

‘Rauschenberg: China/America Mix’ exhibit re-examines legacy of artist’s ROCI project and China visit

By TOM HALL
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In celebration of the 10-year anniversary of the renaming of the Gallery of Fine Art at Florida SouthWestern State College (formerly Edison State College), the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery’s Fall programming will focus exclusively on the enduring legacy and profound global impact of its namesake artist Bob Rauschenberg. From October 22 through December 17, the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery will premiere *RAUSCHENBERG: China/America Mix* – the first solo exhibition of the artist’s work at the Gallery since his death in 2008. Work in the show relates back and examines the aftermath of the artist’s visits to China during his ROCI visits.

ROCI is an acronym for Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange. On an egalitarian plane, Rauschenberg conceived of ROCI as a means of forging communication with other nations through the language of art by providing carefully-selected venues where artists, sculptors, poets and authors from around the world could meet and exchange creative ideas in the spirit of collaboration.

Rauschenberg was all about collaboration long before he launched ROCI in 1984. “From his joint efforts in the late 1940’s with his former wife, Susan Weil, to multimedia performance art with Merce Cunningham and John Cage in the 1960’s, to suites of prints and sculptures in studios at Universal Limited Art Editions on Long Island, Gemeni G.E.L. in Los Angeles and GraficStudio in Tampa, Fla., he has always worked closely with others,” wrote art critic Roberta Smith in a 1991 review. “In his own working compound in Captiva, Fla., he is surrounded by young artist-assistants. Even his art ‘collaborates.’” He mixes media, objects and images, causing them to relate to each other in a new way.”

“To communicate is the goal,” Bob once summarized, but his overarching aim was clearly to replace people’s preconceptions and misconceptions about each other with a vision of common humanity – especially in such insular countries as China, Chile, Cuba, East Germany, Malaysia and Tibet.

“He was trying to introduce the world to itself,” Don Saff observed. Saff would know. The distinguished USF Professor Emeritus not only served as ROCI’s artistic director and organized the 1991 ROCI exhibition at the National Gallery (which served as the Interchange’s only U.S. venue), Saff helped produce Rauschenberg’s mixed media editions for the ROCI project as the founder and director of GraphicStudio.

Here's the way it worked. With an advance staff, Rauschenberg would visit a host country and make art using local materials, ancient techniques and the special skills of local artisans. After producing anywhere from dozens to as many as 230 pieces (as in the case of Mexico), Rauschenberg would then stage a major exhibition at a museum in their country of origin. He would then take some or all of those artworks to the next destination on the ROCI tour, thereby giving artists and audiences in different countries glimpses of themselves and other nations as seen through the prism of Rauschenberg's unerring eyes.

Each R.O.C.I. exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue written by leading poets, writers and journalists of that country, such as the writers Octavio Paz in Mexico and Jose Donoso in Chile. In each country, Rauschenberg left behind as a gift to the people of that nation a work of art he made there. Also integral to each R.O.C.I. exhibition were hundreds of black-and-white photographs, parts of which became silk-screened images in his paintings. They were typically accompanied by *video verite* (a term that Saff coined), continuously-running color videotapes on 10 to 15 video monitors providing scenes and sounds of the countries as seen through Rauschenberg's lens.

Rauschenberg financed the entire venture. "My pockets are empty," he told a Tokyo audience, not entirely in jest. "But to be government-sponsored would defeat the idea of the project. It has to be from people to people. We want to communicate our human kinship. I trust art to do that. Certainly politics isn't doing a very good job."

ROCI's logo was the Oriental symbol of a turtle carrying the world on its back. (Rocky was also the name RR gave his 27-year-old pet turtle, but that's another story.)

"At once altruistic and self-aggrandizing, modest and overbearing, ROCI has endured extraordinarily poor word-of-mouth within the art world for several years, especially after some of its early results – handmade paper collages produced in China in the world's oldest paper mill – were exhibited in New York City in 1984," wrote critic Roberta Smith in 1991. But with 30 years of hindsight, it is now manifest that what Robert Rauschenberg did through ROCI had a ripple effect worldwide.

"As I've travelled, I've talked to artists and they tell me how impactful Rauschenberg's visit and exhibition was," states Bob Rauschenberg Gallery Director Jade Dellinger. "And the ROCI exhibition in Beijing was the biggest blockbuster exhibition in China's history, seen by hundreds of thousands of people [70,000 in the first day alone]. They were starving for information about what was happening in the West but had no way of being able to find out. But Rauschenberg being apolitical was able to set the information ban and restrictions aside."

And it is to set the record straight and clarify the legacy Rauschenberg created through ROCI that Dellinger now brings RAUSCHENBERG: China/America mix to the gallery that bears the artist's iconic name. ■