

Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends At MoMA Celebrates The Collaborative Spirit

Adam Lehrer

I was recently on a panel to discuss the work of the late artist and Ramones' graphic artist Arturo Vega alongside a couple of iconic and influential art writers at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery in Ft. Myers, Florida. Just outside the confines of the gallery space were three Robert Rauschenberg masterpieces that I had never seen before. One in particular featured a collaged image of a human skeleton alongside a reflective surface. One of those writers remarked to me, "Warhol gets all the credit now, but Rauschenberg was a much better artist."



Adam Lehrer
Robert Rauschenberg 'Retroactive 1' install shot

I'm not here to knock the incredible impact that Andy Warhol has had on pop culture and art history. We know he's a genius. But if you're going to discuss early Pop Art and you had to compare and contrast the style's two most iconic practitioners, Warhol and Rauschenberg, you could easily argue that as a pure artist, or a maker of things, Rauschenberg was indeed the better artist. Warhol's mystique was partly based on things like the Factory, his media savvy, his incredible work in art cinema, his blending of the avant-garde art world with pop culture and celebrity, and his detached cool that would go onto to define art world pose. Rauschenberg's work is about freedom: freedom to make things, freedom to exchange ideas with friends, freedom to be an artist in a free society. That beauty has never been more evident than it is at the current Rauschenberg retrospective at MoMA, *Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends*.

When looking at the paintings, screen prints, collages, combines and various collaborations Rauschenberg engaged in with artists of other disciplines (like choreographer Merce Cunningham, composer John Cage, and fellow artists/friends/brief lovers Cy Twombly and Jasper Johns), one can't help but feel a kind of nostalgic patriotism. Warhol and Rauschenberg were arguably the two most important American artists working out of New York in the 1960s, but Rauschenberg's work shuns the ironic, mass media satire of Warhol's for a recognition that the American dream in the 1960s was starting to become something tangible, and beautiful. Rauschenberg could feel the seismic social changes of the 1960s and his work emphasizes a slow but substantial American cultural progress. In *Retroactive 1*, one of the artist's most iconic silkscreen works made of sourced mass media images screen printed via oil onto canvas, JFK is pictured alongside an astronaut floating in space and several more abstract images. Rauschenberg saw in JFK a revitalization of a president with meaning, or, "the president as someone truly exceptional." There is hope in his work; hopes that the senseless murders of Kennedy and Dr. King and Malcolm X might stand for some greater American progress. But viewing Rauschenberg's work now, one can't help but reconcile with the fact that the 1960s promise of slow societal progression is largely over. Our president is now someone truly unexceptional, and as cultural attitudes have moved forward, just as many have regressed all the way backwards. Rauschenberg's exhibition at MoMA is a requiem for an American dream.



Adam Lehrer
Robert Rauschenberg 'Minutiae' install shot

The exhibition is massive: 250 works representing the entirety of Rauschenberg's 60 year career. There as as much to admire in the exhibition as there is to meet with healthy skepticism. Rauschenberg was a wildly prolific artist. He'd try any idea that floated through his sizable imagination, unafraid of the negative impact that critically scorned work could have on his legacy. He largely predicted where American contemporary art has arrived at. The Russian fine art photographer Slava Mogutin recently explained to Document Journal that 2017 is the era of the multimedia artist. But artists like Rauschenberg, and certainly artists like Warhol and filmmaker Jack Smith, allowed this to happen by fearlessly transmitting their artistic concepts to various mediums.

A healthy portion of the exhibition is dedicated to perhaps one of the most venerated aspects of Rauschenberg's body of work: the Combines. Rauschenberg used the term 'the Combines' to describe works he created that combined both painting and a king of assemblage-based sculpture. They today are still very interesting and evocatively beautiful to look at. Works like *Canyon* (1959) look as if objects are coming alive and emerging from the canvas, reinforcing the art object as an organism that changes and evolves with the time that it passes through. There are some works that come off as more haphazard than others. But Rauschenberg was a man of limitless ideas, and you can see in his combines an effort to make sense of an endless stream of disparate concepts and inspirations. One of those combines, *Minutiae*, was commissioned by the revolutionary experimental choreographer Merce Cunningham to be used as a set piece to one of his productions in 1954. The combines were the first paintings to literally come alive and bleed out of the canvas and onto the gallery's floor. To watch the films (made by experimental filmmaker Charles Atlas, who filmed most of Cunningham's productions) of Cunningham's dancers vibrantly move and flit around the combines, engaging with them and breathing life into them, is thrilling.

Rauschenberg's collaborative nature is at the heart of *Among Friends* (after all, the exhibition is named *Among Friends*). Some of the collaborations work very well, and others don't at all, and the good and bad are all inside this exhibition. But I don't believe this exhibition is necessarily solely about good art work, it's about the experimental and open-hearted disposition of Rauschenberg himself, who once said: "My whole area of art has always been addressed to working with other people."



Adam Lehrer
Robert Rauschenberg 'Untitled (Two Rauschenbergs)' install shot

Shunning the ideology of his teacher at Black Mountain College, geometric abstract painter Joseph Albers, who stressed a formal rigor in art work, Rauschenberg saw in artistic collaboration a potential for chaos that more closely resembled a 1960s America that was simultaneously full of contradictions bouncing back and also slowly moving forward in social progress. To Rauschenberg, the concept of ideas being shared and forth between brilliant minds created a beautiful-and culturally important-chaos. For example, Rauschenberg's infamous *White Paintings* (1951) appear, as does his friend and once lover Cy Twombly's versions of the same paintings. Rauschenberg recognized in the white painting a sort of projection rod, in which the audience's understanding of the blank canvas was totally contingent on what we know of the artist and the artist's output. Therefore, one could extrapolate totally different meanings from *White Paintings* depending on whether or not Rauschenberg's or Twombly's name was on them. You could also extrapolate virtually nothing from it, and that would also have been interesting to Rauschenberg.

There is a lot to chew on with this exhibition, and one would truly need more time to accurately convey the brilliance of these disparate bodies of work. But Rauschenberg was so early to exploring various multimedia practices it would be negligent to not express the opinion that he was highly important towards the development of conceptual art itself. In his piece *Erased De Kooning Drawing*, Rauschenberg commissioned the venerated abstract expressionist Willem De Kooning to create a drawing for him (De Kooning evidently had a sense of humor about himself) that Rauschenberg then erased to the point that only vague shapes remain. Rauschenberg recognized that deconstruction was as much a creative act as construction. He also updated methods of art making that never got their due respect. In his exposed blueprint paper pieces, Rauschenberg would place a piece of light sensitive blueprint paper along a wall, have a body stand against it (sometimes his own body, as in *Untitled (Double Rauschenberg)*, expose it to light and an abstract shape would appear against blue negative space. The practice calls to mind the photograms of early surrealist and fine art photographer Man Ray whose influence on contemporary art was yet to be pronounced, because photography itself wasn't yet canonized like painting and sculpture.

The inclusion of *Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno* suggests Rauschenberg's obsessive nature: once he got interested in an idea, he ruthlessly brought that idea to life. Using mass media images that he then burned onto a canvas using lighter fluid, Rauschenberg illustrates a contemporary vision of every one of the 34 cantos of Dante Alighieri's Medieval epic that in my mind serves as one of Rauschenberg's most interesting works to endlessly look at.



Adam Lehrer
Robert Rauschenberg 'Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno' detail shot

There is also evidence of his deep consideration for and attempts to elevate his contemporaries in the piece *Short Circuit* (1955) that was made when Rauschenberg's gallery asked its artist to invite their friends to show work. Once the gallery decided against it, Rauschenberg had his friends and artists Jasper Johns and Susan Weil contribute works that he then assembled into the larger piece. The piece isn't a totally successful work of art, but MoMA successfully includes it here to emphasize the collaborative spirit that jettisoned much of Rauschenberg's best work.

I could say something about how Rauschenberg's later work, like his metallic screenprints, feel stale in comparison to earlier works (like old ideas simply elevated in luxury). I could harp on how no matter how impressive Rauschenberg's collaborative works are, I am most deeply moved by his '60s screenprints. But that's not the point. The point is that Rauschenberg's open mind and free spirit would ultimately alter culture's consideration of what an American artist actually is. The American artist engages with, critiques, and ultimately celebrates his culture's slow progress. The American artist is free to see his/her ideas manifest across all manner of disciplines in the fine arts. Rauschenberg wasn't the first American multimedia artist by any stretch, but he is perhaps the one that most looks like contemporary multimedia artists. Ultimately, *Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends* reads as a tragedy because one is forced to ask themselves, "Are artists, and human beings, still free to express themselves as Rauschenberg once was?" With President Donald Trump refusing to outright condemn murderous Nazi thugs, *Among Friends* reinforces the necessity of the free exchange of ideas, techniques, philosophies, and knowledge. Rauschenberg's work demonstrates a remarkable understanding of nuance, cultural tone, and context. Context has left contemporary discourse. That's an American tragedy.