

American painter Robert Rauschenberg 1925-2008: Avant-garde to Pop

Lee Parsons

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Noted American artist Robert Rauschenberg died May 12 this year of heart failure at his home in Captiva, Florida at the age of 82. Though highly regarded in the art world, Rauschenberg may not be as widely known to the broader public as some of his contemporaries and so the passing of this controversial and influential artist obliges us to consider his work and the era during which he came to prominence.

In the aftermath of the World War II, when leading US artists were effectively cut off—through no fault of their own—from socially progressive movements and broader social currents, their retreat inward was countered by figures such as Rauschenberg whose somewhat naive exuberance effectively threw open the window and invited the world in. Whatever its weaknesses, and he had no shortage of detractors, the best of his art captures the potential of his age and, along with the work of others in his milieu, set a course for the generation of artists that followed.

In the pantheon of the postwar avant-garde, Rauschenberg maintained a leading position in the art world for most of his career. In addition to presaging subsequent currents in art, his work has been credited with providing the transition from Abstract Expressionism to Pop Art. One art critic even designated his use of cultural images as the introduction of 'post-modernist' painting.⁽¹⁾

Leaving aside such dubious characterizations, his collage or 'combine' paintings are some of the liveliest and most convincing work of the time. His effective use of images and objects from everyday life broke with the prevailing 'non-objective' styles in painting and showed an attempt to engage with the world in all its complexity and contradiction.

One characteristic and early work, entitled "Bed," is particularly striking. Legend has it that he woke up one morning and, lacking money for other materials, tacked his own quilt to the wall and began to paint. The quilt is eclipsed by a rainbow of dripping paint over the simply patterned fabric. It is a remarkable piece that conveys a whimsical sort of anarchy intruding on the comfortable refinement of a simpler world.

Though it was his painting that gained him recognition and established him in the forefront of contemporary art, Rauschenberg early on also demonstrated great versatility. In this sense too he challenged conventional wisdom in his collaborations with a number of the leading figures of the day in music, dance, film, photography and theatre.

A changing vanguard

Born Milton Ernest Rauschenberg in Port Arthur, Texas in 1925, his father worked as a lineman for a utility company and his mother, who noted that "art was not in our world," worked at needle craft. As a boy he was discouraged from an interest in drawing and early on thought he would become a fundamentalist preacher, an ambition he soon gave up when he discovered that the strictures of religion were too limiting to his creative energies. After briefly studying pharmacy and a stint in the marines, he enrolled at the Kansas City Art Institute in 1947.

In 1949 Rauschenberg attended Black Mountain College in North Carolina, which was by then a center of the American avant-garde. Under the tutelage of Joseph Albers, an influential artist with origins in the Bauhaus movement of the 1920s, he learned discipline and method. It was also here that he began to work with the soon to be renowned choreographer Merce Cunningham and sound artist John Cage, another controversial artist who promoted accident and even mysticism in the creative process.

Something about the tumultuousness and mobility of immediately postwar America must surely find its expression in Rauschenberg's transition from would-be fundamentalist preacher preparing to be a pharmacist to avant-garde painter, studying with some of the 'cutting edge' artists of his time, in the matter of a few years!

Rauschenberg and Cage worked on a number of projects in the following years, but the 1951 piece called "Automobile Tire Print" is among their best known and most representative collaborations. The title is comically literal. Rauschenberg had Cage drive a car over stretched out paper, which he then fashioned into a scroll in what was construed as an audacious challenge to the self-seriousness of the art world.

Around this time Rauschenberg produced his famous "Erased De Kooning", which was, as the title suggests, a drawing by Willem de Kooning, whom he greatly admired, erased over the period of a month. Against the criticism that this was an act of protest or vandalism, Rauschenberg proclaimed the result to be poetry. Still, these early statements are not his most sincere and seem self-conscious in light of his later work—as though he were trying to impress more than express.

He married artist Susan Weil in 1950 and they had a son, but soon afterward they divorced and Rauschenberg embarked on his relationship with artist Jasper Johns, who rivals him in fame if not importance. Together they were spurred on to their respective creative heights over the next decade. In Rauschenberg's words, their union gave them "permission

to do what we wanted." No doubt the relationship itself contained an element of protest, no matter how limited, against American conformism of the Eisenhower era.

Working alongside Cage, Rauschenberg continued to design sets and costumes for Merce Cunningham, one of the most influential figures in modern dance, and rounded out his efforts by composing music and experimenting with electronics, photography and other media throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

An innovative piece in 1955 titled "Monogram", representative of much of his work for the next decade, displays a stuffed and painted angora goat inside a car tire. Granting it credit for its peculiar originality, formally the piece is a continuation of the efforts by art pioneers of previous generations such as the Dadaists, and Surrealists. The work nevertheless charted a new direction for the period by re-introducing objective symbols in art.

Rauschenberg's signature "combines" are seemingly spontaneous or even reckless Action Paintings adorned with random items. Undoubtedly there is an element of accident in his work, but in his best pieces he does transcend his limitations to convincingly portray an epic view of civilization and art, such as in his "Retroactive" series of the early 1960s. One senses that he is also dealing with something deeply personal—often a nostalgia for his own past—and a love of the sensuous world.

Art in crisis

Rauschenberg's artistic trajectory was very much conditioned by the retreat from political and ideological concerns imposed on the artists by the realities of Cold War America, which characterized the avant-garde, led by Abstract Expressionists such as Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell and Mark Rothko, among others, collectively known as "The New York School."

Intent on freeing themselves of the domination of European painting, what also bound these artists together was a "common need to denounce all rhetoric and elude all the nets cast by ambitious cataloguers and historians." (2) Though Rauschenberg agreed with these aims, he was also determined to bridge the gap between the increasingly isolated art world and the broader public. His outlook is summed up in his formulation that, "Painting relates both to art and life. Neither can be made—I try to act in the gap between the two."

Revolutionary changes in technology and social relations early in the last century presented particular problems for traditional art forms such as painting and sculpture--the avant-garde was in part a response to a marginalization of fine art that resulted from the growth of a mass market. Fighting for the independence of art from dominant commercial interests, the avant-garde were driven to challenge established tastes and the limits of what could be considered art. By the time Rauschenberg came along the old barriers had largely been broken down even in parochial America.

Anti-capitalist and socialist ideas that had inspired the Dadaist and Surrealist movements in response to depression, war and fascism also animated the American avant-garde, which found its centre in New York City before and during the Second World War. In the subsequent period of

social stagnation such ideas were suppressed and something of value was lost to the next generation of painters. What was nevertheless preserved in figures such as Rauschenberg was the old spirit of protest, which they invested with a new vitality.

The connection drawn between Rauschenberg and the nonsensical "found art" of Dadaism is valid but limited. While the Dada movement, most famously expressed in Marcel Duchamp's urinal ("Fountain"), sought to alienate the official art world and to oppose the order that produced the world wars, social content for Rauschenberg was largely incidental.

Artists like Rauschenberg responded to their disconnection from popular culture by appropriating its products for their art, but—unable to resolve the impasse that fine art faced—their efforts ultimately became an adaptation to it, and that has fed into the prevailing currents, principally concerned with purely formal explorations.

His monochrome "White Paintings", produced at the Art Students League in New York in 1951, nevertheless provoked a critical backlash reminiscent of that unleashed against the Dadaists over thirty years previous. The utter simplicity and even vacuity of these works demonstrate a nihilism that anticipated the minimalist trend of the 1960s and 1970s and foreshadowed the cul-de-sac in which the avant-garde now finds itself.

Rauschenberg's legacy

With his work now fetching millions at auction, it is a commonplace to observe that Rauschenberg became 'overrated.' The mythic status accorded a select few artists whose work commands astronomical prices reflects more the machinations of the market than artistic worth, and Rauschenberg instinctively maintained a scepticism about his success. "I was the 'charlatan' of the art world. Then, when I had enough work amassed, I became a 'satirist'—a tricky word—of the art world, then 'fine artist,' but who could live with it?"

Irrespective of the distortions of the art market, this artist's contribution to stylistic innovation and his prolific activity in a range of creative spheres deserves recognition; what his enduring legacy will be is another matter.

It is to his credit that in the latter decades of his life Rauschenberg initiated projects to benefit international cultural exchange and to promote and assist new talent. He founded a non-profit organization for this purpose and showed a generosity of spirit in numerous other undertakings. Typical of his philanthropy, he famously bought up a swath of Florida beachfront around his studio and allowed the previous owners to stay on at his expense.

An inquiry into what exactly Rauschenberg intended with his shenanigans is not overly illuminating. On the whole, he didn't seem to concern himself a great deal with history or theory, and when called upon to comment on various issues he reveals a characteristic insouciance. Whatever his conscious intentions, his design sense is often remarkable and his art authentic and engaging. Fame and fortune aside, it would have to be said then that his work, by the terms it sets for itself, succeeds.

And how is this to be explained in the case of an artist who by all indications was so little concerned with the deeper significance of art? In his own words, "knowing more only encourages your limitations." Ultimately he was a product of his age which was, to say the least, a difficult one for art (and thought). If, as Trotsky observed, there are many in this world who think as revolutionists but feel as philistines, does the worldly success of a figure such as Rauschenberg suggest that the opposite may be true; that it is possible to express things profoundly but with little understanding? Possible perhaps, but surely not prescribed.

For the more thoughtful, the deepening crisis for art in the current period, while not identical, must be seen as bound up with that of society as a whole. Whether Rauschenberg's sort of response to a world in crisis has lasting significance remains a question that is posed to the current generation of artists.

Notes:

- (1) Leo Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism" (1972)
- (2) Dore Ashton, "The New York School: a cultural reckoning" (1972)



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