cage, art was "an affirmation of life—not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we're living"— a sentiment Rauschenberg took as a credo. Many of Rauschenberg's works over the years featured tires and wheels, in part to dramatize restless motion, in part as an homage to Duchamp's bicycle wheel.



Rollings (Salvage Series), 1984. Acrylic and collage on canvas, in two parts, 152 x 155½ inches. © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg/licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y./DACs, London. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Robert McKeever.

Rauschenberg's earliest audacities were the *White Paintings*, large canvases that he covered with nothing but white enamel paint. He made these works in 1951 while teaching at the Black Mountain College, an experimental arts school in Asheville, N.C. (where he also met John Cage). He applied the paint with rollers to make it as smooth as possible, so that it reflected viewers' shadows and took on different shades, depending on the time of day and the quality of light. These were his first experiments

with merging art and life; Rauschenberg later called them "performance pieces." Cage called them "airports for lights, shadows and particles." They inspired him to write *4'33"*, in which a pianist sits silently at the keyboard for 4 minutes and 33 seconds, then leaves; the "music" is the sounds offstage—people coughing, horns honking outside the hall. Alas, *White Painting* doesn't work at the Gagosian Gallery, which has no natural light, no shadows. It's like "performing" *4'33"* in an empty, soundproof chamber.



White Painting, 1951. Oil on canvas, in two parts, 72 x 96 inches. © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg/licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y./DACs, London. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Robert McKeever.

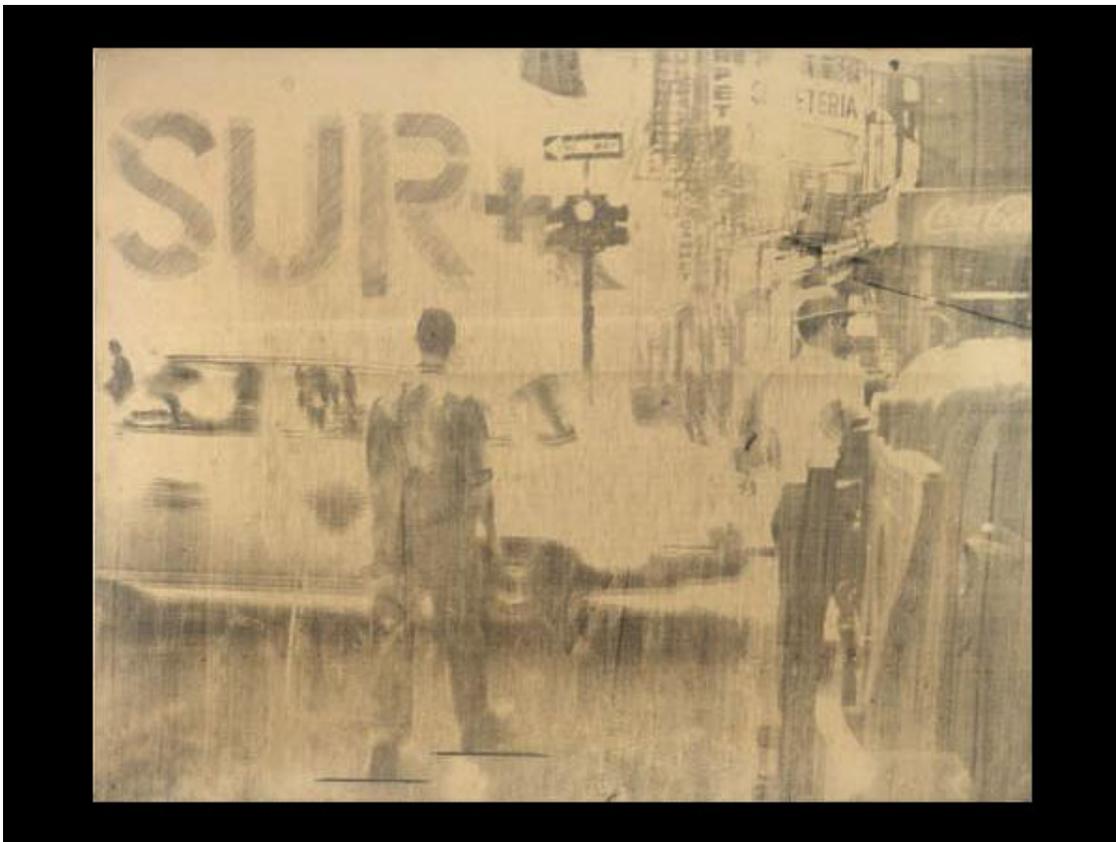
Rauschenberg was by inclination a collaborator (another point of difference from the Abstract Expressionists). In the 1960s, he designed sets for Merce Cunningham's dance company. Some of his works invite viewer participation. (Speak into the microphone on *Dry Cell*, a small sculpture that entails a dry-cell battery and a silkscreen painting of a helicopter, and you activate a motor that sounds like a chopper's blades

spinning.) *Short Circuit*, an early combine, includes a small American flag painted by Jasper Johns (later stolen and replaced with a reproduction), a drawing of dancers by Susan Weil (Rauschenberg's ex-wife), and a collage of *stuff*: a piece of a program from a Cage concert, a Judy Garland autograph, some fabric, color bars. At the time, Johns was painting his large, soon-to-be-classic flags. He and Rauschenberg, in a relationship both artistic and romantic, were deliberately "moving out," as they put it, from the Abstract Expressionist's influence. Johns was cooler, more precisely focused, but each, in his own way, expanded the notion of what was possible in art.



Short Circuit (Combine), 1955. Oil, fabric, and paper on wood supports and cabinet with two hinged doors containing a painting by Susan Weil and a reproduction of a Jasper Johns flag painting by Elaine Sturtevant, 41½ x 38¼ x 4½ inches. © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg/licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y./DACs, London. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Robert McKeever.

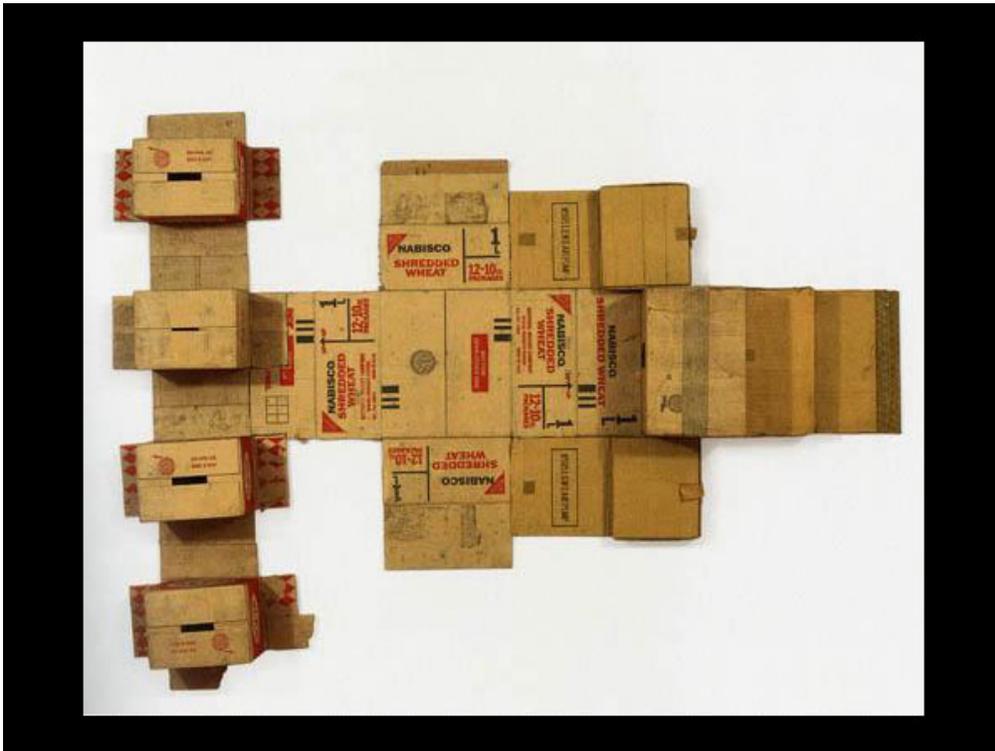
Rauschenberg started out as a photographer as well as a painter and returned to the medium in 1962, after Andy Warhol showed him the artistic possibilities of silkscreen printing. But where Warhol silkscreened images from pop culture or mass-market products to freeze a familiar object into a mechanized icon, Rauschenberg used the process to dramatize the relentless motion and sensory clutter of modern life—the same impulse behind the combines. (This was no social critique, by the way: Rauschenberg *liked* the motion and clutter, just as Warhol liked Campbell's soup and Marilyn Monroe.) "One gets as much information as a witness of activity from a fleeting glance ... as one does from staring at an object," Rauschenberg wrote in an essay on photography. "Because even if you remain stationary your mind wanders, and it's that kind of activity that I would like to get into the photograph—a confirmation of the fact that everything is moving."



Untitled (Silkscreen Painting), 1964. Oil and silkscreen on canvas, 37 x 46 1/8 inches. © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg/licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y./DACs, London. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Robert McKeever.

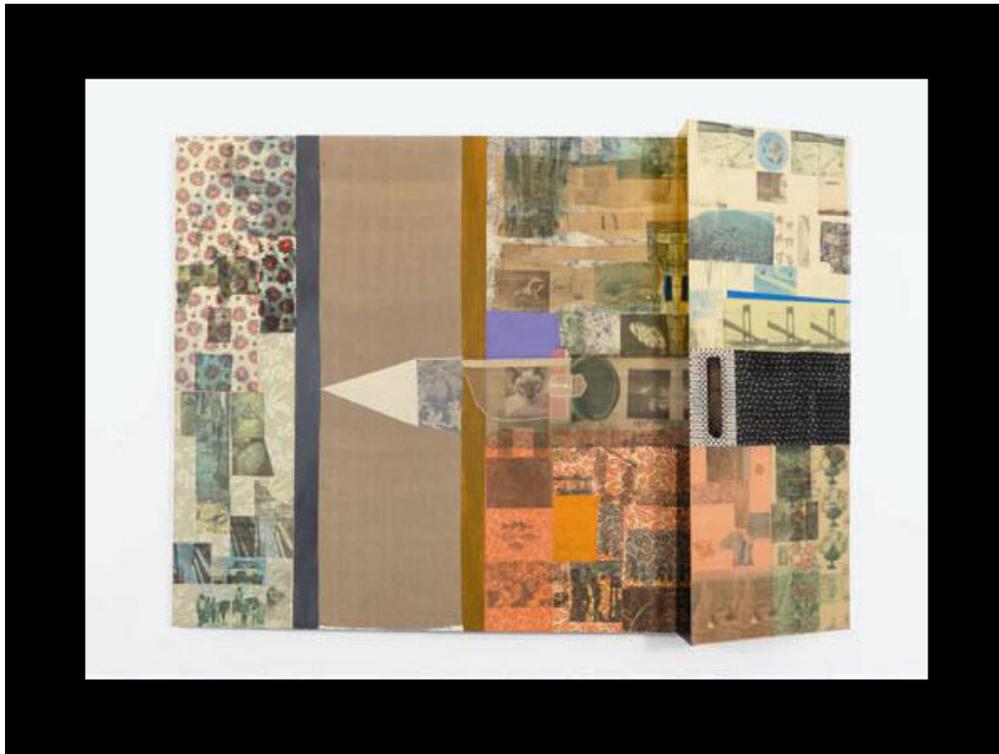
In 1970, exhausted by art-world tensions, Nixon-era politics, and self-destructive boozing, Rauschenberg left New York for the calm of Captiva Island in southern Florida (which would remain his home for the rest of his life). Few "found objects" were at hand (he was surrounded by water), so he worked with what was available: cardboard shipping boxes. A "desire built up in me," he said, "to do work in a material of waste and softness. Something yielding with its only message a collection of lines imprinted like a friendly joke." The project lasted for only a year, and the results strain the most devoted fan's tolerance for Rauschenbergian whimsy. The cardboards have never resonated with me, though there's much to like about "Nabisco Shredded Wheat."

The column of boxes is a play on Donald Judd's shelves (to me, more appealing than the original), and the horizontal construction has a totemic grace; there's music in the way he's arranged the boxes' lines and grids to converge and collide.



Nabisco Shredded Wheat (Cardboard), 1971. Cardboard, 70 x 95 x 11 inches. © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg/licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y./DACS, London. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Robert McKeever.

After the minimalist cardboards, Rauschenberg returned to maximalist form. "I have a special kind of focus, I tend to see everything in sight," he once said. Over the next few decades, he traveled the world and disgorged as much of what he saw, heard, felt, and smelled, fusing as many styles, mediums, and materials as a collage on canvas could absorb. The remarkable thing about these works is the coherence he shaped from all their disparate elements—a "random order," as he called his technique. He created thousands of works over a nearly 60-year span. Many of them don't jell, but the good ones exude a vibrant rhythm, at once jarring and soothing. As with *Mellic Meeting*—which, like many of the works at Gagosian, hasn't been seen in public for decades, if ever—the magic is in the fine detail, the connecting patterns worth examining very closely, *and* the vast overall that washes over you.



Mellic Meeting (Spread), 1979. Mixed media including solvent transfer on fabric collage, and mirror, 96 x 132 x 14 inches. © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg/licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y./DACS, London. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Robert McKeever.

Here's a detail, a small close-up fragment of *Melic Meeting*: fabrics, color bars, a comb, a mirror, swirls, animals, aerial shots of cities and plains, strategic swipes of emptiness, the Brooklyn Bridge—yet somehow it all hangs together like the horns, strings, percussion, and reeds of a symphony.



Detail from *Melic Meeting (Spread)*, 1979. Mixed media including solvent transfer on fabric collage, and mirror, 96 x 132 x 14 inches. © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg/licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y./DACS, London. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Robert McKeever.