

Robert Rauschenberg

Stoned Moon

Tripping on Stoned Moon by Helen Hsu

NASA invited Robert Rauschenberg to witness the 16 July 1969 launch of Apollo 11, the first mission to land humans on the moon. The experience inspired thirty-four lithographs executed at the unflinchingly experimental Los Angeles atelier Gemini G.E.L. Nodding to the process of its making, the series title *Stoned Moon* celebrates lithographic stones, while winking at sixties counterculture and the multitude of lyrical musings on the celestial body. These qualities of polyvalence and open access also characterize the *Stoned Moon* images.

For Rauschenberg, a longtime space exploration enthusiast, observing the moonshot was a kindred opportunity. His silkscreen paintings of 1962–64 already featured astronauts, rocket boosters, and landing capsules. He called his beloved dogs Moon and Laika (whose namesake was the first animal to orbit Earth aboard the Soviet spacecraft Sputnik 2 in 1957). Rauschenberg's Laika gave birth to seven puppies four days before Apollo 11 launched; the fact opens a rare written account in which he affectionately noted, 'Laika who likes barking means bark in Siberia.' The rhythm of the phrase signals several devices paralleled in his assembly of the *Stoned Moon* pictures: alliteration, (slant) rhyme, repetition and its special case of doubling.

Through NASA's Art Program, Rauschenberg gained access to documentary photography, maps, charts, guides, and manuals, in addition to what he culled from mass media

sources. *Stoned Moon's* juxtaposition of free associative imagery conveys an information overload. This condition captures the technocratic accumulation of data and engineering specifications, the ginormous vehicles and their massive supporting infrastructure, that comprised the space program. Rauschenberg reflected on his project, 'Stones opened for images of peace, discovery, and energy. Coexistence of information and sensibilities, facts of unschemed complexities.' On the one hand he embraced this moment of hope and triumph – consider the resplendent rising verticality of the bright spectrum coloured *Sky Garden* (p. 183), which at 7 1/2 feet tall was the largest hand-pulled lithograph at that time. On the other, Rauschenberg appreciated complications to the narrative. After all, the awe-inspiring launch apotheosized the technological sublime and its deep ambivalence. The sublime shuttles dizzyingly between wonder and dread, entangling beauty and danger, vitality and fatality. Outer space is also an abyss, as fertile for the imagination as it is unsuitable for human life. The experience of simultaneous extremes constituted the turbulence of the sixties that unfolded with upheavals both inspiring and terrifying. The moonshot itself could be seen as a civic diversion of Cold War geopolitics in which the space race momentarily eclipsed competitive armament.

Rauschenberg exhibited an acute awareness of the event's prehistory. At the bottom of *Trust Zone* (p. 181) appears the iconic







GIVEN PURGE SYSTEM

PLSS SUPPORT STRINGS

SUN GLASSES POCKET

PLSS

GIVEN PURGE SYSTEM UMBILICAL

TETHER ATTACHMENT ACCESS FLAP

WATER CONNECTOR/BIO-MEDICAL INJECTION/DOSIMETER ACCESS FLAP

LEVA

PLSS CONTROL BOX

RPS ACTUATOR

PENLIGHT POCKET

CONNECTOR COVER

PURGE VALVE ACCESS FLAP

PURGE VALVE LANYARD

COMBIBATIONS, VENTILATION & LIQUID COOLING UMBILICAL

CAPE KENNEDY AIR FORCE STATION

EV GLOVE

PENLIGHT POCKETS

UTILITY POCKET

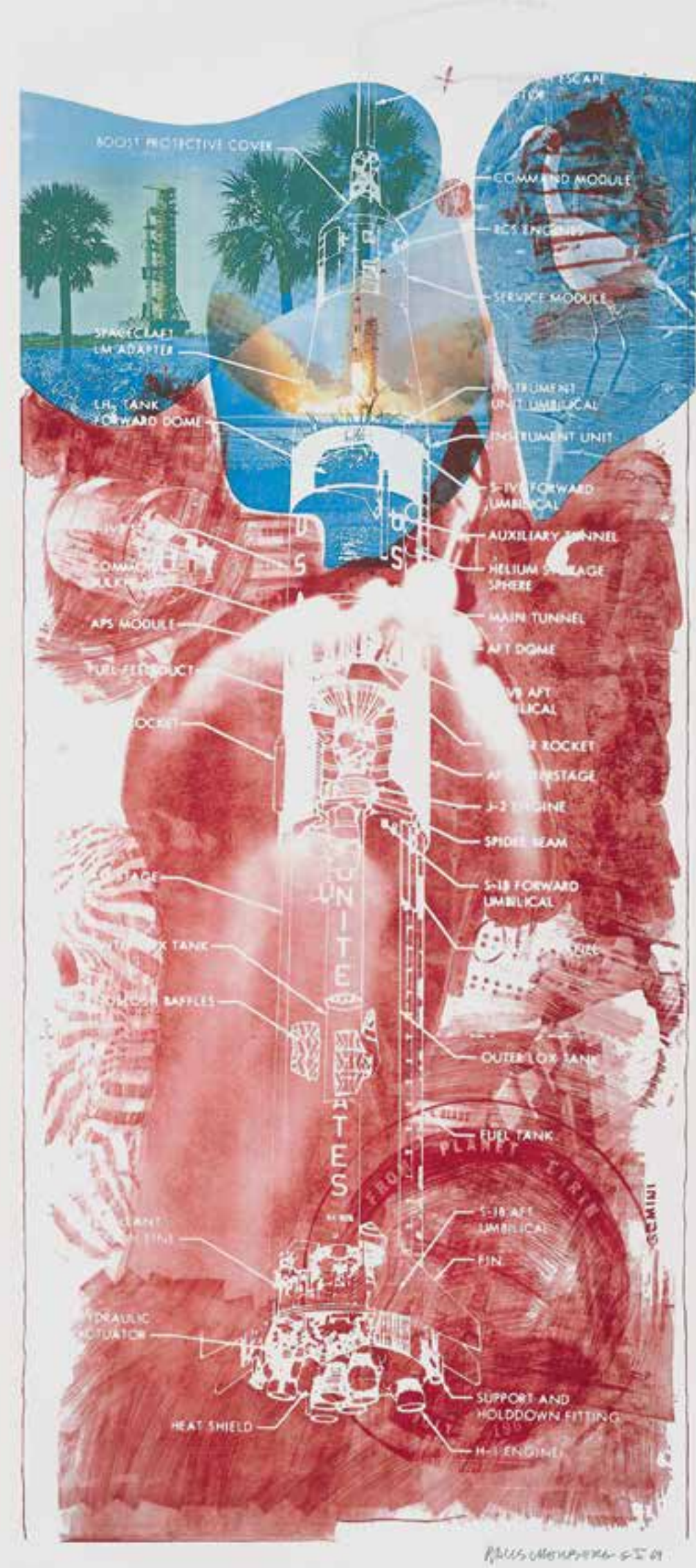
LOADING LANYARD POCKET & LANYARDS

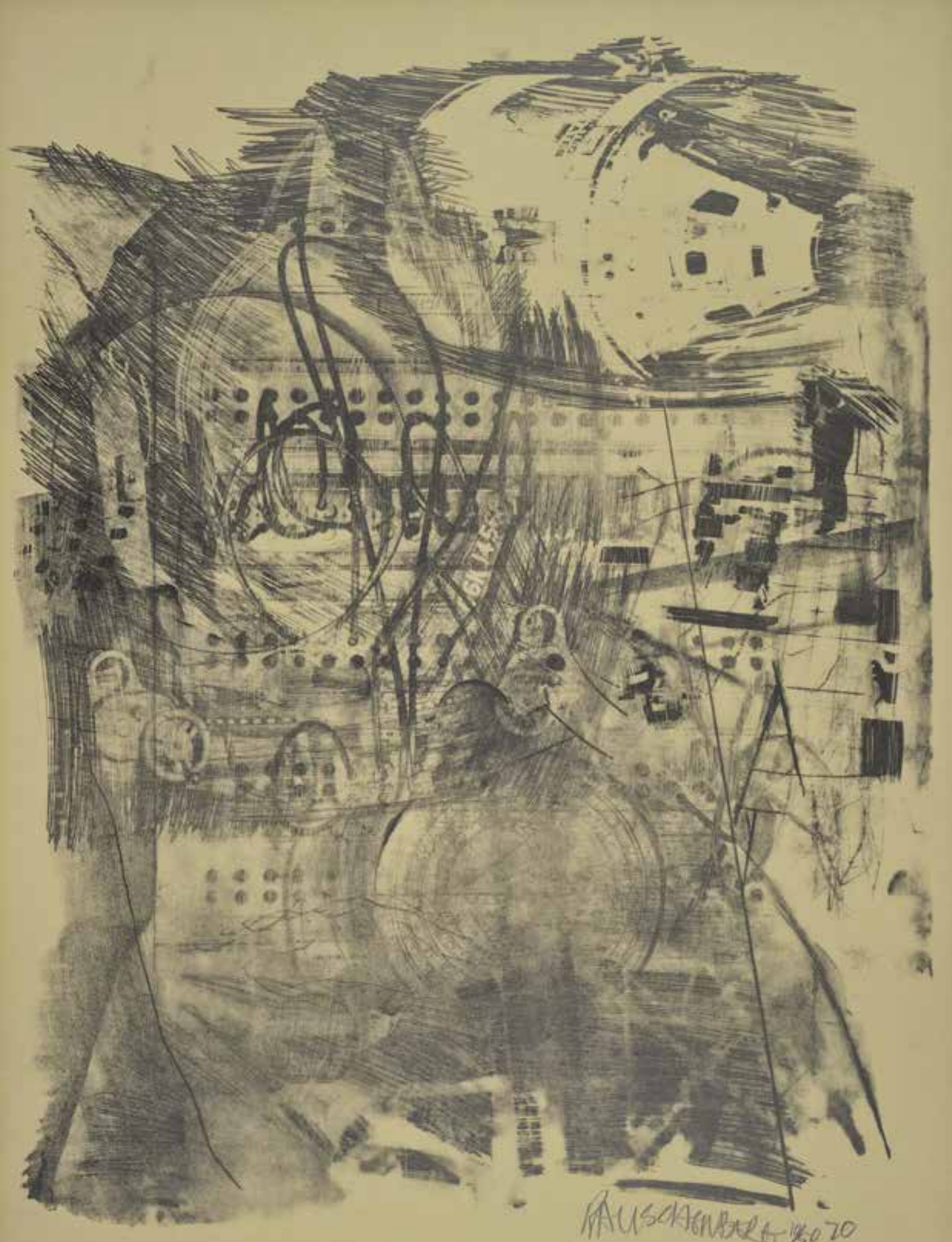
LANYARD COVER

LANYARD BOOM

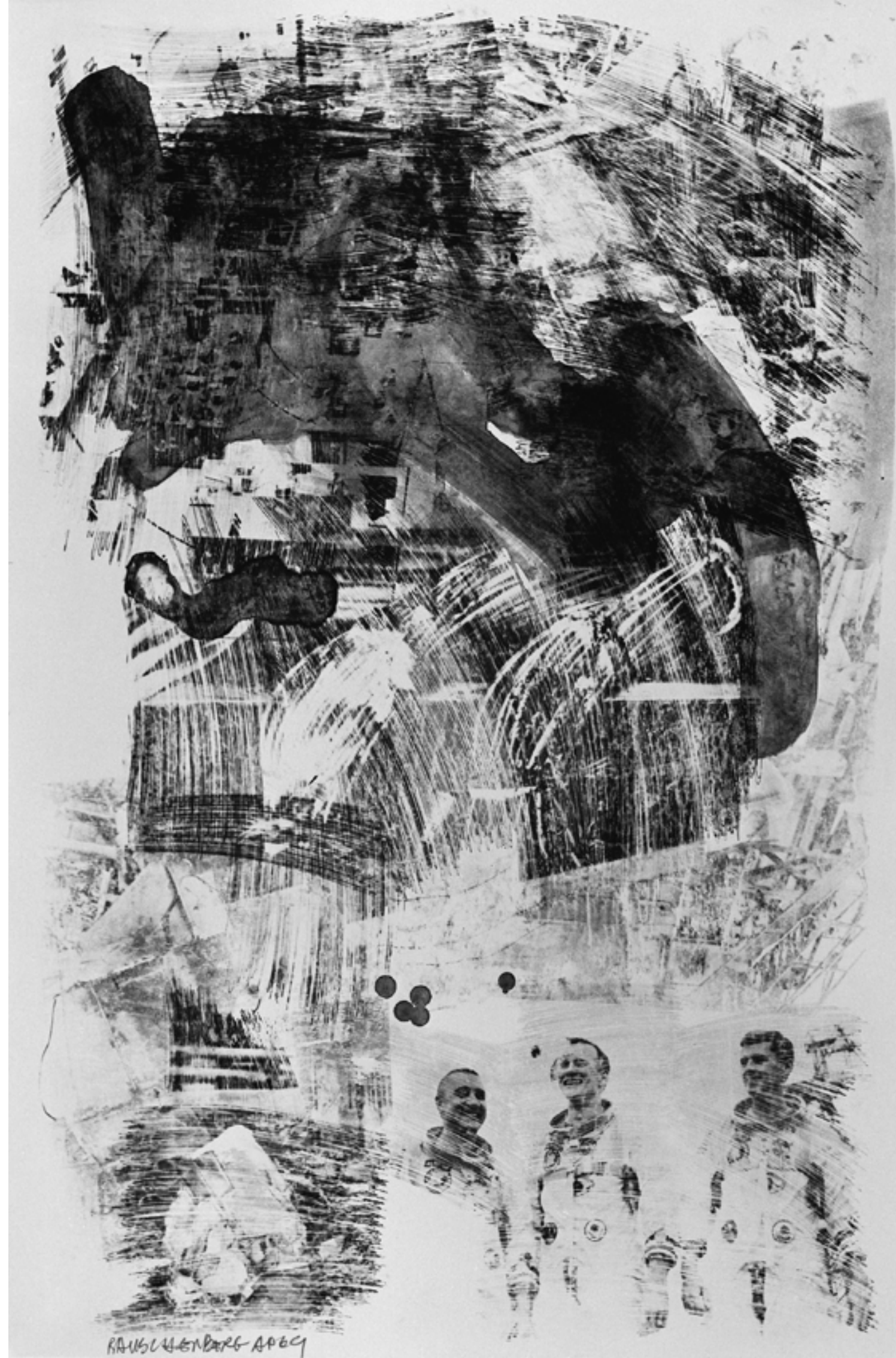
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SP/REITER 1925-55 70



RAUSCHENBERG 1969

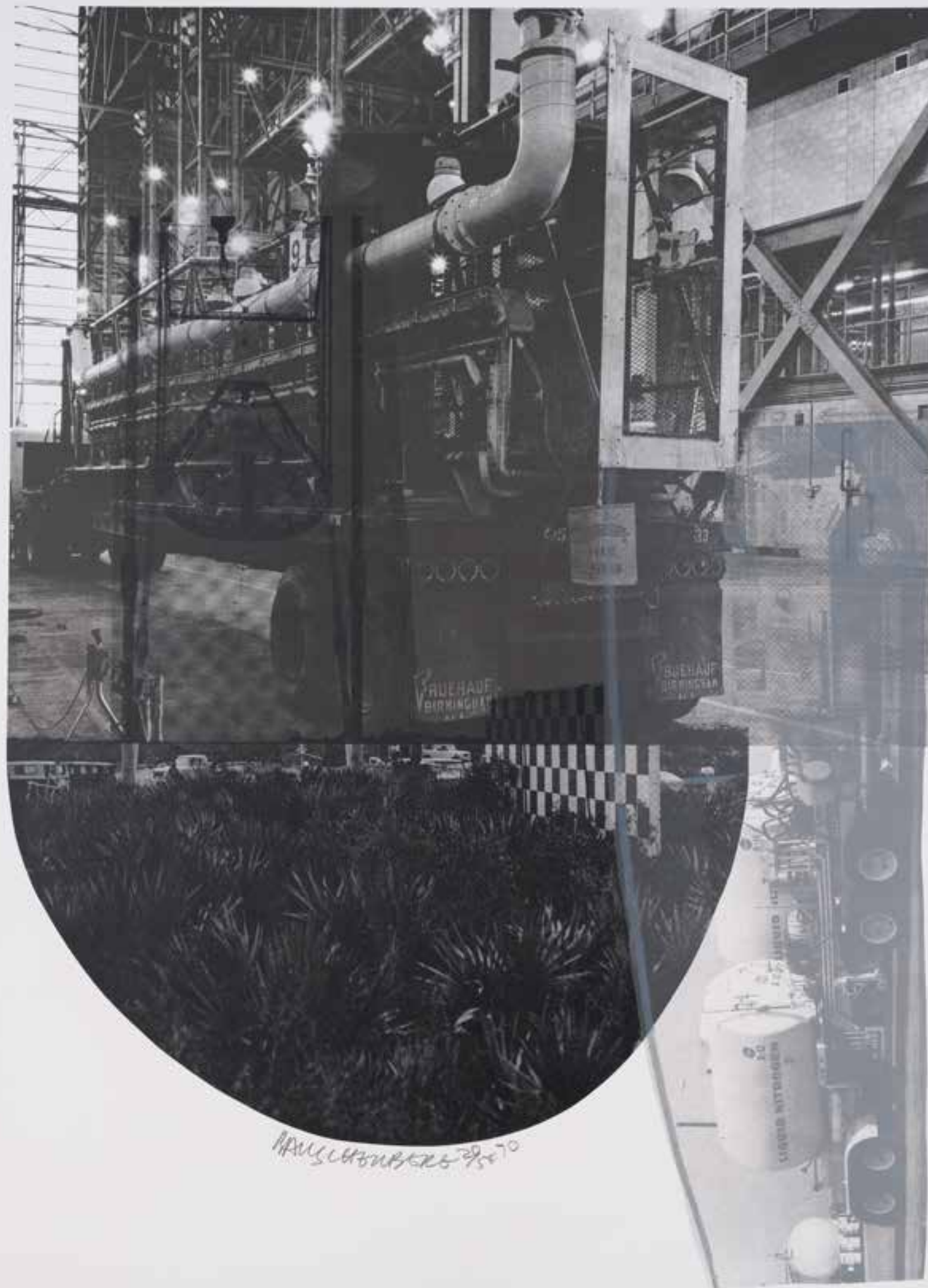


image of the first powered flight in 1903 by brothers Orville and Wilbur Wright. Wilbur anchors the lower left corner gazing toward the future of the John F. Kennedy Space Center and the moon suit, represented by superimposed infographics. Kitty Hawk sands dust the lunar boots. Poking through this historical aperture, guided by Rauschenberg's 1970 statement for *Signs*, a screenprint collage he made on the heels of *Stoned Moon* – 'Conceived to remind us of love, terror, violence of the last 10 years. Danger lies in forgetting' – and prompted by labels on the map in *Trust Zone*, one picks up a trajectory of memory that starts with Kennedy and his 1961 announcement of the goal to land man on the moon. The frenetic overlay of pictures and impressions throughout *Stoned Moon* evokes the enigmatic terrain of the lunar surface as well as the turmoil of the preceding decade.

In reaching the dazzling achievement of Apollo 11, Kennedy's arc also encompassed his assassination in 1963. This national trauma triggers the remembrance of others that compose the atmosphere of *Stoned Moon*: the fatal shooting of activist Medgar Evers and the bombing of a Birmingham church that claimed the lives of Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carol Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley, also in 1963. *Brake (Stoned Moon)* (1969) memorializes Apollo 1 astronauts Roger Chaffee, Virgil Grissom, and Edward White, who died in a fire during a training exercise in 1967. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy were murdered in 1968. (Rauschenberg met King when they both received honorary doctorates from Grinnell College in October 1967, 'I was privileged to share an intimate, unforgettable two-hour cardtable lunch with him, then he was flown back to jail.' This pendulum swing encapsulates the dialectical delirium of the sixties.) Heading right up to the launch countdown, *Life* magazine – a favourite quarry for Rauschenberg's image grabs – identified American casualties from a week of fighting in Vietnam, a grim yearbook that occupied six spreads in the 27 June 1969 issue.

Just as the origin of Apollo 11 can be traced to JFK, so too that of the Vietnam War. NASA's dark twin was the military industrial complex. There is a sinister ambiguity in *Shell* (p. 191), where protec-

tively suited and masked engineers handle a cylinder that could as easily be a weapon as a spacecraft component; the title suggests the former. The layering of satellite panels and the play of colours simulate camouflage moiré. *Bait* (p. 182) implicates hubris in the *Stoned Moon* story. Aloft a murky deposit of images, floats the seventeenth-century locksmith and tinkerer Besnier's gliding mechanism. The operator is depicted with the dignity of a classical nude, evoking Daedalus and Icarus and the latter's fall. The figure in deep orange below Besnier's contraption is tilted horizontal and the figure in dark drab green below that is fully inverted, staging a sequential tumble. Yet if hubris is suggested, it is also superseded in the escape from Earth's gravity. Both figures appear to be engaged in training drills, preparing for conditions in space where falling is not actually possible. While the retribution of the gods may no longer be a fear, the malfunction of sophisticated machines certainly is.

A trio of astronauts enacts the pose of 'see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil' in *Ape* (p. 188). Superimposed on the heads of labcoated scientists, they hint at complicity, if not collusion, in the instrumentalization of research by military and corporate interests. Perhaps the tableau suggests another adage: it's all fun and games until someone loses an eye. Note also the Arabic astrolabe at upper left, a reminder that the dream of exploring space is international, even universal. One need only follow the birds in *Sky Garden* (p. 183), *Local Means* (p. 186), and *Hybrid* (p. 189) all the way back to the first human who gazed enviously at the creature in flight and desired to do the same.

The ludic engagement Rauschenberg invites in *Stoned Moon*, as in all of his work, calls on the viewer to traverse its networks of images and gestures, which are in turn amply linked to external facts and ideas, parse the information, and synthesize new interpretations.

Robert Rauschenberg

(b. 1925 – d. 2008, US) was a leading figure of the pop art movement. Famous for using unconventional materials from dirt and house paint to umbrellas and car tyres, in 1964 he became the first American to win the International Grand Prize in Painting at the Venice Biennale. His work was exhibited worldwide both during his lifetime and posthumously. Rauschenberg was the subject of a recent retrospective at Tate Modern, whilst works from the *Stoned Moon* series form part of an ongoing exhibition at The British Museum, London.

Helen Hsu

(b. 1980, USA) is Assistant Curator at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. She co-edited and contributed to the exhibition catalogue *Rauschenberg in China* (2016). Previously, she served as assistant curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Born to Chinese immigrants, she is a graduate of Stanford University, California.

- p.177 *Arena 11 State 11* (Stoned Moon), 1969
Lithograph, 47 x 32 inches (119.4 x 81.3 cm)
©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation
- p.178 *Banner* (Stoned Moon), 1969
Lithograph, 54 1/2 x 36 inches (138.4 x 91.4 cm)
©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation
- p.181 *Trust Zone* (Stoned Moon), 1969
Lithograph 40 x 33 inches (101.6 x 83.8 cm)
©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation
- p.182 *Bait* (Stoned Moon), 1970
Lithograph, 35 1/4 in. x 26 1/4 in. (89.54 cm x 66.68 cm) From an edition of 46 published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson
- p.183 *Sky Garden* (Stoned Moon), 1969
Lithograph and screenprint 89 1/4 x 42 inches (226.7 x 106.7 cm)
©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation
- p.184 *Strawboss* (Stoned Moon), 1970
Lithograph 30 x 22 in. (76.2 x 55.88 cm) From an edition of 50 published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson
©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation and Gemini G.E.L.
- p.186 *Local Means* (Stoned Moon), 1970
Lithograph 32 3/8 x 43 5/16 inches (82.2 x 110 cm) From an edition of 11 published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles
- p.187 *Brake* (Stoned Moon), 1969
Lithograph on paper 42 x 29 inches (106.7 x 73.7 cm)
©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation
- p.188 *Ape* (Stoned Moon), 1970
Lithograph 46 x 33 in. (116.84 x 83.82 cm) From an edition of 45 published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson
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- p.189 *Hybrid* (Stoned Moon), 1969
Lithograph 54 1/2 x 36 inches (138.4 x 91.4 cm)
©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation
- p.191 *Shell* (Stoned Moon), 1969
Lithograph 32 1/8 x 26 inches (81.6 x 66 cm)
©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation
- p.192 *Bait* (Stoned Moon), 1970
Lithograph 35 1/4 in. x 26 1/4 in. (89.54 cm x 66.68 cm) From an edition of 46 published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson
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