

Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg at the Pergamon Museum 1982. © Christopher Makos, 1982.



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Renascence: Robert Rauschenberg's Encounter
with Andy Warhol's Silkscreens

As Warhol wrote in his book, *POPism*, "Henry [Geldzahler] phoned one afternoon and said, 'Rauschenberg just called to ask me about silkscreening, and I told him, "Why ask me--ask Andy." I said I'd arrange for him to come up to your place and have a look around.'"¹ On September 18, 1962, Rauschenberg and Geldzahler, who was curator of twentieth-century art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and friend to both artists, visited Warhol's studio in the company of the critic David Bourdon, Ileana and Michael Sonnabend (Rauschenberg's Paris dealer and her husband), and Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd, a young Swedish artist.

Among the works Rauschenberg would have seen during this visit were some of Warhol's early hand-painted Pop works--paintings of comics, ads and brand name products (Campbell's Soup cans, Coca Cola bottles)--several of which had already been shown in New York and were probably familiar to Rauschenberg. Some of the slightly later works of this type feature grids of imperfectly repeated images made with the aid of stencils and rubber stamps. Newer works not yet exhibited were Warhol's first silkscreen paintings, among them the "Dollar Bill" series, begun in March 1962, which present gridded configurations of the fronts, or both the fronts and backs, of U.S. dollar bills, produced by means of hand-cut, commercially made silkscreens based upon Warhol's own drawings.

Far more significant for Rauschenberg, however, and also on view that day were Warhol's early photographic silkscreen paintings derived from mass-media photographs. *Baseball*, of June or July 1962, believed to be his first work of this type, presents a staccato grid consisting of the same image, repeated upwards of thirty times, of Yankee Roger Maris hitting a home run, the catcher visible behind him. Also on view would have been a few of Warhol's photo-silkscreens of celebrities Troy Donahue and Warren Beatty, derived from fan magazines, as well as Warhol's first portraits of Marilyn Monroe, some of them in color, which he began shortly after her suicide of August 5, 1962.

During the visit, Rauschenberg asked Warhol to share with him the name of the commercial screenmaker who had produced the screens, and Warhol complied. (It was Aetna Silk Screen Products, New York). Very soon after that Rauschenberg sent the screenmaker a selection of images he had found in newspapers and magazines, as well as several of his own snapshots. By October 1962, he had begun his "Silkscreen Painting" series, which was to consist of about eighty works and occupy him until June 1964.²

For Rauschenberg, Warhol's silkscreen painting technique was a revelation. It offered the solution to a problem he had been trying for some time to solve: how to translate the language of photographic images that he had developed in his transfer drawings to the scale and presence of paintings.

Silkscreens enabled him to move from the collage-based aesthetic of his early years to the photography-reliant one that was to stay with him for the rest of his life.

By the time of his 1962 studio visit with Warhol, Rauschenberg was a well-established artist with a growing international reputation. He had burst upon the New York scene in the early 1950s, attracting considerable attention for such works as the *Erased de Kooning Drawing* of 1953, but it was the "Combines" series, produced between 1955 and 1962, that earned him an early foothold in art history. In these works, which "combined" aspects of sculpture and painting, all manner of found objects and images--from taxidermically stuffed animals, automobile tires, working light bulbs and articles of clothing to newspaper and magazine illustrations--were intermingled with expressionistically painted passages. While the vigorous and emphatic paintwork clearly owed a debt to the older generation of gestural painters, the images were free of Abstract Expressionist angst. Instead, he used the painted passages to activate the collaged surfaces and lend them immediacy.

By the early sixties, Rauschenberg was considered to be a father figure of the international development known as Assemblage, in which found objects and everyday materials, often of junk origins, were appropriated for works of art. What's more, his incorporation into his work of a whole range of artifacts from popular culture--Coca Cola bottles and other brand name goods, comics, images of public figures such as celebrities and athletes--had already brought him recognition as a major transitional figure between Abstract Expressionism and the new Pop Art.

Perhaps more than any of the other artists associated with Pop, Warhol acknowledged his admiration for Rauschenberg and the influence upon him of Rauschenberg's work. Though only three years his senior, Rauschenberg had been a presence on the New York art scene for a decade before Warhol, a commercially trained artist known initially as a fashion illustrator, began to garner wide notice. Warhol credited Rauschenberg's work of the 1950s with having "brought art back from abstraction and introspective stuff"³ and consistently

maintained that Rauschenberg's focus on objects and images drawn from everyday life made his own art possible.⁴

However, after seven years of producing Combines, Rauschenberg had grown bored with methods by now too familiar to him; moreover, he felt constricted by the historical role to which he had been too quickly assigned. Consequently, he began seeking alternatives to what he himself had pioneered. One avenue of pursuit involved his attempt to translate the techniques used in his transfer drawings, begun in the early 1950s, into painting. It was in the transfer drawings that the photographic images so central to his (and Warhol's) use of silkscreen first assumed a major role. To transfer an image, Rauschenberg would moisten newspaper or magazine illustrations with a solvent, place the image face down on a sheet of drawing paper, and then rub the back to impress the image on the paper surface. His first surviving effort to bring this technique to painting was *Calendar* of 1962, measuring 72 by 72 inches, which features a host of transferred photographs as well as surface markings made with graphite and diluted paint. Rauschenberg was dissatisfied with the results and took this approach no further, probably because the images were small, pale and hard to read when applied to a large canvas and, as the originals were destroyed in the transfer process, they could not be reused to create repetitions. Around this same time, Rauschenberg made several attempts to photosensitize canvas, but these too proved unsuccessful.

In late spring, 1962, Rauschenberg made his first lithographs, yet another bridge to his Silkscreen Paintings. Working at Tatyana Grosman's Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE) in West Islip, New York, he produced the print *Urban*, whose clusters of images were the result not of solvent transfers, but of impressions made with lead type and zinc cuts of newspaper photographs that he acquired from the picture morgue of *The New York Times*. Intermingled with washes of lithographic tusche and imprints of found objects (among them a leaf and sheet of perforated notebook paper) are sequential photographs of a baseball tag out; a repeated image of baseball players in front of a scoreboard; portraits of John F. Kennedy; and images of a satellite dish, racehorses and an

imposing building. In its assertive graphic appearance, concentration on black and white, use of a reproductive process and reliance on found, mass media-derived imagery that this lithograph broke grounds for the Silkscreen Paintings, so that when Warhol showed him the photo silkscreen process, Rauschenberg was ready.

He quickly adopted protocols to put the new medium to work. To begin, Rauschenberg would send photographs and illustrations from such magazines as *LIFE*, *Time* and *National Geographic* to the screenmaker with instructions for how he wanted the images sized. A silkscreen consists of a finely woven silk or similar material stretched across a wooden frame. After the cloth is treated with a light-sensitive emulsion, a transparency of the photograph is projected on it. When the screen is developed with hot water, the unexposed areas dissolve, leaving the weave open. To print, the screen is placed face down on a canvas and ink is pushed through the open weave with a squeegee. Like a photographic negative, the screen can be reused and the image reproduced any number of times. On canvas, Rauschenberg complemented the silkscreened images with oil paint applied in a wide variety of touches--drips, washes, flat areas, and expressionistically brushed passages--to activate them and give them presence.

Before Warhol and Rauschenberg took up silkscreening, the process had belonged to the commercial realm, where it was used for printed posters, billboards, labels and the like; in a more limited way, it was used in the graphic arts to make fine art prints known as "serigraphs." Warhol and Rauschenberg, the first to use the technique in painting, subverted the clean, flat colors and crisp edges characteristic of traditional silkscreens. In Rauschenberg's hands, the mechanical process of silkscreening became gestural, malleable and open to improvisation, but Warhol, despite his professed desire "to be a machine," also exploited smears, clotted effects, and imperfections, as evidenced in the aforementioned *Baseball*.

As Rauschenberg is believed to have seen this painting during his studio visit, it seems hardly coincidental that a series of three paintings featuring

prominent images of baseball players were among his earliest Silkscreen Paintings--*Brace*, *Shortstop* and *Quarry*, all completed in the fall of 1962. Although baseball was a subject that frequently figured in Rauschenberg's work (beside appearing in *Urban*, baseball players are seen in the Combine, *Talisman*, from 1958, and in any number of transfer drawings), he probably intended this trio of paintings as an assertion of his method and sensibility, as distinct from those of Warhol. While Warhol used a regular grid format, Rauschenberg produced scattered, intuitively balanced designs whose gestural quality betrayed New York School influences, as did the hand-painted passages with which he energized them. Where Warhol sought an impersonal, mass-produced result, Rauschenberg remained lyrically inclined, using improvisation and multivalent content to canny effect. In contrast to Warhol, who repeated a single image over the surface of the canvas, Rauschenberg opted for multiplicity. Among the images found in *Shortstop*, some of which stutter and repeat or appear as ghosts of themselves, are baseball players (Roger Maris is batting, with Mickey Mantle on deck), a hand taking a pulse, billowy clouds, men loading a payload into a missile, a glass of water, a speckled circle with a wavy edge (maybe a drawing of a seedpod or a view through a microscope), and a transparent box form.

Some of the same images had appeared in *Renascence*, one of several small square works (36 by 36 inches) that Rauschenberg executed as study pieces when he was just beginning his Silkscreen Painting series. Each of these trial works presents a limited number of images, and displays a concentrated focus, unusual for this artist. Whereas Warhol seems to have plunged right into the production of photo-silkscreens, his use of either a single centred image or the grid format obviating questions of composition and design, Rauschenberg first embarked on a period of experimentation, during which he considered some of the formal and thematic possibilities offered by the process. Similarly, while Warhol produced silkscreen paintings with both black-and-white and colour images almost from the start, Rauschenberg confined himself to the

former until May 1963, as he wanted to investigate the medium, unhampered by the added spatial and emotional complexities of colour.

In *Renascence*, two overlapping isometric boxes occupy the centre of the work, where they are, in turn, overlapped by a painted white square that appears to hover above the surface. Rauschenberg once explained that the purpose of the open box form, which he used throughout the series, was “to heighten the viewer’s intellectual awareness.”⁵ The box is an abstraction—a diagrammatic form that describes a volume of space. Juxtaposed with photographic images, the pictorial motif forces the viewer to remain conscious of the illusory nature of photographic depth, evident in the images of the sea that appear horizontally at the bottom left and vertically at the extreme right. Because Rauschenberg silkscreened these images in order to eliminate horizon lines and the sky above, however, they appear very flat. In fact, the strong light-dark contrasts in the sea photographs and their crude transfer to canvas cause the silkscreened images to resemble gestural white brushstrokes against a dark ground. These ersatz “brushstrokes” in turn play against the dense black, gesturally painted ground that appears behind the speckled circular form. Within the confines of this seemingly unassuming work, Rauschenberg was able to, in this way, set out polarities of flat and perspectival, abstract and representational, mechanically reproduced and hand-painted.

The composition of *Renascence*--a central square surrounded by a series of forms that suggest concentric or enclosing squares-- would appear to owe something to Josef Albers, with whom Rauschenberg had studied at Black Mountain College in 1949. Albers’ *Homage to the Square* paintings are also concerned with fundamental questions of abstraction and spatial tension. Given the illusionistic play in *Renascence*, the title may refer to the Renaissance discovery of perspective. It may also allude to the “rebirth” of Rauschenberg’s art—to the wealth of possibility he discovered in the photo silkscreen medium.

While Rauschenberg was in his studio, Warhol asked him for the loan of a few personal photographs that could be used as the basis for a new series of silkscreen portraits. Soon after, Rauschenberg complied, providing Warhol with

both old family snapshots and recent photographs. Though his reputation was on the rise, Rauschenberg, by no means, shared the celebrity status of Elvis Presley and Elizabeth Taylor, Warhol's other portrait subjects of the time. The paintings Warhol made from Rauschenberg's photos stand, instead, as acts of homage to the artist who paved the way for his own art. Warhol produced ten of these paintings in all, most of which feature the image of a noble, somewhat exalted-looking Rauschenberg in a winter jacket gazing skyward (derived from a photograph taken by Rauschenberg's partner at the time, the dancer/choreographer Steve Paxton). Two of Warhol's paintings devoted to Rauschenberg are tellingly titled (and, it would appear, without irony) *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.⁶ Perhaps in recognition of Rauschenberg's working method as distinct from his own, particularly in its engagement with multiplicity, one of these appears to have been Warhol's first photo silkscreen painting to feature a variety of images (albeit arranged in rows of repeated ones) within a single work.

After being awarded the International Grand Prize for Painting at the XXXII Venice Biennale in June 1964, Rauschenberg telephoned a studio assistant back in New York, asking him to destroy the approximately 150 silkscreens in his studio, so as to assure he would not repeat himself, but would move on to something new.⁷ For the next six years, he devoted himself to dance and performance art and to experiments in art and technology. When he renewed his engagement with collage and assemblage in the first half of the 1970s, the work he produced was initially purged of photographic images. The *Hoarfrost* series of 1974 reintroduced them in the form of solvent transfers on fabric.

By the mid-1980s, Rauschenberg, again, began to work with photo silkscreens, often on metal (copper, brass, bronze and aluminium) supports. In 1991, he turned to digital printing as a means of incorporating photographic images into his works. The use of large-format inkjet printers freed him from a reliance on commercial screenmakers and from the physically cumbersome and time-consuming process of silkscreening itself. From this point forward, the

photographic imagery used in his work came not from mass-media sources, but from the cache of thousands of photographs he took during his travels around the globe. Indeed, through the more than half-century of his career, Rauschenberg had travelled far – both geographically and technically – in his quest to bring our image-saturated habitat into his work.

¹ Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *Popism: The Warhol '60s* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 1980, pp.22-23.

² For documentation on the works of this series, see my catalogue raisonné of Rauschenberg's Silkscreen Paintings, Roni Feinstein, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Silkscreen Paintings 1962-64*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in association with Bullfinch Press, 1990).

³ ibid., p.3.

⁴ Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), p.215.

⁵ Quoted in Dean Swanson, *Robert Rauschenberg: Paintings 1953-64*, exhibition catalogue (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1965), n.p.

⁶Of Warhol's two painting that bear this title, the one in the National Gallery, Washington, is dated 1962 and the other, in a private collection, 1963. Warhol appropriated the title *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* from James Agee's and Walker Evan's book of 1941 documenting the lives of Alabama sharecroppers during the Great Depression. The Rauschenberg family photograph that Warhol screened in a sepia tone in each of the paintings with this title shows the family posed in a manner that evokes the tenant farmers seen in the book.

⁷ Tomkins, p.235.