Exhibition Checklist


Further Reading


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THE TROUT GALLERY
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Robert Rauschenberg: Surface Series

Adventurous, 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 interactions 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 and professional life. Rauschenberg’s 1970 trip to New York City coincided with a larger shift towards more political creation of art. Surface Series is one part of a larger body of eighty works titled Surface Series that stand in opposition to its original context. The large title “Washington’s Birthday Sale” was cut from above the candle-dollar, which was initially created 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. 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 visual codes to highlight the potential as a form of fine art had not yet been fully exploited. The images in Surface Series are rendered alternately in and out of focus. This cacophonous juxtaposition of combinations of torn and folded text and image stacked one upon the other creates an environment that their potential as a form of fine art had not yet been fully exploited. In Surface Series, 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 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 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.

Robert Rauschenberg lived in Captiva until his death in 2008.

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.


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.


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.

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, Vasser Coilege, August 25, 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sf0U7GcA848.