

## The making and exhibition history of Rauschenberg's 100-foot-photo, 'Chinese Summerhall'

By TOM HALL  
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During his 1982 visit to China, Bob Rauschenberg took hundreds of photographs. To be sure, he took pictures of murals, monuments and places like the Great Wall of China that attract tourists like you and me. But for the artist who once proposed to “photograph the country inch by inch,” the camera wasn't merely a means of recording where he had been. For Bob Rauschenberg, photography was a tool. It served as a medium that uniquely enabled him to organize the chaos he saw all around into a more evolved, cogent world view. And so include in the took copious shots he took during his '82 China trip were images of cart wheels, exotic plants, store windows, street scenes, markets, food, Coke bottles and a blindfolded water buffalo that was made to continuously walk in a circle in order to power a mixing machine in a factory that made bricks.

University of South Florida GraphicStudio founder and director Donald Saff accompanied Rauschenberg on that trip, and when he and Bob returned to the United States, they made a beeline for GraphicStudio, where they winnowed Bob's photo archive to 52 iconic images. As GraphicStudio's website so eloquently states today, “each image witnesses [Rauschenberg's] remarkable eye and generous vision of life.”

Rauschenberg then chose 18 of these images for a limited edition series of 30 x 40 inch studies and 10 more for a limited edition run of 24 x 30 inch studies. Then he and the GraphicStudio artisans trimmed the negatives of all 52 images and collaged them into a color photo called *Chinese Summerhall*. But *Chinese Summerhall* was unlike any photo of its time. It was printed on an uninterrupted scroll of photo-sensitive paper made by the Eastman Kodak company.

“At the time, it was the most ambitious photograph ever printed,” relates Bob Rauschenberg Gallery Director Jade Dellinger. In fact, the work had to be done after nightfall in a large blackened out commercial space that was formerly a grocery store.

Rauschenberg was so eager to share *Chinese Summerhall* with the public that he scheduled a New Year's Eve opening for the piece at Leo Castelli Gallery in SoHo (along with large-scale ceramic pieces he made on the way home from China during a stopover in Japan). “I thought our opening would remind people how interesting and lively art can be,” Rauschenberg told *New York Times* art critic Barbara Rows in a January, 1983 interview.

Bob took *Chinese Summerhall* with him when the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange, or R.O.C.I., visited the China Art Gallery (now the National Museum of China) in Beijing in 1985. Some 70,000 people took in the 98-piece show in just the first week, with more than 300,000 flocking to the exhibit by the time the extravaganza ended its six-week run.

From there, Rauschenberg dispatched *Chinese Summerhall* to Havana for the R.O.C.I. exhibit his assistant Lawrence Voytek staged there. Then the 100-foot photograph travelled to Washington D.C., where it was twice shown by the National Gallery of Art, once in a GraphicStudio retrospective and then again in a special R.O.C.I. exhibition in 1990 that occupied the entire ground floor and concourse of the Museum's east building. Organized by National Gallery Curator of 20th Century Art Jack Cowart with assistance from Saff (who in addition to discharging his duties at GraphicStudio served as R.O.C.I. Artist Director), the show included 60 paintings, 21 sculptures, 60 photographs, 30 graphic works and 15 video monitors. Each of the countries R.O.C.I. visited were represented, and before it closed, nearly 415,000 people turned out for the exhibition.

Although copies of the 100-foot photograph are in the permanent collections of the National Gallery, Solomon R. Guggenheim Gallery and Contemporary Art Museum at the University of South Florida in Tampa, *Chinese Summerhall* has been sparsely exhibited since then. "To my knowledge, the last time *Chinese Summerhall* was exhibited was [at the Contemporary Art Museum at USF] in 2001," Dellinger told WGCU's John Davis on Gulf Coast Live last week (October 15). Part of the reason the piece is rarely shown are the difficulties attendant with unpacking and installing a 100-foot-long collaged color photograph. When Dellinger too *Chinese Summerhall* out of storage for a major GraphicStudio retrospective that he curated a year ago at the Tampa Museum of Art, he found that the piece needed time-consuming conservation and maintenance before it could be properly displayed. While the work could not be completed in time for the GraphicStudio retrospective, the Contemporary Art Museum has graciously agreed to loan *Chinese Summerhall* to the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery for *RAUSCHENBERG: China/America Mix*.

For the *China/America Mix* exhibition, Dellinger and his curatorial team have been compelled to make substantial modifications to the gallery space. Special walls with rounded corners were required to properly show the photograph. The exhibition also includes the *28 Studies for Chinese Summerhall* plus a paper collage piece titled *7 Characters* thanks to a loan from local resident Fran Fenning, who acquired the work with her late husband, John, for their private collection. *Fort Myers News Press* art journalist Charles Runnells notes that *7 Characters* "incorporates silk ribbon, gold leaf, cloth medallions, imagery from Chinese propaganda posters and seven Chinese symbols for concepts including 'truth,' 'individual' and 'red heart.'"

*RAUSCHENBERG: China/America Mix* opens to the public from 7-9 p.m. on Bob Rauschenberg's birthday tomorrow, October 22. The opening will also feature musical performances by longtime friends Dickie Landry, Kat Epple and Sonic Combine. A pre-opening lecture on "Rauschenberg in China" will be presented from 6-7 p.m. by distinguished guest Dr. Donald Saff, who not only served as Founder of USF's Graphicstudio, but as Artistic Director of Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange/ROCI. ■