

How a bit of trickery led to inclusion of a political poster in the ‘Chinese Summerhall’ 100-foot photo

By TOM HALL
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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.

Included in Chinese Summerhall is a photograph of a political poster Mao, Stalin, Trotsky and Marx. But the photo almost didn't make it into the collage. Rauschenberg and his party came across it while they were in Shanghai during their 1982 visit to China. "Although there was very little advertising and few commercial posters at that time, there were political posters around like this one," recalls former GraphicStudio founder and director Donald Saff, who accompanied Rauschenberg on the 1982 trip. "So Bob takes a picture of it and as a policeman runs up, Bob hands me the camera. So I'm holding the camera, and I can do a little magic, and I see immediately what's happening. I pulled a blank roll of film out my pocket and when the policeman demanded the film in the camera, I opened the back, palmed the film and handed him the blank film." The policeman never knew that Saff had duped him.

But there's more to the story. "When we came back later, Bob wanted to get another shot of the poster. It was gone," exclaims Saff. "It was gone." Thus, Saff had preserved the only shot Bob got of the poster and Rauschenberg duly chose it for inclusion in the 100-foot photo.

Chinese Summerhall is part of RAUSCHENBERG: China/America Mix, a solo show of work Robert Rauschenberg completed during and upon returning back in Captiva following a trip to the People's Republic of China in 1982. RAUSCHENBERG: China/America Mix runs through December 17, 2014. ■