

Visual Arts**When Robert Rauschenberg's art took flight**

A Washington exhibition on the artist's life-long fascination with air and space travel offers an illuminating ride through his work



Robert Rauschenberg working on his portrayal of the Discovery Space Shuttle, Cape Canaveral, Florida, August 1984 © Theo Westenberger Archives/Autry Museum

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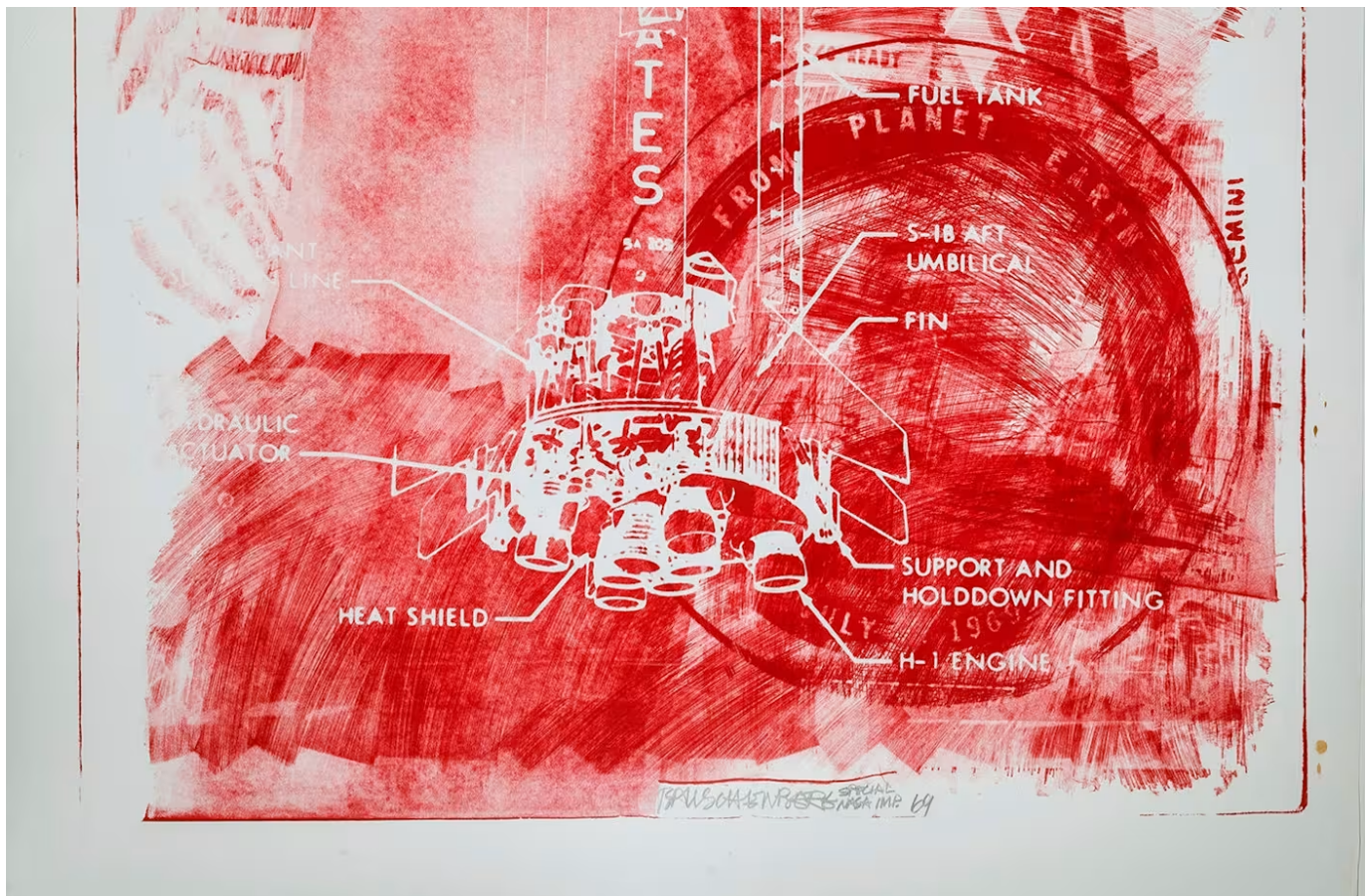
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“Dear Bob — a friend of mine is in charge of the NASA-Cape Kennedy art program. He says: would Rauschenberg like to come watch an Apollo shoot? They pay \$800.00 and expenses and hope you would ‘make something’ for them, are you interested at all? Call me.”

It's a casual note, dashed off on National Educational Television stationery in February 1969, but who could resist a chance to watch an “Apollo shoot”? Robert — “Bob” — Rauschenberg couldn't: he jumped at his TV producer friend's suggestion and contacted Nasa. The space agency was equally thrilled to secure the services of the artist who had won the Grand Prize for Painting at the Venice Biennale five years earlier. “That is very good news,” wrote James Dean, head of Nasa's art programme, to Rauschenberg on learning of his interest.

The fruits of that encounter are among the highlights of *The Ascent of Rauschenberg: Reinventing the Art of Flight* at the newly refurbished Flight and the Arts Center at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum (NASM) in Washington. One of several shows to coincide with Rauschenberg's centennial year — he was born in October 1925 — it explores the artist's enduring preoccupation with flight, offering an illuminating route through a huge oeuvre.





'Sky Garden' (1969)

If any artist was equal to the magnitude of the Apollo program, it was Rauschenberg, stupendously prolific, avid to capture America's 20th-century plenty, and unafraid to work at scale. One of the key works at the NASM, "Sky Garden (Stoned Moon)", was, at the time of its making in 1969, the largest hand-pulled lithograph ever, 2 metres by 1 metre. Running from top to bottom through its centre is a cutaway diagram of a Saturn rocket; superimposed against it in swaths of flaming red are images of the launch, of a lunar footprint, and, like putti adoring a miracle, of rocket designer Wernher von Braun and a Mission Control technician; at top, in sky-blue blobs, are images of the rocket on the launch pad in Florida, with palm trees, water and a wading bird evoking a different kind of flight.

The *Stoned Moon* print series, its title a nod to the limestone slabs that lithographs are made on, as well as to the psychedelic 1960s, was Rauschenberg's response to his trip to Cape Kennedy in July 1969. He was not the first artist to go there — the Artist's Cooperation Program, which sought to convey the cultural value of Nasa's momentous technologies, had been running since 1962 — but he was one of the most famous, with a high profile internationally and at home. Chaperoned by technicians, Rauschenberg explored the Nasa complex for a few days before witnessing the launch that first delivered men to the moon. Later, he would attend the launch of the last Apollo mission, Apollo 17, in 1972, and the inaugural 1984 flight of the space shuttle Discovery.

Many of the other *Stoned Moon* works, collaging mass media imagery and Nasa blueprints with sweeps and blotches of colour, are more sombre than “Sky Garden”, even elegiac. “Trust Zone (Stoned Moon)” overlays an annotated outline drawing of a spacesuit on a map of Cape Kennedy, man and landscape alike rendered in terms of function; in “Brake (Stoned Moon)”, ominous sweeps of black proliferate above a smiling group shot of the three Apollo 1 astronauts, killed in a fire during a capsule test in 1967.

'White Walk' from the 'Stoned Moon' series (1970)

Yet while *Stoned Moon* accounts for nine of the show's 30 works, curator Carolyn Russo's thesis is that Rauschenberg's encounter with Nasa is only one episode in a life-long preoccupation.

"Throughout his entire 60 years [as an artist], he kept coming back to flight again and again and in different ways," she says. The multimedia "Combines" he produced from the mid-1950s featured stuffed birds, feathers and cast-metal wings; in his performance piece "Pelican", from 1963 — there's a video in the gallery — Rauschenberg and a fellow dancer roller-skated on to the stage, rigid parachutes strapped to their backs. Fragments of aircraft wing feature prominently among the industrial detritus that he fashioned into his "Glut" sculptures in the 1980s.

Rauschenberg looked to the skies in other ways too: the show brings together his four "Star Quarters" (1971), an updating of classical constellation maps, where Gemini becomes Diane Arbus's sweet-or-sinister portrait of twin girls, and Pegasus sports biplane wings.

Was he simply reflecting the zeitgeist? Flight was, you could say, in the air — one of the defining technologies of the age — while Rauschenberg was hungry to capture the totality of that age, mass media, discarded Coke bottles and all. "I was bombarded with TV sets and magazines, by the refuse, by the excess of the world," he said of his "Combines". "I thought that if I could paint or make an honest work, it should incorporate all these elements."

Robert Rauschenberg at Cape Kennedy (as it was then known) as a Nasa Art Program artist in 1969, with the Apollo 11 launch site in the background © James Dean/Nasa

But Russo argues that his interest had deeper roots. She points to his fascination with the Wright brothers, the bicycle mechanics who achieved the first powered flight near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, in 1903 (and whose aircraft is at the NASM). When Rauschenberg was asked in 1996 what work of art, other than his own, he wished he had created, he replied: “I would have liked to have been around to help the Wright brothers work on their concept of flying bicycles.”

Several of the NASM works reference the Wrights. “Pelican” was dedicated to the duo, while the lower quarter of “Trust Zone (Stoned Moon)” has an image of the Kitty Hawk flight, with Wilbur Wright looking on as Orville takes off, both dwarfed by the Nasa diagrams above. (“See where this led!” it seems to say.) The triptych “Killdevil Hill” (1975), a skinny, 2-metre-wide lithograph with an old-fashioned bicycle tilting jauntily upwards at right, takes its name from the place near Kitty Hawk where the brothers flew. “Prehistoric Rose Spore (Kabal American Zephyr)” (1981), a wooden propeller mounted on a stool, evokes the early days not only of aviation but also of conceptualism: the piece is a homage to Marcel Duchamp, whose 1913 “Bicycle Wheel” comprised, yes, a bicycle wheel mounted on a stool.

What was behind this fascination? Courtney Martin, executive director of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, which supplied many of the works on show, suggests that a sense of movement is key. “I think it’s an interest in his body actually in that position of feeling as if he is flying, soaring,” she says. “And that’s a metaphor for how he saw himself relative to his art. He is constantly thinking about what is next . . . It’s like he’s in constant motion.”

'Space', from Rauschenberg's 'Tribute 21' series of prints from 1994 © James Nelson/Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Rauschenberg certainly loved to dance. As a teenager growing up in southern Texas, he considered becoming a preacher, but rejected the idea because the fundamentalist church his parents favoured forbade dancing. Later, at Black Mountain College, the storied North Carolina art school, he met the choreographer Merce Cunningham, for whom he designed sets and costumes, before going on to create his own performance works.

This points to another Rauschenberg trait that Martin cites: his love of collaboration, whether with dancers, technicians or fellow artists. "He is constantly looking at how to work with other people, how to share ideas, exchange new things," she says. "He's always looking for a group to join." Flight, and especially space flight, is a fundamentally collaborative exercise — and Apollo, with, at its height, 400,000 people working together to place a handful of men on the Moon, was a maximalist example.

For Russo, that collective endeavour is the product of a deep human impulse, one common to engineers and artists, dancers and astronauts, and one that Rauschenberg prized. The urge to fly, to emulate the birds, to escape gravity's orthodoxy, was a dream long before the Wrights went to Kitty Hawk. It was also an aspiration that resonated deeply with the restless Rauschenberg, ever eager to find new ways of making art.

"Flight represents much more than aeroplanes and rockets to Rauschenberg," Russo says. "It symbolises curiosity, freedom, experimentation, and human possibility. He admired Leonardo da Vinci and the Wright Brothers because they embody this thinking unrestrained by traditional boundaries.

"He saw these connections between artistic innovation and technological innovation . . . For Rauschenberg, flight was both a physical achievement and a metaphor for imagination itself."

'The Ascent of Rauschenberg: Reinventing the Art of Flight', [National Air and Space Museum](#), Washington, DC to July 1 2027; [rauschenberg100.org](#); Carolyn Russo's same-name book is published by [Smithsonian Books](#)

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