

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Art review: Robert Rauschenberg views the moon mission

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Photo: Glen Steigelman / Cantor Arts Center, Stanford

In 1969, Robert Rauschenberg was one of seven artists invited by NASA to witness and respond to the Apollo 11 mission that first landed humans on the moon.

During the year that followed that epochal mission, Rauschenberg (1925-2008) produced a suite of 34 lithographs — the “Stoned Moon” series — at Gemini G. E. L., the graphics workshop in Los Angeles responsible for many of that era’s most celebrated and sought-after new printmaking projects

Beginning Saturday, Dec. 20, Stanford’s Cantor Arts Center presents some of those works along with complementary materials in a small but high-impact exhibition called “Loose in Some Real Tropics: Robert Rauschenberg’s ‘Stoned Moon’ Projects, 1969-70.”

The 13 prints on view, lent by a New York collector, give a full sense of Rauschenberg’s freewheeling creativity. They vary wildly in size, content and palette, but are consistent in their challenge to viewers to extricate details and formal and metaphoric connections among many layers of imagery.

The complete set of lithographs has seldom been seen publicly, although a few museums own it. The currently closed San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has a nearly complete set, which entered the collection with the donation of Pop Art from Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson. The Cantor has borrowed the big Rauschenberg “combine” “Collection” (1954), also part of the Andersons’ gift to SFMOMA, to provide aesthetic background for the “Stoned Moon” series.

NASA had worked with artists and a few writers since 1963 — and continues to, on a much reduced basis — on the assumption that they might capture or express aspects of the space program that eluded the exhaustive documentation it conducted by other means.

NASA program

Rauschenberg, well known as an experimenter with unconventional materials, techniques and imagery, was by far the most adventurous and famous artist to enter the program during the 1960s: In 1964, he became the first American to win the coveted grand prize for painting at the Venice Biennale.

In 1966, he and Billy Kluver, later director of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, had founded the nonprofit Experiments in Art and Technology to promote artists' involvement in new media. Rauschenberg had also made use of imagery derived from media coverage of the space program, so NASA's invitation was not as improbable as it might have seemed to some at the time.

As NASA's guest, Rauschenberg enjoyed exceptional access to every facet of the Apollo 11 operation. Although he was an obsessive photographer, he took no pictures of his own, preferring to rely on other sources. He had long made a practice of incorporating into his work existing imagery from many sources, using various techniques, from collage to solvent transfer to photo silkscreen.

Among the works in the Cantor exhibition, a particularly satisfying example, "Trust Zone" (1969), superimposes a map of the environs of what was then called the Cape Kennedy Space Center on a schematic of an Apollo astronaut's flight suit. The profiles of land and building features and of equipment details, plus the graphic pullouts that identify them, compete for the viewer's attention, inch by inch, conveying a sense of the mission's fusion with the terrain, a marriage with the earth soon to be broken.

"Fuse" (1970), on the other hand, reads as almost completely abstract and colorless, a raw, illegible transcription of the excitement that Apollo 11 provoked in the many who worked on it and in an international public, when photographs and video it yielded were disseminated.

Those who lived through the period, when mindfulness of the Vietnam War tainted even the triumphs of the space program, will detect veiled allusions to that tension in Rauschenberg's juxtaposition of tropical verdure and missile technology.

But the true surprise of the exhibition is a series of collages loaned by the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation and never before exhibited. They rehearse the artist's design for a never-published book that Gemini would have released, known as the "Stoned Moon book." These pieces, consisting of photographs, snatches of drawing and text, provide inklings of Rauschenberg's striking intellectual response to what he witnessed.

Stripped-in passages typewritten in upper case represent Rauschenberg's own notebook jottings, while those in lower case come from correspondence with Henry Hopkins (1928-2009), then director of the Fort Worth Art Center Museum, and later of SFMOMA.

Notebook drawings

Supplementing the collages is a vitrine containing some of Rauschenberg's original notebook pages, including passages of remarkable lyricism and fresh observation, although the show borrows a phrase from Norman Mailer — "Loose in Some Real Tropics" — for its title.

A second vitrine displays Berkeley photographer Malcolm Lubliner's photographs (including contact sheets) of Rauschenberg at work on the "Stoned Moon" series at Gemini.

Altogether, the material affirms Rauschenberg's brilliance as a composer and respondent to his time, and makes a terse, brilliant evocation of the period.