

RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

Interviews: Rosenthal, Mark / "Robert Rauschenberg" / Artists at GEMINI G.E.L.,
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INTERVIEW OF ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

MR: Do you like visiting Los Angeles?

RR: I love Los Angeles. I once said publicly that one of the reasons I like Los Angeles is that it is a thousand miles wide and a quarter of an inch deep. I find Los Angeles both innocent and stimulating. It still has that kind of Western feeling, a controversial rawness. The city certainly works with my renegade feelings about what art is, both of what it's not supposed to be and what it could be.

MR: How did you begin to work with Gemini? Was Booster, the first piece you did for Gemini?

RR: Yes. I remember being in Los Angeles at the Grinsteins, without an idea in my head. Stanley said: "Well, tell us about your idea." It came from nowhere. I said: "I'm going to do a self-portrait." That was the beginning.

MR: What's the atmosphere like at Gemini?

RR: They're quite laid back at Gemini because they have to work with so many different points of view. That's what so nice.

Roy Lichtenstein can come in, and then Jasper Johns, the whole situation architecturally, physically, chemically -- and the pacing will relate directly to that particular person.

I was here only one time when Jasper was working, and he was in real trouble because he only had two more days. It was quite marvelous because it was one of the first times in years that we had been in the situation that we needed each other. I wasn't volunteering. He was hanging up proofs and said: "Which one of these do you like?"

As for working at Gemini, I arrive without knowing what I'm going to do. The tolerance level of all the printers, even though they've changed over the years, is great. You'd drive them crazy if you come with a pre-programmed attitude.

MR: You obviously enjoy collaboration.

RR: When I first started working at Gemini, they had just finished a Man Ray project. I thought they hadn't sufficiently engaged him. My attitude was that the artist should be as involved

as possible, and the work should be unique, as opposed to high quality reproductions. That's where the collaboration comes in.

The reason I enjoy collaboration is that very early I figured out that two expertises were much better than their sum. I don't get involved too much with the chemicals in the shop, but with the processes. In the case of this latest group of lithographs, instead of putting on touche or washes, I'm applying photo emulsion and preparing a ground that the photographs I've taken are on. This is burned directly into plate.

MR: So when you came to Los Angeles to do this group of work, you arrived with these photographs?

RR: No. I passed through Washington and took a couple of photographs that appear in this series, but the rest were all done here in Los Angeles.

MR: What is the title of this group?

RR: I'm thinking of calling the series "Illegal Tender L.A."

MR: What does that mean?

RR: I don't know, but I like it. I like the "Tender" part and the "Illegal" part. I know what "legal tender" means but I don't know what these two words mean together. I think they just describe an attitude.

I love titling. Now I have to give titles to the eleven lithographs in this suite. That's something that happens at the right moment; it's nothing that I ever force. Once the titling process starts, you have to make sure that you can write fast in order to remember, but I love that. I've always considered that in painting, prints, and theater, the title is the last brush stroke.

MR: Have you ever done a triptych before?

RR: I did the Trilogy from The Bellini Series in 1987.

MR: How did you decide to do a triptych here?

RR: The paper was too small.

I did photographs in Venice of a kid swinging, and I liked the image. I wanted to bring all three of the variations into a single work, so that's how a triptych came about.

MR: How do you see your activity in prints vis-à-vis the rest of your work?

RR: I use the activity as a kind of refresher. I've consistently been impatient, restless, and curious, and I've satisfied this weakness by changing mediums often. As soon as I can do something, that is the end of the series. There must be thousands of other things that I haven't thought of, or haven't occurred to anybody, that need to be done. And I'm getting of an age that I have to start thinking, can I get all of ^{it} done?

MR: Turning to the chairs...

RR: It's "Shares," as in financing, "Borealis Shares." They are titled that way because they always look more beautiful when there are two people on them instead of just one. So its shares meant both ways.

MR: How did you come upon "Borealis?"

RR: I was already working on a series involved with rainbow corrosions. I was on my way to Sweden, and saw my first borealis.

I thought that word should be the title for these corrosions. Since then these have been more variations.

The rainbow corrosion still interests me. In fact, I have a new approach to the series, which is to either draw or print in a resistor so that the metal carries the image instead of the opposite way, where the paint is the image on the surface.

MR: What are the chairs made of?

RR: The chairs are brass, copper and bronze, and are covered with Lexan. That's used for bullet proof glass, and storm shutters for hurricanes. It is surprisingly comfortable. If somebody shot you from behind, or even from underneath, you'd be perfectly safe.

MR: How are the images applied to them?

RR: They are silkscreened.

MR: Do you relate these kinds of surfaces to your earlier work?

RR: I like the artwork to generously absorb anything that's going on around it. Since I got involved with working with the reflective metals, that's one of the things I've enjoyed. And I

always had used mirrors and built lightbulbs into my pieces, so that there was never only an artwork inside.

MR: Was it John Cage who noted that your white paintings reflected the environment?

RR: Yes. He said if you are sensitive enough they are clocks, meaning you can tell how many people are in the room and what time of the day it is. And you don't have to wind them but you occasionally have to clean them.

MR: Someone writing about your work used the term "swarms of images." That seems like such a nice expression for the way the images sort of run around these chairs. But when you put the images together, here and in "Illegal Tender," are you thinking about the poetic combinations along with the formal implications?

RR: You have to, as well as the spatial ones, and the color, at the same time. I think you have to be schizophrenic, and it helps if you are a Libra too because you are already off balance.

MR: Trying to find balance all the time?

RR: I never watch what I'm doing because I feel if I know, then I must have seen it somewhere. I don't want to do anything obvious. If you work from plans and thinking, usually it doesn't have that kind of spontaneity. I guess I just have to go fishing again. I used to have some of my best ideas while I was fishing right out in front of the house. Your mind starts drifting, and all of sudden you're working in a whole other consciousness level.

MR: You've been using the image of the chair for some 35 years.

RR: It's a very common object. I'm particularly attracted to elements in life that for the most part are taken for granted so successfully that no one sees them or understands them anymore. For instance, you'd take a telephone a lot more seriously if you had an emergency. I am looking for those elements to photograph now.

MR: Given the context of all the chairs over the years, "Borealis Shares" seems to be the most baroque chair of all, almost thronelike.

RR: I did think it was important that, given the context of people being a part of the art, the chairs look as good as possible. And, hopefully, we've done a good framing job.

MR: I see. You've framed the person sitting there. But the back of the chair is at least as exciting as the front.

RR: If you get tired of sitting, you can stand. I didn't want it to be simply a piece of furniture. Even though it is an object, with a utilitarian purpose, its other side is like a painting on the wall.

MR: How do you feel about furniture?

RR: I like scale, but I hate furniture. I live very austerely, quite grandly, but austerely.

The chairs that I do incorporate in my work are classically ordinary. Maybe that's the revenge of the chairs. I just bought the contents of a restaurant that was going out of business. The chairs that I typically use in my work were all over the room. I have about 26 of them left, and I want to use them all in one sculpture.

MR: Is this the first time you've ever made an artwork that is used, for example for sitting?

RR: No. I did some furniture during the cardboard series [1970-72]. I made boxes that were fastened together but mobile. You could stack some as a table, others as a chair or a bed.

At my old Fulton Fish Market base, I slept on fish boxes.

MR: Did you actually sleep on them?

RR: Yep.

MR: That's why you hate furniture now?

RR: I don't know, but I very rarely see a piece of furniture that I think is interestingly designed.

MR: It seems that you've always made objects covered with images.

RR: I got the other side of life taken care of very quickly, thanks to Josef Albers's austerity, by doing the all whites and the all blacks in the early 1950s. Actually, it wasn't his austerity, it was my stubbornness and respect for every color in the world. Albers always said that art is a swindle, that red is there to make

green look brighter. But I couldn't choose between the colors without feeling as though I was misusing them; it was not fair to make a contract with one color at the expense of another. So I was just frozen into wanting to exercise all colors equally. It wasn't until several years later that I even dared to do the all reds, and once I did those, other colors, like oranges and yellows, started "leaning" on them. Then I finally just broke loose.

MR: It's always been fascinating to think of you working in the 1950s contemporaneously with the Abstract Expressionists.

RR: I don't think they knew who I was or where I was in my art. There were two schools then, Hofmann or de Kooning. It was one of the few times that I found living in the shadows an advantage. By the time anybody realized that maybe I was serious, it was too late to do anything about it.

Los Angeles, September 22, 1991