



Boundaries

From the late 1940s and into the 1950s, Abstract Expressionism was the reigning style that dominated the art scene. The once traditionally accepted representational narrative was no longer the standard. In their angst, Abstract Expressionists were interested in conveying something more profound, more awe inspiring. Artists like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko were the leading contenders of the day. They favored large scale, completely abstract works with the intention of asserting the individuality of the artist, where the painting process and the artist's part in it became the subject. This was a radical shift in direction. After the traumatic events of WWII, painting beautiful works of an idealist world was no longer of interest. In America, the movement was profound, as it turned the eyes of the art world from Paris to New York City.

Robert Rauschenberg, a young artist at the time, came to the new art capital of the world eager to create work that, in many ways, would push artistic boundaries wide open. Beginning in the early '50s, the artist set out on a journey, a path of exploration in media and in concept. By challenging preconceived assumptions, Rauschenberg was able to discover a revolutionary new way of seeing and working. He later labeled this art form the Combine, a combination of both two-dimensional techniques and three-dimensional assemblage. "Most of my choices (in materials) were dependent upon availability and in the way that the painting was growing. I never started with a plan but just felt the appetite of the artwork and tried to be sensitive to that," Rauschenberg said. "As I used more and afforded less, I figured out that if they (the paintings) came out from the wall, because there was a whole other side not doing anything, it would give me twice as much space to work in and finally they just walked off the wall."¹

Rauschenberg's hybrids embraced found materials and objects from everyday life. Images and ephemera from mass media and popular culture, like comic strips, signage and magazine clippings along with diagrammatic and iconographic elements, were juxtaposed against life's disparate detritus that would project out from the picture plane, creating new relationships which challenged the viewer's mind to find alternative connections. His expansive visual vernacular included drawing, painting, photography, solvent transfer, collage, printmaking, assemblage, sculpture, set and costume design and performance

art. Rauschenberg, who has always been a forward-thinker, was also incorporating technology and interactivity into his work twenty years prior to it becoming mainstream. In 1966, Rauschenberg and artist Robert Whitman co-founded a groundbreaking, nonprofit organization called Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) with the assistance of Billy Klüver, a research scientist at Bell Telephone Laboratories in New Jersey, and engineer Fred Waldhauer. E.A.T. enabled the collaboration of artists and engineers through the assistance of corporate funding. Under this visionary program, Rauschenberg produced pioneering works, each requiring viewer interaction to create the experience. Bringing everyday life and the viewer into the artistic process was a revelation that still intrigues the artist, four decades later. "I like the idea that I was the first to see it,"² added Rauschenberg. By breaking away from traditional artistic norms, technical approaches and accepted philosophies in picture making, the artist was able to discover a new language in which to communicate and define his existence in time.

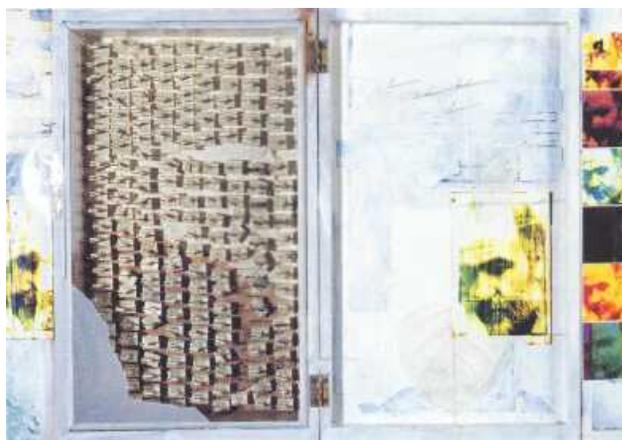
Rauschenberg's grand formats and cacophonous, multidimensional compositions were also in sync with a world that was, at the time, expanding and beginning to move faster than ever before. With the postwar economic boom, a more progressive mindset was in the air. Society was not only open and ready for change, they expected it. Big business also embraced innovation. Seduced by the advent of TV, advertisers jumped ship and moved their campaigns from print to television broadcast, causing many of the popular magazines of the day to close their doors. The demand for realistic, narrative illustration that once had its heyday on the covers and interiors of every major magazine was fading. Photography had also taken a huge bite out of the illustration business. To survive, illustrators needed to reinvent themselves. Many looked at Rauschenberg's work as a new and exciting way to communicate. "It was during the fifties that a healthy revolt against the slick, photograph-oriented illustration, then in vogue, really began to gather adherents," said illustrator Austin Briggs in a talk before the Minneapolis-St. Paul Association of Professional Artists in 1965. "This revolution was accelerated by the demise of several national periodicals in a losing competition with television for the presentation of fictional escapism. Other floundering publications sought salvation in acquiring a new

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image—anything different and strident enough to retain the attention of a wavering public. These conditions produced an opportunity for the illustrator to be truly creative with a freedom from the restraints of the past never before experienced."³

By the mid-1960s, Rauschenberg had paved the way for both fine and commercial artists to experiment like never before. Everything and anything was free game when it came to picture making. "The greatest thing that this whole business did in the sixties was to introduce variety and freedom, not only in the fresh ways that illustration could be done, but also in the opening up of new sources of assignments," said illustrator Bernie Fuchs. "The field had never been so fast changing and unpredictable or so demanding of the illustrator's mind as well as his brush as it was in the sixties."⁴ Illustrators Bob Peak, Fred Otnes, Mark English, Barren Storey, Wilson McLean and many others further carried the torch initially lit by Rauschenberg into the commercial art realm. Their use of multiplicity in picture making became very influential to not only their contemporaries, but also to the next two generations of illustrators. "Up until the 1960s, I had worked as a conventional illustrator doing realistic painting," recalled Otnes. "Then, I saw a pullet in *Life* magazine of Robert Rauschenberg's that was a real dynamic piece. It really expressed the feeling of the time." Rauschenberg was a great influence on Otnes during his formative years. "I also had a lot of experience as a kid with printmaking techniques when I worked for a newspaper in the photoengraving department. So, it was my intention to combine a lot of things—collage, montage and printmaking techniques," Otnes continued. "I was bored with what I was doing and this gave me a big chance to experiment and there was so much you could do with the technique and its possibilities for illustration." This was the beginning of the poetic, highly textural, signature style that the artist is currently working in today. Otnes's brilliant fusion of collage, assemblage, photoengraving, etching and other mixed media on linen canvas has been an inspiration to many illustrators that have followed in his footsteps.

Illustrator Barren Storey shared his experience of the times: "In the decade that began almost precisely the moment I left school, American art was about to explode. It was a time of revolutionary innovation. The task for me and for many illustrators of my generation was to determine whether or not we wanted to accept prevailing attitudes engendered in school, go into fine art with its affirmation of passion and originality, or come up with a new hybrid that somehow bridged the two seemingly contradictory tendencies." After moving to New York City in 1960, Storey began experimenting with media as a comp artist for J. Walter Thompson and BBDO. He was very much influenced by The Museum of Modern Art and would spend every lunch hour admiring the works of artists such as Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Jasper Johns and, of course, Robert Rauschenberg. "More



Collection, 1954. Robert Rauschenberg. 80" x 96" x 3 1/2", Combine painting: oil, paper, fabric, newspaper, printed reproductions, wood, metal and mirror on three canvas panels. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Gift of Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson.

Cages 6 Strata Part 2 (front and back covers), 1996. Dave McKean. 12" x 20", fly collection, pins and thread, shell, photography, acrylic, and tracing paper. NBM Publishing.

than the other artists, Rauschenberg seemed to have found the ultimate hybrid of mass communication and the subtle language of modernism," explained Storey. "By the time he began to create his silk-screen paintings of mass media, the content references became less cryptic and his visual language had found a synthesis between the formal skills that I had studied and a sense of meaning that seemed understandable, readable and accessible. Even after all these years, Rauschenberg's work continues to defy those who would relegate him to a style of the past. Every painting, every construction, every photo-assemblage speaks to those who are devoted to the passion of seeing the relationships around us. I am one who is proud to have experienced it and learned from it." Storey's fascination with process has led him on a pilgrimage that transcends mere technique. His innovative use of alternative materials and approaches to create an environment that is not only multidimensional, but also multi-sensual has made him a pioneer in his own right. At the close of the 1970s and well into the '80s, pluralistic image making was widespread.



Black Iraq: Terrorists, 2005. Barron Storey. 18" x 18", acrylic, gouache, ink, photocopy of drawing, and tape on canvas.



On Being 700, 2000. Fred Otnes. 24" x 32", mixed media collage and assemblage on canvas. Deloitte & louche LP (100th anniversary book).

With the '90s came Adobe Photoshop, available through desktop publishing technology. The computer and this innovative software application opened up even more possibilities for artists to explore than ever before. Many were using digital means to enhance and add further distinction to their work. They were scanning, manipulating, printing out and then reworking an image with other media, combining both traditional and electronic means. Illustrators such as Dave McKean and Eric Dinyer have made great strides in pushing this new medium to an artistic level. "Computers are very good at mixing up contexts. For instance, you can recognize the motion captured from a person walking, but when applied to a pile of rocks so that they move through space using the same gait and walk cycle, the two elements create a friction of ideas in your brain. The brain recognizes the motion, but struggles with the context. Collage has always done this," explained Dave McKean. "There is also a great feeling that comes with heading off into unexplored territory. In art school and then afterwards, I always felt comics had a lot more to offer the world than the stuff that was available. Today, digital image making in film seems to have that same virgin forest feeling to it." McKean has recently created a full-length feature film in his signature style called *MirrorMask*, now available on DVD. "My work is about storytelling, so film is ideal for me. I'm fascinated with it and don't think I'll ever stop learning about the process," added McKean. "I love using sound and music as well as pictures."

The sophistication of computer graphics and animation software has allowed a new generation of artists to redefine what is possible. The lines between drawing, painting, photography, printmaking, sculpture and cinematography are almost completely blurred. When it comes to engaging an audience, the visual experience is no longer confined to a static existence. "Film has changed enormously over the last twenty years and the more it becomes freed from budget, distribution and business concerns and put back into the hands of individuals, the better and healthier the medium will be," noted McKean. Limited only by their imagination, illustrators

are exploring and experimenting like never before, discovering not only alternative ways of working but also new markets to diversify their offerings. It's an exciting time. "By reaching out to (other disciplines) such as writing, music, animation, design, film, etc., illustration will survive and with a much less pigeon-holed existence," McKean explained. With the advent of interactive media, picture making will continue to change and evolve in ways we can only begin to dream about.

Pluralistic, multidimensional and multi-sensual image making will move into the twenty-first century as it is in pace with the consciousness of popular culture. Rauschenberg, a major influence in the advancement of alternative approaches in picture making, is now 80 years old and living in Florida. He is still an active, prolific artist, producing cutting-edge work that continues to push open the boundaries between art and the viewer. Rauschenberg's collaborative spirit, expansive ideology and inventive mindset serve as a shining reminder that in order for art to truly endure, creatives must be willing to take an active role in pushing content to a higher level, persuading clients to adopt new, more inventive ways of communicating with an audience. As artists continue to push the boundaries of visual expression, the world is able to experience a dynamic, more robust existence. CA

Author's note: A traveling exhibition of Rauschenberg's revolutionary Combines, spanning from 1954 to 1964, began at The Metropolitan Museum (MET) in New York City (go to www.metmuseum.org for tin online view) from December 20, 2005 to April 2, 2006.

Rauschenberg and his long time friend and biographer New York Times writer Calvin Tomkins held a public conversation moderated by Nan Rosenthal from the MET's Department of Nineteenth-Century, Modern, and Contemporary Art. It was given to a standing room only crowd that greeted Rauschenberg with a warm standing ovation. The exhibition, Robert Rauschenberg: Combines, is now on display at The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and will remain there until September 4, 2006. It will later travel internationally to the Pompidou Center in Paris (October 4, 2006 to January 8, 2007) and then to the Moderna Museet in Stockholm (February 4 to April 29, 2007).

Footnotes:

1 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Robert Rauschenberg and Calvin Tomkins: A Conversation about Art and Life*, February j, 2006

2 Ibid.

3>, Walt and Roger Reed, *The Illustrator in America 1850 to 1980: A Century of Illustration*, (New York: Madison Square Press, 1984), p. 252.

4 Ibid, p. 282.