

Rauschenberg's legendary work ethic won over Chinese handlers during stopover outside Xuan paper mill in Jing Xian

By TOM HALL
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“Bob Rauschenberg was indefatigable in terms of producing his art,” declared Donald Saff during his *RR to PRC to ROCI* talk prior to the October 22 opening of *RAUSCHENBERG: China/America Mix*. “Those of us who knew him saw that he was working all the time, and when he wasn’t working, he was thinking about work.” Rauschenberg’s former studio assistant Lawrence Voytek could be seen nodding his agreement in the front row of the Rush Auditorium.

“There was a television on 24 hours a day so that the world was constantly invading the interior of his home and the interior of his mind,” continued Saff, who knew Rauschenberg well, both as the founder and director of USF’s GraphicStudio and the advance man for and artistic director of the artist’s 1985-1990 world tour known as R.O.C.I. or the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange. “This stimuli, as well as all the people who would come by and visit him, would feed into the broad palette of ideas and techniques that he had learned from many of the artisans he had met.”

Rauschenberg’s work ethic certainly impressed his hosts during his visit to China in 1982 to do a paper project in the 1,500-year-old Xuan paper mill in Jing Xian. After being delayed in the Yellow Mountains for more than a week, Rauschenberg was eager to make some art when he, Saff and his group finally arrived at the VIP compound outside the mill. But more complications thwarted Bob’s creative impulses. “In the end,” Saff said, “we worked out a system in which we would cut up posters [that Bob had collected during the course of the China trip], lay them out on a template and [our Chinese handlers] would carry them back and forth to the mill.”

Finally clear of the bureaucratic red tape that had been restraining them, Rauschenberg and his group worked day and night. “Now in most socialist countries, you make believe you work and they make believe they pay you, but they didn’t understand Bob’s work ethic. He got up early and immediately went to work. He had people he trusted and they went to work too. And he hung his art all around. They had never seen anything like that and so they started staying at the VIP compound to watch, particularly the cooks.”

One of the cooks befriended Rauschenberg, and even taught him how to make Chinese dumplings,” Saff reminisced. And although he probably never knew it, that cook told Rauschenberg something that changed Bob’s life and inspired one of the world’s greatest artists to embark upon a 10-nation, 5-year worldwide cultural tour that continues to influence artists across the globe even today.

What did the cook say? Well, for the answer to that question you will need to read tomorrow’s post.

RAUSCHENBERG: China/America Mix is a solo show of work Robert Rauschenberg completed during and following a trip to the People’s Republic of China in 1982. On exhibit at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery on the Lee campus of Florida SouthWestern State College, the show runs through December 17, 2014. The Bob Rauschenberg Gallery was founded as The Gallery of Fine Art in 1979 and was renamed on June 4, 2004 as the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery to honor and commemorate its long association and friendship with the artist. ■