

The mind behind the Rauschenberg Gallery



Jade Dellinger, FSW director of exhibitions, in the entranceway of the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery

By: Frankie Rowley

Hidden behind a secret door in the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery lies the office of the man responsible for transforming the gallery into an epicenter of high caliber artists and exhibitions.

Jade Dellinger, an art historian, author, and former independent curator, has been the FSW director of exhibitions and collections since 2013.

"The idea of pursuing working in museums really came out of going up to the Baseball Hall of Fame with my great grandfather as a kid," said Dellinger.

Dellinger knew he wanted to work in museums from a young age.

His first Baseball Hall of Fame trip with his great grandfather, Baseball Hall of Famer, Edd J. Roush, inspired him to become a curator.

"The minute we get to the museum, people are pulling him away to get his autograph and every-one is making a big deal of his presence. As a kid, I was a bit overwhelmed by that, but the director of the museum told me that there was something really important I had to see and that it was really special. [They] took me on a personal tour of the museum. It had a profound impact on me because it felt like this really important place."

Dellinger's fascination with art started in 7th grade with a presentation on the Greek renaissance painter, El Greco.

"El Greco was kind of the perfect artist, in a way, for me to take an interest in because he had been a big influence on a lot of the modernists," said Dellinger.

In middle school, Dellinger scoured the artists of his time for those influenced by El Greco, and discovered Rauschenberg.

Dellinger was immediately taken. To him, Rauschenberg was the same caliber as the great artists of the past and he happened to be creating art in Captiva, only a hundred miles away.

“Even though we were both in the same state, only a few hours away, he still felt a million miles away.”

At 15, Dellinger wrote a fan letter addressed to Captiva’s Mucky Duck Pub, where Rauschenberg sometimes visited, with 10 dollars enclosed for a drink.

“The story was that [Rauschenberg] would walk the beach and be there to have a drink and watch the sunset. So I read that and I thought this is perfect.”

The idea to write a fan letter came from reading the ones sent to his great grandfather.

Within a week of sending, Dellinger received an authentic Rauschenberg lithograph addressed “for Jade, Bob Rauschenberg.” With a handwritten note reading, “I’ll have that drink and wish you luck just before I get to work tonight. I’ve put a gift in your pocket. Best, R.R.”

Years after the initial interaction, Dellinger became an independent curator for nearly two decades, in New York and Tampa.

As independent curator for the Tampa Museum, Dellinger planned a John Cage exhibit for Cage’s centenary. Cage was another modernist and a friend of Rauschenberg. The exhibit was a replica of Cage’s “33-1/3.”

“He had made this piece in the 1960s called ‘33-1/3’, the speed at which records play. Cage’s idea was to make a musical piece that could be participatory, but you didn’t need to know how to play an instrument. So he filled the room with records and record players. Cage’s intent was to have people participate by picking and playing records and having all these great sounds going at once”.

The musical installation included over 200 records curated by thirty artists significant to Cage, including Yoko Ono, Jack White, Jim Rosenquist, Iggy Pop, David Byrne, and William Wegman.

“In thinking about putting together the show for his centenary, I wanted to do it again, but have really special records curated by people who had a connection to Cage.”

The exhibit took the Tampa Museum by storm. Dellinger brought it to the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery in 2012.

“I knew about the Rauschenberg Gallery and decided to come down and talk to the director of the gallery and say that we could do this super easily and it would be a really cool thing. The former director was all for it,” said Dellinger.

The gallery had not held a Rauschenberg exhibit for over four years, since the artist’s death in 2008.

“When I did the Cage thing, much to both of our surprise, all of the people who came to the original Rauschenberg exhibitions showed up. About six months later, the former director called me and he said that he was planning to retire and that I should consider taking his job, because ‘if anyone was going to bring Bob back to the gallery, it would be you.’”

Dellinger took over the gallery following the former director’s retirement.

“It was important to bring Bob back – if not physically – at least through thoughtful and significant exhibitions of the art he left behind.”

The gallery’s current exhibit, Rauschenberg 40, celebrates the artist’s life and the gallery’s 40th anniversary with pieces he created in SWFL.

Most of the pieces that hang in the exhibit were gifts he gave to local friends and assistants.

The lithograph Rauschenberg sent to Dellinger now hangs in the curator’s office behind the gallery walls.

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