

Rauschenberg Gallery remembers namesake legend



By Dario Rangel Condor

The Bob Rauschenberg Gallery is celebrating its 40th anniversary this fall by unveiling artwork originally produced by Robert Rauschenberg, the gallery's namesake.

Twelve years after Rauschenberg's death, the gallery reached out to local collectors for the artworks he made in Southwest Florida.

"It truly is amazing to see how much the community has come together for the show," said Jade Dellinger, FSW director of exhibitions and collections. "The impact and excitement that Bob really brought to this town and the world. How much his art has affected people and those people wanting his art to affect others."

The artwork on display were gifts from Rauschenberg to local collectors.

“The pieces we have in the gallery now are from a 10-mile radius,” said Dellinger. “None of the works have ever been for sale. They were all gifts from Bob to the people in his closest circle.”

Thirty-four haunting drawings of the nine circles of hell in Dante’s *Inferno* welcome visitors to the Rauschenberg 40 exhibit. These were some of the first pieces Rauschenberg completed in Florida.

In late 1952, Rauschenberg wanted to get away from his home in New York City. While looking for property along the Gulf Coast of Florida, Rauschenberg illustrated the epic poem.

“Bob used to joke about having to go through hell to get to Florida because was working on Dante’s *Inferno*,” said Dellinger, “but once he got here it was paradise.”

Rauschenberg had been trying to work on the illustrations prior to looking for property in Florida. His dyslexia made it difficult to read and interpret the text into art. It wasn’t until he made a stop at Treasure Island that he was able to really focus. He rented a small studio by a fisherman’s wharf and eight months later completed the illustrations.

“Being able to finally finish the depictions of Dante’s *Inferno* was very important to Robert, which I think is what ultimately lead him to have that connection with Florida,” said Dellinger.

The center of Rauschenberg 40 is a vibrant series using an art technique Rauschenberg developed.

The walls of the gallery are lined with reflective metal sheets covered with intricate, colorful wax images of Rauschenberg’s photography. He called these pieces “wax fire works.” Wax is heated and mixed with pigments then pressed through a silk screen of Rauschenberg’s photography to create these impressions.

One wax fire work, *Swim*, was wax-laid pictures he took of Florida and New York City. Another wax fire work, *Pegasits*, has a steel chair jutting out of the top.

In 1954, Rauschenberg started incorporating sculptural elements (like the chair) into his paintings, which he coined “combines”. His combines made him a renowned artist worldwide.

“By the time he was looking for property in Florida, he was already well established [as] a famous artist,” said Dellinger. “He owned property, he had buildings in New York, and he owned a studio. He was having exhibitions all over the world.”

In 1979, Edison State College (later renamed FSW) opened the Fine Art Gallery and the L Building. The goal of the gallery was to professionally exhibit expensive and valuable artwork.

Knowing how special the gallery was, Nanette Smith, the former vice president of Edison State College, contacted Rauschenberg.

From then on, Rauschenberg and the gallery built a strong relationship.

Rauschenberg frequently had solo exhibitions in the gallery. He also added to other exhibits from his personal collection. He had more than 20 exhibitions from 1979 until his death in 2008.

“Renaming the gallery of fine art, in Mr. Rauschenberg’s honor was easily justified to upper administration and the state of Florida,” said Dellinger, “given the artist’s long-relationship (and his) many exhibits and financial contributions to the college.”

The Edison Fine Art Gallery was renamed The Bob Rauschenberg Gallery in 2003.

“You can’t overstate his importance to FSW and the community,” said Dellinger. “It was because of his connection with FSW that allowed Bob to interact with others and be a public figure here in the community.”

The Rauschenberg 40 exhibit will hold events for many important upcoming dates, including Rauschenberg’s birthday and the gallery anniversary.

“(Rauschenberg) has this saying which I use as the motto for the gallery. ‘Fort Myers can be as small as your mind is or as big as the world is,’” said Dellinger.

An earlier version of this story erroneously marked 1969 as the year Rauschenberg came to Florida. It was 1952.

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