

RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

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SUNDAY/ The News & Courier - The Evening Post, Chas., S.C., November 8, 1981—3-E

Lowcountry Through The Eyes Of An Artist

By **MARJORIE WEISS**
Special Writer

Robert Rauschenberg and his working assistant Terry Van Brunt were in Charleston Oct. 26 for two days to open the new photograph exhibition at the Gibbes Art Gallery. Entitled "In and Out City Limits: Charleston," the show consists of 49 photographs taken here by Rauschenberg during brief visits in 1980 and '81.

He and Van Brunt traveled from Long Island to Captiva Island, Fla., taking pictures along the way. Shows in New York, Baltimore and Sanibel Island, Fla., were also in large part a result of this trip. Rauschenberg and Van Brunt will be on hand to open exhibitions of the photographs in each city. At present the photographs are being shown for a limited time only in the cities in which they were taken; however, books are being made of each exhibition. These will be available at the Gibbes and in museums everywhere.

The impressive reputation of Robert Rauschenberg comes from his work, since 1950, in painting, printmaking, constructions and performance, and his synthesis of the different spheres of work. He has combined commonplace and not-so-commonplace materials — photos, newspapers, fabric, pillows, stuffed birds — with brilliant painting, to make his sensual and poetic combine paintings.

Also familiar to an art audience are his silkscreen and transfer images on veils of cloth. Previously photography has been relegated to providing images to be used in larger works or in combination with another medium. In this current series of exhibitions he is showing his photographs solely as photographs.

Following are excerpts from an interview with the artist during his stay in Charleston for the opening of his show.

Q. Why Charleston? How did you decide to stop here and photograph?

A. This time, in '80 and '81, I started in a '36 Phaeton Ford up in Long Island and my idea was to photograph the entire coast. I got enough work that I considered artistically interesting in Charleston to contact the Gibbes Gallery. My intention all along is to do my road show. The Gibbes was enthusiastic about the possibility and I put together this collection.

When I was just "knocking" around, in pre-travel days (from Black Mountain, c. 1950), I found Charleston a particularly provocative place. I felt the difference between Folly Beach and Isle of Palms and Charleston. I like ports in the first place. If I can, I always stick close to the coast. Port towns are considered much more dangerous and vulnerable. Charleston is so open: anytime you have a port situation you have a main-line contact with the outside world which is made up of the unknown. That's why ports are, to me, always more interesting than interiors.

Q. Six cities have been done in this "In and Out City Limits" series. I was wondering why the exhibitions are not traveling.

A. I'm sure that eventually there will be some massive show; selections from a partial totality. But right now my idea about the spirit of the show is to share my visit with the people who should be more experienced in that environment than I am, and more familiar with it and, if I can, to show you something that you haven't seen in your own place.

Q. You have used photographs in all different ways in your other work. Would photographs you have used in a show like this be likely to become material to be used in some other way?

A. Oh sure, absolutely — in lithographs, painting, stage sets.

Q. I looked quickly at the photos this morning before they were hung. My prominent impressions are of surfaces beside other contrasting surfaces, patterns, juxtapositions of surface textures. Are those things you notice especially or do they just seem to come through in this collection?

A. Yes. It's a mixture — not so much their juxtaposition but their coexistence,

I feel that if I show something that is very contemporary, even banal, and you can see a tree that is hundreds of years old, they help make each other real. It intensifies or sharpens the point of view. One could, gradually, if one had more time or patience, isolate this event and that event, but the likelihood of someone wanting to concern himself with both of those things at the same time is unlikely or there wouldn't be any need for the photographs. If you can capture as many diametric situations in one frame, as possible, then you have one more chance of getting that person to open up.

There is one photograph downstairs ... one of my favorites, the toilet in the Mills House with just a little bit of the headline of the "hostages" there. And you know, people have forgotten about the hostages. In looking at it somebody may say "That's just a photograph of a toilet." But if that word "hostage" crosses their mind, something might change. I don't know, it's a long shot, an interesting long shot. Most often the people who come to museums have a fixed open mind: they're looking for something that fits into the closed world that they have framed.

Art shouldn't be finer than anything else, it's rarer — so therefore, expensive or difficult or any of those things.... Those photographs are to broaden the concept of what is visually bombarding you all the time. I don't know which is more dangerous; to be blind to everything around you or to hate everything that is around you. There is a canvas cover over some work on a bunch of telephone lines. They are being protected by this large canvas shape. If that was made out of granite sitting in somebody's cemetery, or in a museum garden, everybody would stare at it. But they pass

this, either not looking at it or thinking "when are they going to fix that, that's ugly?" Part of my interest in showing photographs locally is to insist that people be happier where they are.

Q. You mentioned you don't crop the image....

A. There's such excitement to me, that moment when everything gets in that little box...when it happens it's so thrilling. When I miss, well, OK. But it's worth it just for that magic time.

Q. There seems to be an amazing symmetry and serenity in these photographs. Is it intentional? Is it a function of your focusing on a particular thing? Are you looking for it or is it a by-product?

A. It's a combination. I couldn't see it if it weren't there. But if you don't have the whole experience then you have to be selective and that's where you try to catch the essence, to make each moment as serene or as heroic as possible.

I think I'm trying to exclude the clutter of the interferences of that image and then to work full frame. I try to shoot at 22 as much as I can so that whatever is in the frame is as clear as anything else in the frame. But sometimes the light doesn't let you do that.

Q. Going back to your earlier work, would you have been doing something essentially different at any other time when you were shooting photographs than when you were doing these on this tour?

A. No, I don't think so. It's the same sensibility that runs through all different media. The change in medium keeps you from sinking into a particular point of view specifically unique only to that medium. If you keep changing you can't get down there where you're trapped. A lot of people think I've unnecessarily jumped around from idea to idea and medium to medium and I can't say they're all the same, but just because they don't look alike doesn't mean they aren't. I have to trust myself, and it all filters through my sensibility and my conscience. I prefer that to any exterior stylistic idea anytime. I'm only interested in art as it applies to life.

Q. There seems to be present in most of your work an urge to combine and compose. Is that urge restrained in the presentation of a single photograph?

A. I think that's in the single photograph.

Q. You have mentioned the water towers on rooftops, and other images, as peculiar to New York. Are there particular shapes or things you associate with Charleston?

A. There's a kind of softness about Charleston...it isn't northern and it isn't southern....But I haven't spent enough time here, that's just a feeling that I have — a kind of softness as opposed to hostility or brittleness that I've felt in other places that were going through as many changes as Charleston is. The feeling about Charleston is more gentle.

(Marjorie Weiss teaches drawing and painting at the College of Charleston.)

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