

Long-lost John Cage painting, now found, debuts at Fort Myers' Rauschenberg Gallery at FSW

Charles Runnells, Fort Myers News-Press Published 9:00 a.m. ET April 15, 2019



John Cage's recently rediscovered 1990 painting, "New River Rocks and Washes" (Photo: BOB RAUSCHENBERG GALLERY @FSW)

For 27 years, it was a mystery: Whatever happened to that huge [John Cage](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Cage) (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Cage>) painting, "New River Rocks and Washes"?

Artist Ray Kass was there when the renowned composer and visual artist created the oversized painting in 1990 with the help of Kass, a sprawling team of assistants and piles of river rocks from the nearby New River.

The painting was eventually sold to art collector Adelaide de Menil for her family's expansive The Menil Collection. Then it was put in a tube, placed in a storage crate ... and forgotten.

But Kass never forgot about that massive watercolor painting — one of Cage's last two paintings before his death in 1992.

"I'd been looking for it for years," he says.



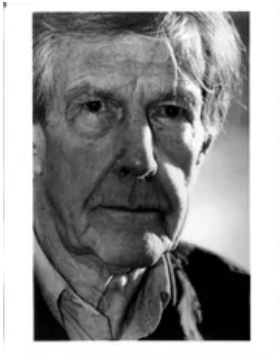
A close-up of John Cage's recently rediscovered 1990 painting, "New River Rocks and Washes" (Photo: Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at FSW)

Now — rediscovered just a few months ago — the painting is being displayed for the first time anywhere at [Bob Rauschenberg Gallery](http://www.rauschenberggallery.com/) (<http://www.rauschenberggallery.com/>) on the south Fort Myers campus of Florida SouthWestern State College. The exhibit continues through July 27.

Laura Kuhn, executive director for New York's [John Cage Trust](https://www.johncage.org/) (<https://www.johncage.org/>), says it's always important whenever a new Cage work resurfaces. "This one is a big deal in the art world."

Big is the right word. The massive 8 ½ by 28 foot painting takes up almost an entire wall at the south Fort Myers gallery.

It's a wonder the thing got lost in the first place, Kuhn says. "It's really quite large. It's not something that's in the back of your closet."



Artist/composer John Cage
(Photo: Special to The News-Press)

The painting was rediscovered earlier this year after Kass and Jade Dellinger, director of Rauschenberg Gallery, started working on a planned exhibit of Cage's collaborations with Kass. Those artworks were created at Kass's Mountain Lake Workshop, an ongoing series of community-based art collaborations in Southwestern Virginia.

Kass had tried to find the missing painting for years. But the Fort Myers exhibit inspired him to try again with [The Menil Collection](https://www.menil.org/) (<https://www.menil.org/>).

That eventually led Kass to contact Adelaide de Menil's The Rock Foundation. De Menil had purchased the painting in 1992, after her family's The Menil Collection had bought a companion piece, "New River Rocks and Smoke," which Cage created around the same time at the Mountain Lake Workshop.

Sean Mooney, chief curator for The Rock Foundation, started doing some detective work to try to locate the missing painting. Eventually, just a few months ago, he found it in a mislabeled crate in a storage facility in Deer Park, N.Y.



John Cage's recently rediscovered 1990 painting, "New River Rocks and Washes" debuted April 11 at Bob Rauschenberg Gallery. (Photo: BOB RAUSCHENBERG GALLERY @FSW)

"Apparently, the work had been purchased decades prior, but never given an acquisition number," Dellinger says. "It was in the original crate that Ray (Kass) built, but was unidentifiable from the outside of the wooden box as a work by John Cage.

"[It] had been shuffled from one fine art storage facility to another — only resurfacing in Long Island in the last few weeks!"

That discovery came just in time for Rauschenberg Gallery's new exhibit focusing on Cage's work at Kass's workshop, where the two collaborated from 1988 to 1990 using nearby river rocks, watercolors and paintbrushes (and sometimes feathers). It's the third Cage-related exhibit at the FSW gallery.

Cage — best known for high-concept musical compositions such as "4'33'" — was also a visual artist and a longtime friend and collaborator of the gallery's namesake, groundbreaking artist Bob Rauschenberg.

Dellinger, himself, is a fan of both Cage and Rauschenberg.

"As with Bob Rauschenberg, I sent John Cage a fan letter or two in high school, and he was exceedingly generous in responding to some rather naïve questions I posed at the time," Dellinger says. "I had some brief in-person encounters with him upon my arrival for graduate school in New York in the early 1990s (before his death in 1992) and had always been fascinated by his hugely influential practice — both as a composer/performer and visual artist."



One of the paintings in John Cage's "STEPS: A Composition for a Painting" series will also be displayed at Rauschenberg Gallery. This one was created years ago with Merce Cunningham Dance Company. (Photo: BOB RAUSCHENBERG GALLERY @FSW)

The new Cage exhibit, which opened April 11, is sure to draw world-wide interest, Dellinger says.

"The world premiere of "New River Rocks and Washes" (1990) is a major event, and will likely resonate internationally," Dellinger says. "The monumental scale of this seminal work ... and the fact that it has not previously been exhibited over the almost three decades since its creation, make this exhibition a rather significant event."

Still, Dellinger says he wanted to provide a broader context for the piece, too, and so the exhibit features about 20 more Cage works, including other paintings in his "New River Watercolors" series and his "River Rocks and Smoke" series (both from the Mountain Lake Workshop).

Then there are Cage's "Zen Ox-Herding Pictures," his "Ryoanji" series of drawings and three pieces in his "STEPS: A Composition for a Painting" series.

That last series uses a set of written instructions from Cage and a large paint brush to create painted footprints on a monumental-sized canvas. One of the "STEPS" paintings was created years ago by Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Two other pieces, licensed through the John Cage Trust, were created April 10 at Rauschenberg Gallery with Kass, Dellinger and others.



A close-up of John Cage's "STEPS: A Composition for a Painting," part of a series of collaborative works using a set of written instructions from Cage and a large paint brush to create painted footprints on a mounumental-size canvas. (Photo: BOB RAUSCHENBERG GALLERY @FSW)

Still, the main event at the new exhibit is undoubtedly the massive, never-before-exhibited “New River Rocks and Washes.” That painting came at the tail end of Cage’s collaborations with Kass at the Mountain Lake Workshop.

Cage was originally drawn to the New River area for a mushroom-hunting program. But then Kass took Cage to the river and talked him into using river rocks in a series of watercolor paintings over the next several years.

To make the paintings, Kass says he would set up an art studio for Cage filled with hundreds of river rocks, paint brushes, various kinds of paper and a large team of assistants to mix paint or lift and carry the rocks — many of them too heavy for one person to carry.

Cage would do all the actual painting himself, Kass says, using the ancient Chinese text the “I Ching” to randomly choose the brushes, the rocks and where they’d be placed on the paper. Then he’d paint around the rocks and also use a 7-foot-wide paintbrush to create the broad watercolor strokes in the background.



John Cage’s recently rediscovered 1990 painting, “New River Rocks and Washes,” is being displayed at Bob Rauschenberg Gallery, along with other collaborative works from Virginia’s Mountain Lake Workshop. (Photo: BOB RAUSCHENBERG GALLERY @FSW)

“New River Rocks and Washes” was the result of the artists’ final workshop collaboration in 1990. It was one of the last two paintings Cage ever did, along with “New River Rocks and Smoke,” produced in that same session using smoke marks made on wet paper with the smoke from fires.

Now, 27 years later, “New River Rocks and Washes” has been rediscovered and plans are being made to send the painting to Houston after the Fort Myers exhibit. There, it will be reunited with “New River Rocks and Smoke” at The Menil Collection museum, where that sister painting is on display.

It’s been a crazy ride, Dellinger admits, and one he never expected when he and Kass started planning the exhibit.

“The beauty of all of this craziness is that, in the end, one of these two lost masterworks is being world-premiered by us,” Dellinger says. “And then it’s going to The Menil.

“The goal is to reunite them. But we have the great honor of world-premiering this long-lost masterwork — one of the two last paintings that Cage made.”

If you go

What: “JOHN CAGE: STEPS & Other Works from the Mountain Lake Workshop”

When: April 11-July 27

Where: Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at Florida SouthWestern State College, 8099 College Parkway S.W., Building L, south Fort Myers

Admission: Free

Gallery hours: 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. Monday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday

Info: 489-9313 or rauschenberggallery.com (<http://www.rauschenberggallery.com/>)