

Recalling how revolutionary and transcendent Bob Rauschenberg was on the 89th anniversary of his birth

By TOM HALL
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Today is the anniversary of Bob Rauschenberg's birthday. He would have been 89. With the assistance of the Guggenheim Museum's Julia Blaut and author and cultural provocateur Dave Hickey, today might be a great time to remind ourselves just how revolutionary and transcendent Captiva's favorite son really was.

"Rauschenberg's art was always one of thoughtful inclusion," Blaut wrote for Guggenheim Bilbao in 1998. "Working with a wide range of subjects, styles, materials and techniques, Rauschenberg was called a forerunner of virtually every postwar movement since Abstract Expressionism. He remained, however, independent of any particular affiliation. At the time he began making art in the late 1940s, his belief that painting relates to both art and life presented a direct challenge to the prevalent Modernist aesthetic. The celebrated *Combines* begun in the mid-1950s brought real world images and objects into the realm of abstract painting and countered sanctioned divisions between painting and sculpture. These works established the artist's ongoing dialogue between mediums, between the handmade and the readymade, and between the gestural brushstroke and the mechanically reproduced image."

"Bob's taste for fecundity and radicalism was what made Bob, Bob," observed Hickey, who had occasion to reflect back on his longtime professional and personal relationship with Rauschenberg during an ArtSPEAK @ FSW lecture in the Rush Auditorium on Saturday, October 4. "Bob was unconventional. In fact, when he found himself in a conventional setting, he did the opposite of what was expected."

Rauschenberg did not just combine disparate subjects, styles, materials, techniques and genres. His expansive artistic philosophy included, notes Blaut, a "lifelong commitment to collaboration with performers, printmakers, engineers, writers and artisans from around the world" – both during and in the decades following R.O.C.I. (the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange). [In fact,] fostering working relationships between artists and engineers was the founding principle of E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology), an organization established in 1966 by Rauschenberg with, among others, Bell Laboratories research scientist Billy Kluver." The latter collaboration enabled Rauschenberg to integrate light, sound and motion into large-scale interactive sculptural environments.

Taking a chapter out of Napoleon Hill's *Master Mind Principle*, collaboration allowed Bob to live in the "big present." Hickey explains. "For Bob, the present extended back 40 years. It was only there that art history started. By opening the door to a 40-year present, it gave Bob a big box in which to work, in which to indulge himself."

"Rauschenberg's reputation as the leading artist of his generation was secured," says Blaut, "by his first solo exhibition, held in 1963, at the Jewish Museum in New York, and the Grand Prize for Painting awarded him the following year at the Venice Biennale." But Bob didn't let reputation or success deter him from experimenting in ways that dismayed and confounded his contemporaries, reviewers and critics.

“Bob ran off his own entropy,” Hickey summarizes. “A lot of what made Bob a good artist is that he did bad things. Sparks would fly off him. He was a good guy who was not a good guy.” His rowdiness, drunkenness and irreverence (like the time he erased a Willem de Kooning drawing as a “happening” or performance art piece) earned him a much-deserved and undoubtedly cherished rep and rap as the bad boy of art.

“Bob didn’t give a shit,” Hickey says bluntly.

He didn’t have time to worry about what others thought or were doing. “He improvised so quickly,” observed Hickey during his ArtSPEAK remarks, with a shake of the head that underscored his incredulity and admiration.

“Expanding upon Marcel Duchamp’s concept of the readymade, Rauschenberg gave new significance to such ordinary objects as a patchwork quilt or an automobile tire by juxtaposing them with unrelated items and placing them in the context of art,” writes Blaut. “By the late 1950s and early 1960s, the found image had become paramount in Rauschenberg’s visual vocabulary. Reproductions from newspapers and magazines were incorporated into his drawings, prints and paintings as he perfected techniques of solvent transfer, lithography and silkscreening. With his move in 1970 from New York to Captiva . . . he now favored an abstract idiom and the use of natural fibers, such as fabric and paper.” And in 1979, Bob renewed his interest in photography. “From this point forward, images incorporated into Rauschenberg’s work in all mediums were drawn exclusively from his own photographs.”

“But Bob didn’t just create one work of art,” Hickey adds. “You build one work off of another and another until you have a show,” Bob said often. “You’re always working toward the next show.”

What made all of his accomplishments possible was his unabashed willingness to take risks and to fail. “He’d make ten works to get one [keeper],” notes Hickey. By contrast, Jasper Johns (who shared Rauschenberg’s interest in deriving art from the commonplace) would produce two to get one. “Bob was aware of the difference,” chuckles Hickey. “‘We’re all on a tightrope,’ he told me once. But Jasper’s tightrope is only three feet off the ground.”

There is a tendency nowadays to lionize Robert Rauschenberg. Art historians want to canonize him for the role he played in pop art and all aspects of post-modernism. Collectors want to include him on their walls even if they don’t particularly understand or appreciate his art. And according to Hickey, the artist’s own Foundation (which is run by his son, Christopher) wants to turn his paintings into bearer bonds. “But Bob would hate smoothness, political correctness, corporateness and branding. Bob was a free spirit in the woods with some work to do.”

So, given Hickey’s cautionary tale, how should we honor Bob’s memory and evaluate his legacy on this, the 89th anniversary of his birth? Perhaps it is best to reflect not as much on his art and his place in the art world, but on the qualities that distinguished him among his peers and people in general. By that standard, Bob was inclusive, encompassing, expansive and collaborative. He was curious, inquisitive and always willing to experiment and take chances. Not one to let image or brand get in his way, he didn’t mind falling flat on his face and looking like a fool or incurring the wrath, cataclysmic hatred, opprobrium or ridicule of the art world, as he did with the de Kooning happening and R.O.C.I.

Some might even call Rauschenberg courageous. But they would do so at the risk of Dave Hickey wagging a scolding finger at such an attempt to idolize the man. “That’s antithetical to Bob’s life and lifestyle,” asserts Hickey. “He was willful. Same as Warhol. Bob did not have a biographical narrative. His was an episodic narrative. He saw, interpreted and expressed.”

In other words, he was just Bob being Bob. Deal with it. ■