

Robert Rauschenberg (American, 1925-2008), *Surface Series* (Nos. 37-54),
Silkscreen on paper, Gift of Lawrence and Carol Zicklin, 1982.13.1.1-18.

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Robert Rauschenberg: *Surface Series*

Adventuresome, collaborative, innovative—it was these defining traits that led Robert Rauschenberg to a career creating new methods of artistic expression. Alongside friends Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, and Jasper Johns, Rauschenberg was among the American vanguard in creating art that challenged the dominance of abstraction. His achievements paved the way for artists during the second half of the twentieth century who wanted to explore the world around them and their personal intersections with it. Rauschenberg is known best for his *Combines* of the 1950s, paintings that fused the gestural brushwork of abstract expressionism with items like Coca-Cola bottles, newspaper clippings, and room furnishings; the result was a novel form, both painting and sculpture. Rauschenberg also created numerous multimedia artworks with partners such as choreographer Merce Cunningham, composer John Cage, and Bell Laboratories scientist Billy Klüver. He is recognized today for his groundbreaking work in printmaking, photography, performance, and technology-based art.

The eighteen silkscreen prints that comprise *Surface Series* were created over the first two months of 1970 and mark a crucial turning point in Rauschenberg’s personal life and professional career. It was in this year that the artist left New York City, the dynamic home that had ignited his early interest in print media, to adopt a quieter life with his partner Robert Petersen in Captiva, an island off the coast of Florida.¹ Professionally, his creation of *Surface Series* coincided with a larger shift towards more political and socially engaged art projects. In the same year he created the series, Rauschenberg designed a poster for the first internationally recognized Earth Day, established the nonprofit organization Change Inc. to provide emergency funds to artists, and retracted work from the United States’ section of a global exhibition in protest of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam war.²

In describing the catalyst for *Surface Series*, Rauschenberg explained that “the world condition permitted me no choice of subject or color and method of composition.”³ The stark black and white headlines featured in *Surface Series* mark the artist’s growing distress over social inequities, specifically global violence, racism, the Vietnam War, and environmental pollution. Frenetic combinations of torn and folded text and image stacked one upon the other are rendered alternately in and out of focus. This cacophonous juxtaposition of words and pictures evokes the overwhelming nature of media bombardment in the age of communication. Through artmaking, Rauschenberg hoped to improve the world; he wrote, “By working together, sharing information, technology and art could be a way to awaken the conscience of people to avoid a crucial disaster.”⁴

Surface Series is one part of a larger body of eighty works titled *Currents*.⁵ The title is thought to be a literal reference to current events and a metaphorical allusion to the way various forces exert power and create motion, just as water is moved by wind and gravity. In total, *Currents* consists of thirty-six collage studies, eighteen prints in *Surface Series*, and twenty-six prints titled *Features*. Each screenprint in *Surface Series* began as two separate collages. Rauschenberg cut and pasted news headlines, photographs, drawings, and magazine excerpts into a single collage and took a photograph of the result. He then did the same with a second collage. By superimposing the resulting two photographic films, Rauschenberg was able to adjust overlapping areas to achieve his desired tonal



Fig. 1 *Surface Series* #45, 1982.13.1.10



Fig. 2 *Surface Series* #43, 1982.13.1.6

values, focus, and composition. Another photograph, this one of the combined films, allowed him to craft the final image that would be used to make the silkscreen print. Rauschenberg wanted *Currents* to have an immediate impact; the body of work and its related series was exhibited at Dayton’s Gallery 12 in Minneapolis, MN, Automation House and Castelli Graphics, in New York City and the Pasadena Museum of Art all between April and September of 1970.

While Rauschenberg’s political beliefs are not explicit in *Surface Series*, his choice of source material is revealing. He incorporated major newspapers and tabloids, but also alternative liberal publications. For instance, alongside *The New York Times* and the *New York Daily News*, he included the *Daily World*, the only daily Marxist newspaper in the United States at the time, and the *Berkeley Barb*, a countercultural publication supporting civil rights and the anti-war movement. In addition to fifteen different newspapers, Rauschenberg sourced magazines, broadsheets, and drawings for his final images. He described the project as “the most serious and journalistic work I have ever done.”⁶

Within Rauschenberg’s career, *Surface Series* demonstrates his growing mastery over the medium of printmaking. The artist had begun concentrated experimentation with prints in 1962, convinced along with his friend Warhol, that their potential as a form of fine art had not yet been fully exploited.⁷ In *Surface Series*, Rauschenberg uses the specific abilities of printmaking to create a critique of mass media. For instance, recurrent coverage of the Black Panther Party, the Trial of the Chicago Seven, Nixon’s presidency and environmental disasters serve as through-lines in the series, highlighting the way certain news stories, through repetition, can occupy primary focus in readers’ perception of world events.

In other examples, Rauschenberg highlights abilities achieved easily through the image-transfer processes that define printmaking. One print features a large image of a rolled dollar bill lit like a candle (Fig. 1). Its shape, scale, and placement on the page mimic the rolled copy of *The Wall Street Journal* featured in another print (Fig. 2). When paired, the images provoke associations with the economy and capitalism, as well as with extermination and destruction, and subsequently give the candle-dollar image a meaning that stands in opposition to its original context. The large title “Washington’s Birthday Sale” was cut from above the candle-dollar, which was initially created



Fig. 3 *Surface Series* #47, 1982.13.1.4

as part of an advertisement encouraging viewers to shop on President’s Day. The extracted title can be found in another print (Fig. 3) where it appears above smaller text reading “... Roosevelt Saturday Night” and a large image of a striding horse.⁸ The story under the horse describes how it was a former racing champion saved from a future as horsemeat. In this context, the title takes on patriotic and altruistic connotations.

In *Surface Series*, Rauschenberg manipulates the scale of objects, employs mirroring strategies, creates twin images, and juxtaposes text and image from different sources. These are the same techniques used by printed media, such as newspapers, to shape how readers engage with content. Rauschenberg demonstrates these strategies at such a large scale (each print is 40” x 40”), that the *Surface Series* screenprints call attention to the tools available to the media when presenting information. By demonstrating how the news is deployed and can be manipulated, Rauschenberg deconstructs its core strategies and issues a call to arms for critical media consumption.

¹ Rauschenberg lived in Captiva until his death in 2008.

² Today, the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, built on the artist’s conviction that art could ignite social change, continues his philanthropic work through funding small and midsize foundations that promote equity through socially engaged initiatives.

³ Rauschenberg, *Currents* (Minneapolis Dayton’s Gallery 12, and New York: Castelli Graphics, 1970).

⁴ Lawrence Alloway, “Rauschenberg’s Development,” in *Robert Rauschenberg* (Smithsonian Institution, 1976), 18.

⁵ The images in *Surface Series* were numbered according to their original placement in the total sequence of eighty works. Hence, the prints shown in this exhibition are numbers 37 through 54. They would have been followed by the prints in *Features*.

⁶ Mary Lynn Kotz, “Robert Rauschenberg’s State of the Universe Message,” *Art News*, February 1983, 56.

⁷ While some scholars claim Warhol introduced the idea of working with printmaking to Rauschenberg, others assert that the two came to the medium at the same time. Either way, Rauschenberg’s artistic admiration for, and sometimes rivalry with, Warhol is well-noted. Rauschenberg acknowledges the work of his friend in print No. 47, which includes an article on censorship of a film Warhol produced.

⁸ Curator Helen Hsu has traced the origins of all media sources in *Surface Series* and describes some of their original contexts and creative juxtapositions in a recorded lecture on the subject. See “Streaming Media: Rauschenberg and the News in 1970” uploaded by The Loeb, Vassar College, August 25, 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFu07IGABkM.