

‘China/America Mix’ exhibition offers greater understanding and appreciation of Rauschenberg’s R.O.C.I. legacy

By TOM HALL
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RAUSCHENBERG: China/America Mix opened on October 22. The exhibition contains work that the artist created during and following his return to Captiva from a trip he made to China in 1982 will be the artist’s sixteenth one-man show at the College since the Gallery was founded in 1979. Among the work on display are examples of his *7 Characters*, some of the studies he did for a 100-foot-long photo-collage, and the impressive photo-collage itself, which is titled *Chinese Summerhall*.

The exhibition is the first solo exhibition of Bob Rauschenberg’s work at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery since the memorial that was staged in 2008 following the artist’s death. But it is not the first solo show of the artist’s work at the gallery that bears his name. *RAUSCHENBERG: China/America Mix* is actually the 16th solo show of Rauschenberg’s work at the gallery at Florida SouthWestern State College, which was renamed and dedicated in the artist’s honor ten years ago.

Each of the works included in this dramatically-staged exhibition is magnificent in his own right. But every work of art has a story, and the intriguing stories surrounding the works included in *China/America Mix* add powerfully to the allure of these pieces, both individually and as a collective whole.

It was *7 Characters* that were made at the 1,500-year-old Xuan paper mill in Jing Xian, China from handmade paper so enduring that it was used to record China’s most important documents and for artistic scrolls. “What Bob did was he took the world’s most diaphanous paper,” explained GraphicStudio founder and director Don Saff during his *RR to PRC to ROCI* talk prior to last Wednesday night’s opening. “You could almost see through it, like glass, and Bob used the delicateness of the paper, but he also laminated 30 sheets together so that he had this thick laminate, delicate paper and paper pulp. He was going to exhaust every possibility.”

But Rauschenberg did not stop there. “He also had these images of ubiquitous symbols which he said he was putting into the stomach of the paper,” continued Saff, who accompanied Rauschenberg on the 1982 China visit. “He was putting the art into the stomach of the paper, and as *7 Characters* reflects, that’s exactly what he did.”

Before and following his time in Jing Xian, Rauschenberg took hundreds of photographs as he toured the cities and countryside of China. From this archive, he and the artisans at GraphicStudio culled just 52 shots, and from these, he chose 18 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. "From Bob's perspective, individual prints within an edition could vary," said Saff as he described the process by which the *Studies for Chinese Summerhall* were produced. "Bob didn't feel like he had to adhere to them all being identical. Bob didn't like giving a work of art to an artisan, then going away and coming back just to sign the work. Bob wanted to be part of the creative process every inch of the way because there was always an opportunity that way. If you gave the work to an artisan, the opportunities evaporated."

Many of these studies are hung up in the sky in the gallery and above the main attraction, *Chinese Summerhall*.

Just to say that Rauschenberg collaged 52 photographs into a photograph that is 100 feet long doesn't convey the scope and scale of the project. *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. "There couldn't be any light during the printing process," Saff told an SRO audience during his pre-opening talk last Wednesday. "So [Rauschenberg and the GraphicStudio artisans] were working in the dark. They actually had to make 25 collages to get 5 [keepers]. If the registration marks didn't line up, they'd have to go back and start the process all over again from the beginning, and all of this was done in the dark."

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

Today, the 100-foot-photograph, *Chinese Summerhall*, hangs on specially-constructed curved walls that have been painted Chinese red. The effect is nothing short of breathtaking, and the only thing missing from the exhibition are some of the paper sculptures that Rauschenberg made during the China trip.

Since assuming the directorship of the gallery, Jade Dellinger has sought to extend and expand upon Bob Rauschenberg's legacy. To have 16 solo exhibitions of one's work total is a remarkable accomplishment never approached by the vast majority of artists. To have 16 in one gallery alone is unprecedented. And for a variety of reasons, *7 Characters* was not a critical success here in the United States, nor were the majority of works that Rauschenberg did in the host countries that his R.O.C.I. project visited. The problem, of course, was that Rauschenberg was decades ahead of his time. While R.O.C.I. visited insular, isolated countries, the U.S. and European art markets were just as insular when it came to appreciating artworks based on other cultures. Those artworks are better understood today, in a global economy characterized by cross-culturalism.

But the learning process starts not here, on a website that talks about the exhibition, but standing before the work inside the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery. *RAUSCHENBERG: China/America Mix* runs through December 17, 2014. ■