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A FIELD GUIDE TO PARADISE

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‘RAUSCHENBERG 40’

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Show premieres Rauschenberg work from Florida collectors

Charles Runnells

Fort Myers News-Press

USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

Legendary artist Robert Rauschenberg wanted some peace and quiet to work on his challenging new project: Illustrating the epic journey through Hell in Dante's poem "Inferno." And he wasn't finding that peace and quiet in New York City.

So Rauschenberg looked south in the late 1950s, and that eventually led him to Southwest Florida.

He started out on Cedar Key but later discovered Captiva Island, where he moved in 1970 and lived until his death in 2008.

"He always said he had to go through Hell to get to Florida," says Jade Dellinger, director of Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at Florida SouthWestern State College in south Fort Myers. "And that was all about illustrating Dante's 'Inferno.'"

"But then when he found Captiva, he talked of it as Paradise — so another kind of reference to Dante."

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Robert Rauschenberg poses in the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery in the early '80s, back when it was called The Gallery of Fine Art. SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-PRESS

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Rauschenberg ended up completing his Dante illustrations in that newfound Paradise — and he did a whole lot more, too.

A major exhibit at Bob Rauschenberg Gallery shows those illustrations and many of the other pieces the artist created during his five decades on Captiva. Most of the works have never been shown outside of private collections.

“These are things that are essentially being world-premiered,” Dellinger says. “This is a show that you wouldn’t see at MOMA. You’re seeing things, for the first time, 12 years after his death.”

There was just something special about Captiva, and Rauschenberg often talked about magical experiences like the time he happened upon a ball of butterflies. Those experiences inspired much of the art that was to come.

“He was searching for where he wanted to be,” says Rauschenberg’s longtime studio assistant and chief fabricator, local artist Lawrence Voytek. “He was a big fish in New York City, and he moved to an island in Florida.

“To Bob, this was like his power spot. And he was quarter Cherokee. He was really sensitive to what was going on in nature. And he had a good feeling about it.”

That good feeling led to major projects such as “Labyrinth” and the sprawling “The 1/4 Mile,” projects that were created in Lee County and debuted at Rauschenberg Gallery — a place closely associated with the artist since it opened in 1979.

“Our function (at the gallery) became that of a kind of laboratory for him,” Dellinger says. “And it allowed him to assemble things and try ‘em out — and try ‘em out not with the New York art elite, but with locals who called him Bob.”

The “Rauschenberg 40” exhibit celebrates the 40th anniversary of the gallery and its longtime relationship with the pop artist widely considered to be one of the most important artists of the 20th century. The gallery — formerly known as the Gallery of Fine Art — changed its



Rauschenberg’s “Pegasits” series used chairs from the former Captiva restaurant Timmy’s Nook. The art was made through “wax fire” using an open flame, molten wax and metal screens. CHARLES RUNNELLS/THE NEWS-PRESS

If you go

What: “Rauschenberg 40: The Fortieth Anniversary of the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at FSW Exhibition”

When: Now through Dec. 14

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

name its name to Bob Rauschenberg Gallery in 2004.

“It was like his little museum gal-

lery,” Voytek says. “We had ‘The 1/4 Mile’ here. It was the newest, freshest stuff.”

The new exhibit doesn’t include “The 1/4 Mile,” “Labyrinth” or any of Rauschenberg’s better-known pieces that caused a sensation in the ‘50s and ‘60s, including groundbreaking “combines” like his famous “Monogram,” which blended painting and found objects into sculptures.

Instead, “Rauschenberg 40” offers work that’s never been displayed in a museum, gallery or anywhere public, Dellinger says. They come straight from private collectors throughout Southwest Florida — many of them friends of Rauschenberg.

The art often shows the artist’s love for Southwest Florida and his connection to its nature, its people

and its history.

The metal wall sculpture “Pegasits,” for example, uses a chair that came from one of Rauschenberg’s favorite Captiva restaurants, the former fish house Timmy’s Nook. He bought up all the restaurant’s old metal seats and used 22 of them for his “Pegasits” series, which was made through a screen-printing process involving metal screens, open flame and molten wax.

A similar piece, “Seminole Host,” shows the image of a Seminole woman hovering on its mirrored stainless-steel surface, which reflects the gallery around it and people visiting the exhibit. “It becomes this sort of apparition, so it’s like a Seminole ghost,” Dellinger says. “It’s about the disappearance of the Na-

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tive American and local native cultures.”

Other pieces have a more personal connection to Rauschenberg and his closest friends.

The stainless-steel “Swim,” for example, was donated to Rauschenberg Gallery by Fort Myers residents Fran and John Fenning. The late John Fenning was the artist’s long-time friend and surgeon.

“This is our first opportunity to show this incredible work that was donated by the Fennings,” Dellinger says. “So it becomes a kind of focal point for the exhibition.”

Then there’s “Shovel Reserve,” one of the sculptures Rauschenberg made from scrap metal and other found objects. He called them “gluts.”

Voytek was right there beside Rauschenberg for those and most of the artist’s other pieces. The two were kindred spirits who would get equally excited about beautiful objects they’d find in local scrapyards and elsewhere — things like piles of shiny steel mesh or railroad signs with the letters “RR” on them (Rauschenberg’s initials).

“Bob had this way of really seeing something,” Voytek says. “He would look at things and say, ‘Look at the surface! Look at the colors! Look at the way it is.’”

“Bob would be at a scrapyard and be hot and smelly and stinky, and he’d be like, ‘Look at this! Just look at this!’ And we would bring all this stuff back.”

Some of those precious objects would eventually be assembled into



All of the art in the “Rauschenberg 40” exhibit was donated from local art collections to mark the 40th anniversary of Bob Rauschenberg Gallery in Fort Myers. CHARLES RUNNELLS/THE NEWS-PRESS

“Shovel Reserve.” Voytek, of course, was with Rauschenberg when they found the shiny “junk” that would become that sculpture — and Voytek was just as in love with those objects as Rauschenberg was. There was a snow shovel. Old fasteners. Shiny stainless-steel mesh that Rauschenberg proclaimed was “better than snake skin.”

“It was really gorgeous stuff,” Voytek recalls.

Then, one day, Rauschenberg decided to put those objects together into a glut. Norman Lear was visiting the next day, he told Voytek, and he wanted to make something to give the TV writer/producer as a gift.

“Bob played a trick on me,” Voytek says. “He picked out these objects that I knew he really liked, and he knew I really liked.”

They assembled the sculpture to-

gether, and then Voytek got a surprise from Rauschenberg. “He said, ‘Get me a Sharpie,’” Voytek recalls. “And so I gave him a Sharpie. And in front of me he wrote: ‘For Lawrence.’”

It’s the most valuable piece Rauschenberg ever gave to Voytek, but not the only thing. Voytek’s collection includes many drawings and other items.

“He would give me things that were really precious and really close and personal,” he says. “We would talk about spiritual, emotional things, and we would be just really connected in many ways. And so when I got something from him, it was like he trapped a part of my persona and nailed it.”

“Shovel Reserve” is one of three gluts in the exhibit. Other works in “Rauschenberg 40” include lithographs Rauschenberg made for gallery fundraisers, drawings from his 1965 portfolio edition of Dante’s “Inferno,” pieces from his “Urban Bourbon” and “Anagrams (A Pun)” series, and the delicate dye transfers he called the “Waterworks” series.

Rauschenberg made the “Waterworks” series in the early 90s using a \$200,000 inkjet printer, back when that technology was still expensive and in its infancy. The transfers used vegetable dyes, which are sensitive to light and break down over time. That’s why they’re being displayed at Rauschenberg Gallery under low light and UV-filtering Plexiglas.

“The problem had always been, continues to be, the stability of those inks,” Dellinger says. “But for him, it was more important to make something that you could keep in the closet and it would be beautiful and bright and fresh and clean.”

“He believed very much that in

life we have entropy. And the idea is that if you’re going to enjoy it, maybe it’ll disappear, but you’ll have this time with it.”

Those pieces, along with the rest of the “Rauschenberg 40” exhibit, represent a valuable collection of artwork, Dellinger says. How valuable? It’s easily worth millions of dollars, he says.

That’s why many of the collectors loaning their artwork to the gallery want to remain anonymous. They don’t want people knowing they have such expensive art in their homes.

None of these objects have been sold before, so there’s no telling how much they’re worth, Dellinger says. But just in case, the gallery took out an insurance policy with Lloyd’s of London. For perspective, Rauschenberg’s 1964 silkscreen “Buffalo II” recently sold for a whopping \$88.8 million at a Christie’s auction — five times more than any previous work from the artist.

That proves Robert Rauschenberg remains relevant and in-demand in 2019 — 12 years after his death at age 82 on Captiva Island. And it shows why “Rauschenberg 40” is such an important exhibit, Dellinger says.

“Everything in this exhibition is priceless,” he says. “These things have not been in a gallery. These things were gifts of love from Bob.”

“These were things that have remained in the community, that 12 years after his death, have never been exhibited. And they were things that were gifts of love to the people he cared most about.”

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