Interviews: Harmel, Mark / “Rauschenberg” / Sanibel-Captiva Islander, 1980

The Sanibel-Captiva Islander
April 15, 1980

Robert Rauschenberg, Texas native, ex-New Yorker, Captiva Island artist, is currently exhibiting at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts. The show includes 50 works on paper, a selection of mixed media, and a collection of lithographs and etchings. Rauschenberg is considered one of the most important and influential artists of the 20th century.

Q: What kind of images do you choose for your work?
A: I try to make work that is not too formal or rigid, but with some sense of ambiguity and mystery. The viewer is encouraged to project their own interpretations onto the work.

Q: Do you try to stay away from themes?
A: Yes, or moments, or images, I don't really do funny pieces, or pieces, or serious pieces.

Q: Do you try to make statements?
A: I'm very interested in the idea of making art that is not just an expression of my own personality, but also an expression of the collective consciousness. The work is meant to provoke thought and provoke questions.

Q: Are you people only supposed to read your work slowly?
A: Too fast and the work is incomprehensible. It's a slow process, it's a process of making the work and making the work and making the work.

Q: Do you get most of the pictures that you see in your work from magazines or newspapers or where?
A: I get most of the pictures that you see in my work from magazines, newspapers, or wherever.

Q: Do you ever use images of your own? I mean, do you ever use your own images or your own drawings?
A: It's a way of making a connection between the two. It's a way of making a connection between the two. It's a way of making a connection between the two.

Q: In what kind of art do you work on the most?
A: In the kind of art that is not just an expression of my own personality, but also an expression of the collective consciousness. The work is meant to provoke thought and provoke questions.

Q: When you work on a piece, what do you do when you're working on it?
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Q: What are your thoughts on the future of art?
A. "Yes, because the way I'm looking at it is 'light and dark.'"

Q. When you're taking pictures are you recording them as singular images or do you have something else always in mind?

A. "I take them as singular images."

Q. You never worry about what you're going to do with a picture while you're taking it?

A. "No. When I started taking a lot of photographs in Fort Myers the excuse for doing that was that I was collaborating, with Parrish Brown in New York and was making a stage set for her. The piece is called 'Glacial Decay' and there are over 200 shots blown up to projections 10 feet by five and a half feet and they fill the stage. There's a series of these four simultaneous computerized moving images and they're all from Fort Myers. So I started looking very far into Fort Myers because of that assignment, but, my search within Fort Myers was always to find as broad a palette of images as I could. If I keep a check on anything it's the fact that I'm not reducing the visual to a controlled packet."

Q. So you don't just go out and say, "I'm just going to shoot palm trees today?"

A. "No. then you lose the miracle. It's so exciting taking photographs. You can be driving to Bailey's or something and all of a sudden you look and say, 'My God, look at that!' And of course there's usually nobody with you to say, 'Oh, yea, that's terrific' but if YOU know, that's important. And a lot of things don't feel so terrific except through your idea looking through the camera. And then they (your ideas) have to be confronted when they come out in the darkroom, and if they don't look terrific when they come out in the darkroom then maybe they weren't so terrific!"

"But there are a lot of things that are maybe in the same world that we all walk through but there's no 'same' way of looking at them. That can't be clearer than in the darkroom.

"There was a photography teacher that went to Black Mountain College. I wasn't there then - but the story I heard was that his exercise was to set up a camera in a fixed location - and he allowed NO adjustments. in class, the first day, he let each person take a photograph with the fixed camera. Then his second lesson was to show them how different all their photographs were! The way I heard the story was that the help they could make NO adjustments - which is a lot more romantic than allowing slight adjustments! But either way the moral is there: the place was more or less the same, even if it wasn't exactly the same, the light had changed, even though it was more or less the same, and all those things make enormous differences."

Q. Do you normally carry your camera with you?

A. "I choose to choose and not to choose. It's always a deliberate choice. I really prefer to just leave everything else and go out and take pictures. And then I know that that's what I'm doing. That doesn't mean that I mind stopping off and running a few errands for people, but more or less what I'm doing is just taking pictures. That's my vacation!"

Q. Your vacation? You mean it's not work?

A. "No. I'd be embarrassed to call it work because I get such a high from doing it."

I noticed that you don't have many pictures of people in your show for The Photographers' Gallery. There's just one - of a fellow painting a sign."

A. "Well, he was just holding onto the paint brush. There was no way of getting the paintbrush without him. But I do admire the head that

Q. Have you ever had someone on the street say, "Hey, take my picture?"

A. "Oh, yea."

Q. Did you do it?

A. "No. Do you? Everybody says that. Even a long time ago when I was just working with one camera I had to very consciously 'take portraits' or not. I mean, if I was somebody I really wanted to photograph then the whole situation would never be candid - they would know exactly what I was doing, when I was doing it and they wouldn't be doing anything else. That was it."

Q. Do you ever see people who make you say to yourself, "I want to shoot that person," but then you don't do it?

A. "Not really. More often I see treetops or lights that I think that way about, rather than people."

Q. Then people aren't a subject that you're interested in?

A. "I don't know. It's whatever breaks the light out and it has to do with - I really don't know. I had that figured out once. It's complicated."

Q. Sometimes I feel barriers there too, but when I really want to shoot someone I either ask them or, if I want it bad enough, I just do it.

A. "If it were something that you really needed maybe you wouldn't feel that way. So there must be a reason for not preferring to take pictures of people. Because you could ask permission from a tree just as easily."

Q. Trees don't give you dirty looks!

A. "But they don't make you nervous or impatient either! Or ask for a copy!

"But that's all part of shyness. You don't feel confident but you want to give the situation everything you've got."

Q. Are you going to be worrying about limiting the amount of prints you make?

A. "Not for the (Photographers' Gallery) show. I don't think there will be that problem there."

Q. Have you thought about limiting prints? Deciding to print just 100 of something and then destroying the negative?

A. "I don't know. I just haven't been in business - but that's a possibility. I would prefer to just mark the negatives so you could see that the edition was gone, or something - like you would cancel a stone. But anyway, I would certainly make sure that everyone was protected."

Q. Are you taking more pictures now than you normally do?

A. "One of the reasons that I'm taking more pictures than I have in the last few years is because I've just gotten my darkroom set up. This is the only darkroom that I have, here, and I'm not a 'photographer.' I'm too
Q. I like slides because you just shoot them and send them off.

A. You asked me before about shooting color; it's not that I don't like color. It's just that, I prefer black and white to color; it's just that so far I can't control it. I can't make a good color picture. I can see a good color picture but I can't make it.

Q. The time in the darkroom is like no other time in any kind of environment that I know of where I don't know whether I've been there for 20 minutes or six or eight hours. I guess it's part of the necessary insulation that you have to have in order to have control working with sensitized materials. Nearly everything else that I do I have an 'outside world' sense of time. When I'm painting I have the feeling, 'OK, I've been working for six hours or 12.' In theater you definitely know because everything is minute by minute. The show must go on but the show-must stop too, so there's a capsule of time involved there. Sensitization in the darkroom is just a magic place. I felt that way from the very beginning, since back at Black Mountain College. I would all of a sudden stop working, jarred by reality, and say, 'Oh, my God I missed supper!' And I would go on and I'd miss breakfast. Or the opposite was true - supper wasn't for three hours.

Q. I don't know if I like the idea of calling it magic but time in the darkroom seems to belong to material, not to the human being. It's not a social time or a functional human time. All the details you have to give the time to - the chemicals, the lights you're working with as the being.

Q. How do you feel about being photographed yourself?

A. It's hard to talk about. I don't consider myself a photographer - he only takes photographs because it gives him an excuse to look at everything. He has the same camera that he started off with and he's the only photographer I ever met who said - and I've heard it before - 'You won't even know I'm there' - and I sometimes did forget that he was there taking pictures! He became such a good friend. He came for an afternoon and stayed for five days, and I never asked him to go anywhere with me as a photographer. I simply asked him to go with me because we were having such a nice time that neither one of us wanted to leave!

Q. How was he different?

A. He has no idea. If it was a technique I certainly would know it. There was just so much care involved, and quietness in his movements.

Q. When he did leave, he stuck a note under my door saying that he just had to go to Viet Nam. He felt he would make movies in Viet Nam and was going to go over on a troop ship with new recruits and come back with the wounded. He was going to make either one or two documentaries about it.

Q. When we first talked about you having a show at the Photographers' Gallery you surprised me when you said, 'I'll risk it.'

A. I'm not terribly sure about any of the things I do, so it is a risk. Somehow I think there's possibly more risk in showing on Sanibel than there is in showing in New York, Paris, or Los Angeles.

Q. Any hard-core paparazzi who follow you down the street?

A. Yes. I guess professionally it's supposed to be a compliment but I don't really need that kind of business.

A. Cartier-Bresson, the famous photojournalist, has taken pictures of you. What was that like?

A. He was beautiful. I guess he has a great sensitivity. He himself is a shy person and he says he doesn't consider himself a photographer - he only takes photographs because it gives him an excuse to look at everything. He has the same camera that he started off with and he's the only photographer I ever met who said - and I've heard it before - 'You won't even know I'm there' - and I sometimes did forget that he was there taking pictures! He became such a good friend. He came for an afternoon and stayed for five days, and I never asked him to go anywhere with me as a photographer. I simply asked him to go with me because we were having such a nice time that neither one of us wanted to leave!
Q. Did you attend many or that shows?
A. "Yes. I tried not to go to openings because I just wanted to look at the works. I shouldn't say that an opening is no time to look at the works! You know we're having a band and we're having a tent and it's going to be a party if nothing else."

Q. You were very supportive of that Gallery and all that? You surely must have had other demands to show outside of Sanibel and Edison Community College lately.
A. "Of course. Two weeks ago I had a retrospective in Berlin. From there I went on to the Pop Art Show in Venice then to Paris for the show of early photographs then to New York to show most of this year's work - done here - at Leo Castelli's Gallery. This is Friday, Saturday someone is coming to pick up an exhibition that goes to Los Angeles and I just had a telephone call about the Around The World Show and how they want me to end up in Los Angeles for the opening of their new museum there. I'm not looking for shows! In fact, I hope it's possible, I want to get into some experimental casting projects because of my new assistant - I have to find out what he knows about that because I know very little. I'm looking forward to that collaboration and I'd like to take just a whole year and just work and if anybody wants to have a show they make the show. I don't know if I can do that or not because everytime I have a show I want it to be as good as it possibly can be. Usually means I have to work on the exhibition myself. Maybe I will just have to say, 'No exhibitions in 1981 at all.'"

Q. You've been very supportive of the Gallery and all the artists. Is there any artist in particular that you've been involved with and that you've been supportive of?
A. "I think that's the only thing to do. I have CHANGE, the emergency fund for artists foundation and we now have free hospitalization for artists. Unfortunately we're only in two locations, in Los Angeles and in New York. But the New York area is particularly important because that's where there's almost no such thing as a 'New York artist' and you're really helping the rest of the nation because most of the artists come from somewhere else and go to New York. "I'm also involved in changing the legislation for artists' rights - the contribution laws, which are so unfair and the inheritance laws."

Q. Why did you decide to move to Captiva?
A. "I'm involved in changing the legislation for artists' rights - the contribution laws, which are so unfair and the inheritance laws."

Q. "Hang out." So, if I have to assume the negative responsibility of being some kind of a celebrity I would like to be able to use it at home here where it makes some difference to somebody else's life.
A. "I don't doubt there'll be some people who come in from outside. It's my reputation and I have to suffer it greatly. It's not always an advantage to be someone who's well known. There are all kinds of responsibilities that can interfere with, like, whether you can go fishing or not or just 'hang out.' So if I have to assume the negative responsibilities of being some kind of a celebrity I would like to be able to use it at home here where it makes some difference to somebody else's life. If because I'm showing at the Gallery some people come in from Miami or Atlanta or Los Angeles or just write in for requests - well, that's good - mean it's good for everyone."

Q. I don't want to use the local facilities for my own financial gain. I'm giving the photographs to people who will make a contribution to the people who are working with the Gallery, which will support more exhibitions, maybe enlarge the facility - that's a lousy little darkroom they have. I mean I don't see any reason why they can't have a really fine darkroom that all the members and people having exhibitions could use - like a 'guest darkroom.'"

Q. You've always been sort of a collecting point for other artists. I thought perhaps you were having some of these exhibits to support artistic activities.
A. "No, I don't think so. When I first came down here people wanted to know how they could get into my 'commune' and it never was that. Everybody here supports themselves, have their own lives and the people who work for me are experts at what they do. So it's not a 'Hippy' idea."

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Q. The reason I moved to Captiva was to be able to work time without the exhibition structure. The reason I moved to Captiva was to be able to work time without the exhibition structure.
A. "I don't know if that's a good idea it just seems, theoretically, like a good idea for me to have a large piece of work time without the exhibition structure. "The reason I moved to Captiva was to be able to have longer working days. If Captiva changes too much I don't know where there's another place as beautiful, so I wouldn't know where to go."