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Robert Rauschenberg, *The Lurid Attack of the Monsters from the Postal News Aug. 1875 (Kabal American Zephyr)*, 1981

Even without knowing its unusual title, those who set eyes on *The Lurid Attack of the Monsters from The Postal News Aug. 1875*[1] are immediately taken aback. The viewer is confronted with a parade of four antique timber saws with heavy wooden handles, their sharp, ragged-edged teeth pointing in alternating directions and exuding menace. Bowed [2]upward under tension, these savage cutting tools seem liable to break loose at any moment. They are placed end-to-end along the top of a narrow rectangular box structure, covered with fabrics and images, that cuts assertively across the viewer's space. A pair of iron wheels, one on each side of the box near its center, elevates one end off the floor, while elongated fluorescent lamps on the bottom provide an ambient glow and endow the object with simmering life. Set low to the ground at an

incline, the construction suggests a fantastic slithery beast--a lizard or dragon--but also calls to mind a cannon or other instrument of war, an impression reinforced by the black acrylic sheet that can be read as a hole at the object's "front" end, whereas the opposite end is "sealed" with bronze-colored mirrored Plexiglas. Further, among the most prominent images on the sides of the box are multiple views of a large group of helmeted figures wearing gas masks and images of a village whose buildings lie in bombed-out ruins. In one section of the box, sandwiched between the images of gas-masked figures and razed buildings, a skeleton tilting up against a sarcophagus. With its chin leaning on its hand, it seems to contemplate or mourn humankind's fate.

For all its menace and intimations of disaster, the work also exerts a lyrical and even seductive force. While the saws may have an intimidating effect, the tensile arches are strangely appealing, and the blue and orange paint that enlivens their surfaces establishes a palette that carries through the piece as a whole. Plain and patterned fabrics, some in bright colors, cover the top of the box. On the sides are images, transferred from newspapers and magazines, that allude to a wide range of subjects, from war and destruction to art, nature, and childhood play.

The Lurid Attack of the Monsters belongs to the *Kabal American Zephyr* series begun in 1981, which drew inspiration from an exhibition Rauschenberg had seen the year before at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *The Bizarre Imagery of Yoshitoshi: The Herbert R. Cole Collection*. Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839-1892) is widely recognized as the last great master of Ukiyo-e, the Japanese woodblock print. Although he depicted a variety of subjects in the course of his career, much of Yoshitoshi's work focused on scenes of brutal violence and death--wars, assaults, murders, and visitations by ghosts or monsters--which he typically depicted taking place in beautiful settings as enacted by exquisitely dressed figures. Rauschenberg's encounter with the art of this Japanese master sparked a string of works in which, using objects and

images drawn from life, he sought to capture what he called the "fantasy-macabre."[3]

Secrets, mysticism, and mythology are all implicit in the *Kabal American Zephyr* designation. The word "Kabal" can be read as a portmanteau combining "cabal," which refers to a secret society or conspiracy, and "Kabbalah," the ancient Jewish mystical tradition involving occult symbols with esoteric meanings. "American" summons up Rauschenberg's cultural roots. While it might be thought to refer to the pragmatic and familiar, it might here also stand for the mythologizing of aspects of the American experience. (One of the works in the series, for example, includes the image of Pegasus that Mobil Oil used as its logo at the time.)

Originally the name of the Greek God of the west wind, "Zephyr" has come to mean a gentle breeze, but it is has also been used as a proper or trade name for various vehicles including bicycles, cars, trains, planes, and warships,[4] lending them connotations of lightness and speed. The series title, then, is a word collage in which the artist juxtaposed disparate notions to provoke or freshen awareness, giving rise to new perceptions. As applied to material objects, this strategy of unexpected abutment is the generative principle behind all of Rauschenberg's constructions, right from the outset of his career.

Almost all of the *Kabal American Zephyr* works have darkly evocative titles. Most of those dated 1981 have titles appropriated from Yoshitoshi, who often gave his prints poetic names. Among those adopted verbatim by Rauschenberg are *The Brutal Calming of the Waves by Moonlight*, *Demons of Illness and Poverty Stalking the Lucky Gods*, *The Parade of the Wicked Thoughts of the Priest,* and *The interloper Tries Disguises,* the latter of 1982. In that year, Rauschenberg for the most part stopped using Yoshitoshi's titles, saying, "... I learned how to do the titles myself. I picked up on the cadences."[5] *Pegasus'*

First Visit to America in the Shade of the Flatiron Building and *The Vain Convoy of Europe Out West*, both of 1982, were named in that fashion.

Rauschenberg's preoccupation with the Japanese printmaker in 1981 is of particular significance, as it was on a trip to China with Gemini GEL to work with local materials, processes, and imagery one year later that he conceived the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange, or ROCI. This project, which extended through 1991, involved Rauschenberg serving as a self-appointed cultural ambassador. He traveled an exhibition of his work and created new series using local resources, images, and materials in each of eleven different countries, his aim being to use the power of art to encourage international cooperation and communication. In 1982, even before ROCI began, Rauschenberg went to Japan to create the sculptural *Japanese Clayworks* series, which fused ceramic traditions with new image-transfer technologies and combined imagery from ancient and modern Japan.

Yoshitoshi's career spanned two eras--the last years of the feudal Japan and the first years of the modern industrialized Japan, at the time newly opened to the West. In the 1870s, newspapers sprang up as part of the modernization drive that the country was undergoing in response to these influences. Yoshitoshi, as the Los Angeles County Museum's catalogue for its 1980 exhibition of his work notes, "is generally credited as being the first Japanese to do topical newspaper illustration."[6] He produced news *nishiki-e*--woodblock prints designed as full-page illustrations--to accompany articles, usually on sensationalized subjects, for several newspapers, among them *The Postal News*. Newspaper and magazine articles and illustrations were also, of course, a career-long staple of Rauschenberg's art, dating from works of the early fifties to pieces produced shortly before his death in 2008. Yoshitoshi's role as a pioneer of mass-media illustration seems not to have been lost on Rauschenberg, given the citation of *The Postal News* publication in his title. The transferred images of newsprint--specifically vertical columns of stock

price listings--prominent on one side of *Lurid Attack* were perhaps a reference to the printed vertical lines of text that appear at the top of each of Yoshitoshi's *Postal News* illustrations.

While Yoshitoshi did many prints for *The Postal News*, none bears the title, *The Lurid Attack of the Monsters*. However, one of the prints in the LACMA exhibition catalogue, dated "c. August 1875," is *Black Monster Attacking a Carpenter's Wife*.[7] The illustration is based on a newspaper story about a man's wife growing increasingly ill from night to night due to a monster's visitations; when she finally moved to a relative's home, her condition improved. In his print Yoshitoshi depicted a dramatic and highly erotic scene in which a man, presumably the carpenter, recoils in horror as he watches the monster's lumpen, ghostly body envelop that of his wife, its mouth meeting hers.

Rauschenberg seems to have taken the suggestion of the monster attack from Yoshitoshi's *Postal News* illustration of August 1875 and brought to it associations of his own, providing the monster with the form of a lizard-like beast that reads also as a cannon or other instrument of war--the "monster" for Rauschenberg becoming a reference to war and other dark forces at work in the world. The gas-masked figures, who appear in multiple on one side of the box, are counterbalanced on the other side and opposite end by repeated images in close-up of a coral reef, whose tone and clustered forms echo those of the hideously masked figures. Nature's wonders are here contrasted with human-made horrors. It does not seem coincidental that extending from the coral reef images is a trio of images of pillows, which connote rest, reassurance, and ease. However, beside it the image of what may be oil barrels "filled" with stock price listings from a newspaper stand alongside an image of boats in an open sea, bringing to mind oil spills and their destructive pollution of coral reefs, like those off his beloved Captiva Island, where Rauschenberg lived and worked for nearly four decades.

This interpretation of the works' imagery may not, admittedly, be in total accord with Rauschenberg's thought processes when constructing this work. His method of provocative juxtaposition is inherently open-ended, so that while clues offered by titles, imagery, and, in the case of *Lurid Attack*, the lizard-cannon form, are often revealing of his overall intentions and themes, the works are by design multivalent--meaning there are no wrong answers. A case in point is the gas-masked figures, which most immediately invite an ominous interpretation, evoking war. However, gas masks were also worn as protection by Rauschenberg and his assistants in the studio when transferring images to fabric, since the solvents used were highly toxic.[8] From his perspective, the gas masks assume an autobiographical aspect, commenting on his creative process. Such is the nature of his art.

In *Lurid Attack*, as in so many of Rauschenberg's works, found objects and transferred images rhyme in both form and content, giving rise to associations at once witty and strange. As an example, the contemplative male skeleton mentioned above is echoed by a similarly positioned image of a baseball player with a bat. Another effective rhyme is seen near the other end of the box, where a length of fabric printed with a pattern of what appears to be Native American design is attached to the top. The pattern's running triangular motif echoes the serrated edges of the cutting implements above. In addition it is also arched like the saws and rendered in the orange and blue with which they are painted. The fabric pattern also can be read as an abstraction of the images of butterflies and flowers that appear on the side of the box, just below. Adjoining the butterflies and flowers is a cluster of images pertaining to art and leisure: a painter with a paintbrush, a pianist at a keyboard, a couple on a city street, and children in a swimming pool.

The recent identification of the pianist as John Lennon and the couple as John Lennon and Yoko Ono lends yet another layer of meaning to the work's content.[9] Lennon's senseless murder in December 1980, just a few months

before the piece was begun, the skeleton's function as a *momento mori*, the birds and flowers as symbols of the couple's (and Rauschenberg's) oft-stated pacifism, and Ono's Japanese origins would all seem to play a role in *Lurid Attack*.[10] It has further been suggested that the painter might be Rauschenberg's friend, the Pop artist James Rosenquist, whom Rauschenberg acknowledged for having addressed political and social concerns in his art.[11] In its topicality and incorporation of portraits of artist friends, *Lurid Attack* calls to mind Rauschenberg's screenprint *Signs* (1970), a work that brings together symbols and scenes emblematic of the United States in the 1960s, among them images of the Vietnam War, the moon landing, a candlelit peace vigil, and the assassinated figures of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King. Prominently featured is another musical icon and friend, Janis Joplin, who died of a drug overdose shortly after Rauschenberg completed the print.[12]

In contrast to *Signs*, however, *Lurid Attack* also assembles content that transcends the topical in favor of a broader, more open-ended frame of reference. Alongside the image of Lennon and Yoko on the street, for example, is an extended one of children in a swimming pool. On the opposite side of the box appears another large-scale image, three times repeated, of children ambiguously engaged: are they climbing or descending from the wooden barrier depicted, or attempting to flee?

Whatever the nature of this trio of images and what they might have meant to Rauschenberg, it's worth noting that their source, as with many of the other images in this work, was probably *Soviet Life* magazine. While earlier in his career Rauschenberg derived images from the American magazines *Time*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *LIFE*, by the 1980s he was also drawing from any number of foreign publications and had three subscriptions to *Soviet Life*. He said he favored these magazines because the images are "half again as big as LIFE ever was.... They also have wonderfully transferrable color."[13] Certainly of equal

or even greater significance was the fact that the illustrations in these magazines were international in scope.

Although Rauschenberg began to travel the world and make art using images and objects from these overseas explorations as early as the late 1940s, he remained a quintessentially American artist in his "practical" interest in his found materials, his maverick attitude, and his predilection for the homegrown. During the early 1980s, however, he became increasingly committed to using art to transcend national boundaries and serve as a global language of communication. As he famously wrote in 1984, when launching ROCI, "...art contains potent peaceful powers and is the most non-elitist way to share exotic and common information, seducing us into creative mutual understandings for the benefit of all." His encounter with Yoshitoshi's art in 1980 seduced him into a creative dialogue with this master printer from across the globe. In *The Lurid Attack of the Monsters,* 1981, he brought the topical and antique and the exotic and common resoundingly together and, like the fellow artists to whom he paid tribute, revealed himself to be a concerned citizen of the world.

[1] Hereafter referred to as *The Lurid Attack of the Monsters* or *Lurid Attack*.

[3] While I am uncertain of its original source, Rauschenberg is quoted as using the term "fantasy-macabre" in Mary Lynn Kotz, *Rauschenberg/Art and Life* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), p. 215, and Robert Saltonstall Mattison, *Masterworks in the Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1995), p. 123.

[4] Kotz, p. 215, writes that Zephyr "was the brand name of a beloved bicycle in his youth."

[5] Marti Mayo, "Chronology" in *Robert Rauschenberg: Work from Four Series: A Sesquincentennial Exhibition,* exhib. cat., Houston, Texas, Contemporary Art Museum, 1985.

[6] Roger Keyes and George Kuwayama, *The Bizarre Imagery of Yoshitoshi: The Herbert R. Cole Collection*, exhib. cat., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1980, p. 11.

[7] Although the exhibition catalogue, cat. no. 11, p. 39, dates *Black Monster Attacking a Carpenter's Wife* "c. August 1875," LACMA's website now titles the work *Black Monster Attacking a Carpenter's Wife in Kanda, no. 663* and dates it April 1875. See http://collections.lacma.org/node/191357.

[8] Mattinson, p. 114.

[9] In an email to Jon Henricks of April 20, 2017, Kala Merrifield of Yoko Ono's Studio One confirmed that John Lennon is seen at the piano keyboard in a photograph of 1980 and that "the two backs are John & Yoko walking out of the Dakota." She continued, "Both images are by Kishin Shinoyama and were used during the promotion of "Double Fantasy" LP released in November 1980. John's face does look a bit distorted, but it's him." Shinoyama's images were shot three months before Lennon's death.

[10] Beginning in late 1960, Yoko Ono's loft at 112 Chambers Street in New York City became an important space for Fluxus and other avant-garde performances, and Rauschenberg and Ono became acquainted at that time. For an overview of Ono's role as both an artist and curator of the downtown scene, see Klaus Biesenbach and Christophe Cherix, *Yoko Ono: One Woman Show, 1960-1971*, exhib. cat., New York, Museum of Modern Art, 2015.

[11]Rauschenberg once wrote, "Jim Rosenquist is as generous in art as he is in politics.... His compositions are organized in content and color as if they were a public/social alarm. The alarm is positive. The degree of optimism in his work is by degree, but always there. En masse, the works are a welcome and a celebration of life in the broadest sense." Quoted in Michael Lobel, "Sign Language: James Rosenquist in Retrospect," Artforum, October 2003, p.131.

[12] Both Port Arthur, Texas, natives, Rauschenberg and Joplin met at the New York City nightclub Max's Kansas City in 1968. In 1971, he named a small lithographic press in his Captiva studio "Little Janis" in her honor.

[13] Barbara Rose, *Rauschenberg* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), p. 78.

Black Monster Attacking a Carpenter's Wife [in Kanda, no. 663]

Alternate Title: Dai roppyaku rokujūsan gō
Series: The Postal News
Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (Japan, 1839-1892)

Japan, 1875, April
Prints; woodcuts
Color woodblock print,13 5/8 x 9 13/16 in. (34.7 x 23.4 cm)
Herbert R. Cole Collection (M.84.31.123)
SEE http://collections.lacma.org/node/191357