

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Robert Rauschenberg's Jammers at Gagosian Gallery

By John Holland



Installation shot Robert Rauschenberg Jammers exhibition, Gagosian Gallery, Britannia St.
© Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

Robert Rauschenberg's Jammers, made after a visit to India in the mid seventies and currently showing at the Gagosian Gallery in London, are an anomaly. All of Rauschenberg's usual tropes and techniques, his expansively vulgar and urban sensibility are absent; they feel like the work of a different artist.

If Rauschenberg's art is defined by his omnivorous consumption and regurgitation of images, objects and materials, the Jammers series, in contrast, are elegant, tasteful, imageless (though not really abstract) and rustic. Rauschenberg said that experiencing India allowed him to embrace unambiguous beauty – which of course gets us stuck in the question of what beauty in art means, now. Not the beauty of Classicism, with its structured and hierarchical sense of rightness and order, nor the Romantic sublime, terrible and transgressive and overwhelming. Not Beauty as Truth, but beauty in the small contemporary sense; the purely, sensually pleasurable, or even just the decorously elegant. And certainly a long way from the aggressive vulgarity of Rauschenberg's earlier 'Bed' or 'Monogram' Combines.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Mirage (Jammer)*, 1975,
© Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

Rauschenberg's claim to originality lay in his use of found imagery as a material to manipulate like any other (though the current Schwitters show at Tate includes pretty much every idea that made him famous), and an equalising of all visual information, one thing as apparently significant or as arbitrary as another, all assembled on what Steinberg called the 'flatbed' picture plane; not a window, but a site of accumulation – like a scrapbook. The Jammers though, are not just imageless, and very clearly subject to gravity (and therefore with a particular orientation to the viewer), but exhibit a clear and simple gestalt. Too simple really.

Nearly all of them are made largely of sections of coloured silk, pinned to the walls by long rattan poles. They look like abstract pictures, handicraft Ellsworth Kellys or Brice Mardens – though Rauschenberg is uninterested in the specificity of chromatic precision necessary to engage seriously with formal abstraction. They could also be, as their collective name suggests, sails or flags, or washing on a line. And they are surely influenced by Arte Povera (sharing its balancing act between poetic simplicity and fey charm), as well as Barry Flanagan's remarkably similar, if less 'exotic' fabric and wood pieces of the late 60s and early 70s. But as I say, Rauschenberg was never much concerned with the subtleties of colour, and aside from the visceral use of black and white and pitch brown he tended to use the primaries to signify "colour" in a way that certainly owed nothing to his Black Mountain mentor and nemesis Joseph Albers. So even with these brightly keyed works there's not a huge amount to be gained by looking for active and considered chromatic relationships, still less for the sort of emotive colour sensibility he always claimed not to understand ("I've never had a sad cup of coffee"). They are, after all, readymade pieces of decorative fabric.

It is in the context of Rauschenberg's EAT (Experiments in Art and Technology, est. 1966) and ROCI (Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Initiative, est. 1984) that the Jammers would want to be seen. As part of the optimistic and idealistic collaborative projects that he funded and which most closely embodied his well known desire to work in the gap between art and life. Now, stripped of these vestigial associations, they compliment the walls of Slick Larry's temple to Mammon with considerable poise and elegance.



Robert Rauschenberg, Quarterhouse (Jammer), 1975,
© Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

Pimiento III [red work at far end wall of installation shot], Index [blue and white work to left of Pimiento] and Pollen (Rauschenberg tends to have good titles – concrete, evocative and contrary) use big swathes of silk, dyed with intense saturated colours, sown together horizontally and against which are leaning rattan poles in various combinations, sometimes wrapped in silk or gauze. The colours are beautiful, and there's not all that much to say about them. Pimiento III, combines three close but clashing shades of hot pink and scarlet, Index abuts a sort of lingerie cream against a deep Prussian blue, Pollen has a layer of cadmium yellow beneath some shimmering silver-grey, slightly and tastefully distressed.

They are lovely because coloured silks are lovely, and because they have all the sophisticated elegance of good interior design. Then again, some of the silk pieces feel more prosaic; like Gear, essentially a typically stripy seaside windbreak, or Hibiscus – giant fuchsia pink underwear. Several works, like Vow, Untitled (Jammer) [second from right of installation shot] and Sprout [first from left of installation shot] are just simple constructions of poles with food tins – the labels, words and logos which would normally be consumed in his centripetal aesthetic, removed – or they stretch and fill various tones of gauze into something approaching sculpture, protruding from the wall and provoking perhaps more deliberate associations of travel, bodies, work, in the case of Coin not just money, but the peculiar illusion of something seen through monsoon rain. Or is that just being fanciful? Like the Venetian series that Rauschenberg made a couple of years before the Jammers, many of these assemblages share Arte Povera's evocation of a metaphysical aura through the tasteful balancing of two or three pleasingly rusticated bits of stuff. In the smaller gallery, two works take this poetic aesthetic but give it vaguely political allusions, in the titles at least. Capital (Unions) and Charter (Unions) are largely made of rag-mud, which I assume is a traditional building material, and they suggest poverty more than exoticism.

Rauschenberg's dense and apparently unfiltered conglomerations of images and material fact always courted the possibility of being about both everything and nothing. Imagery is used as an

arbitrary (though not random) material, and then sometimes as overloaded signifier (all those astronauts, soldiers, rioters and Presidents), despite his claim to drop a combination of images if it sparked any “clichés of association”. The Jammers series, whatever its origination in social idealism, seems to have come down on the side of meaning nothing, in the most lovely way possible.