

Robert Rauschenberg Foundation  
Hunter College MA in Art History

# Untitled, 1974

MARGARET COLBERT

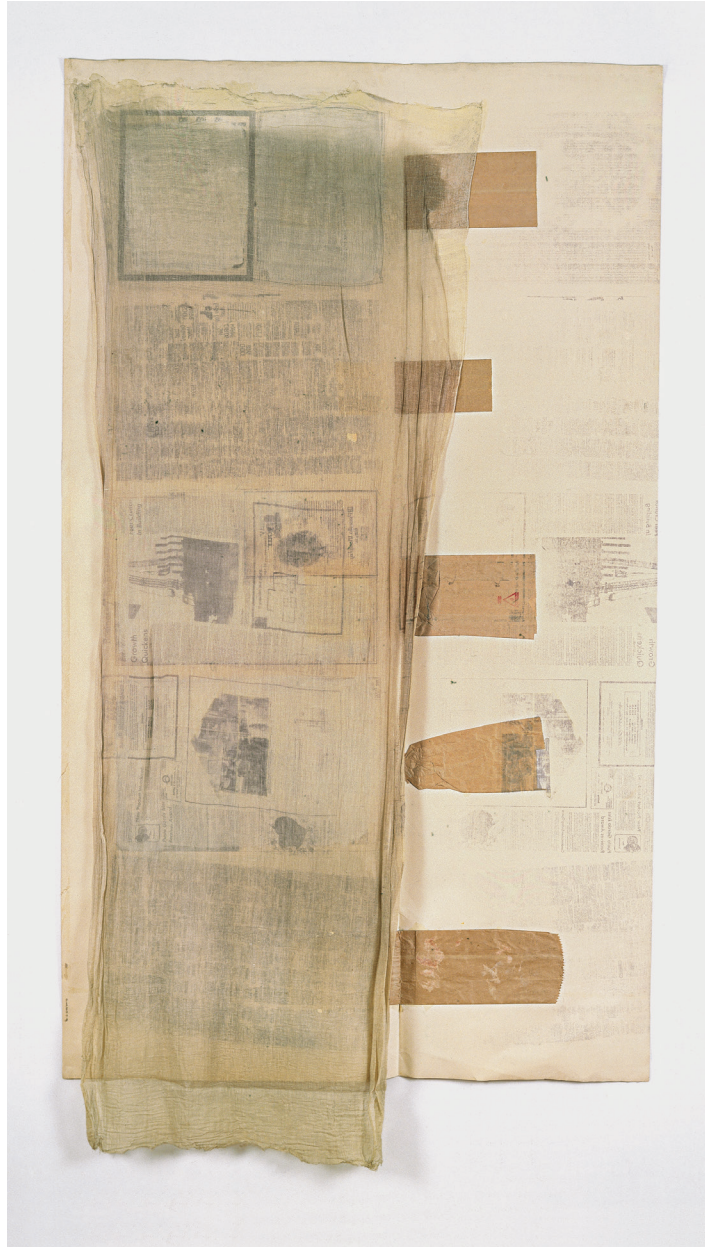


fig. 1

Robert Rauschenberg, Untitled, 1974  
Solvent transfer, fabric, paper bags, paint, and graphite on fabric-laminated paper  
88  $\frac{3}{4}$   $\times$  47  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches (225.4  $\times$  120.5 cm)  
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

## Untitled, 1974

In the early 1970s, Robert Rauschenberg began several new series in which his materials, techniques, and muted color scheme marked a departure from those that he had previously favored. *Untitled* (1974; fig. 1) is a key, transitional work from this period, evident from the different series titles it has been assigned.<sup>1</sup> The artist chose it for his exhibition at the Leo Castelli Gallery in May 1974 (figs. 2, 3, and 4), in which he exhibited three sculptures from his *Early Egyptians* (1973–74) and debuted his drawings, the *Tablets* and *Pyramid Series* (both 1974). These works directly preceded his *Scriptures* (1974), a suite of drawings with card-board, crushed paper bags, and gauze that he produced during a long-awaited visit to Israel later that same month. The importance of *Untitled* lies in its relative uniqueness. As with two other similar pieces in the Castelli show, it stands outside of any series proper and ushered in a new hybrid of collage and transfer printmaking on a paper support.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the veil of gauze adhered to its surface reveals specific autobiographical references that underscore the relevance of Captiva and Rauschenberg's personal life to his artistic development.

In the late fall of 1970, Rauschenberg moved from New York to live and work full time at his Captiva estate.<sup>3</sup> The change of residence heralded a new phase of creativity for the artist, one that was marked by experimentation with new materials and, as a result, new imagery. Captiva provided Rauschenberg with a sense of calm and contentment; it was an undeveloped coastal landscape and its detritus was of a different character than the found objects he had been drawn to while living in New York. In a 2002 interview, Rauschenberg stated " ... every time

fig. 2

Installation view of *Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly*, May 4–25, 1974, showing at left, five *Tablets*, as well as Rauschenberg's *Untitled*, 1974 (left) and *Untitled*, 1974 (right) on the far wall; at the Leo Castelli gallery, 420 West Broadway, New York. Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Leo Castelli Gallery Records, Washington, D.C.



fig. 3

Installation view of *Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly*, showing at left, five works from Rauschenberg's *Pyramid Series* and *Untitled*, 1974, as well as four of Cy Twombly's drawings on back wall; at the Leo Castelli gallery. Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Leo Castelli Gallery Records, Washington, D.C.



### HOW TO CITE THIS ESSAY

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fig. 4

Installation view of Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly, showing, at far left, Rauschenberg's *Untitled*, 1974, *Untitled (Early Egyptian)*, 1974 at center, and four works from the *Pyramid Series* on right wall; at the Leo Castelli gallery. Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Leo Castelli Gallery Records, Washington, D.C.



I got to Captiva, something magic happened, I just decided that was where I was supposed to be."<sup>4</sup> This sense of belonging opened his eyes to the eloquence of more natural substances with their neutral colors and fine textures: sand, paper, gauze, driftwood. Like cardboard, his other preferred material of the period, these items could be found almost anywhere in the world, imbuing them with a sense of both the personal and universal.

Rauschenberg's move to Captiva also ushered in a new engagement with printmaking, a medium he had turned to as early as 1962 with his collaborations at Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE). Now, a decade later, he brought the printmaking equipment right into his new studio. After the acquisition of two presses, he and the well-known printmaker, Robert Petersen, established a workshop that they named *Untitled Press*. Rauschenberg had first met and collaborated with Petersen through Gemini G.E.L., a fine art printmaking studio where Petersen had produced editions for artists such as Roy Lichtenstein and Frank Stella. It was there that Rauschenberg and Petersen began a personal and professional relationship that lasted over a decade.<sup>5</sup>

Embracing the printmaking medium, Rauschenberg began to play with the physical results that could be produced from experimenting with the press in a nontraditional manner, specifically by sandwiching cardboard or cheesecloth between two sheets of paper, as in the *Tablets* and *Pyramid Series*, respectively (figs. 5 and 6). He and the other printmakers used the gauze-like cheesecloth to clean lithograph plates, but seeing these rags left to hang and dry in the studio inspired the artist to include them in his compositions.<sup>6</sup> The materials and visual effects of *Untitled* descend directly from these works: it dispenses with the embossing technique introduced in the *Tablets* and *Pyramid Series*, but retains the use of the gauze, as well as the overall pale, buff palette.

The acquisition of the presses coincided with Rauschenberg's new fascination with the aesthetics of traditional handmade papers and artisanal methods of production. To this end, in August 1973, he traveled to the Moulin à Papier Richard de Bas, a paper mill in Ambert, France. His firsthand experience with handmade papers invigorated his new focus on the medium's inherent expressive properties, first seen in his *Egyptian Series* (1973), consisting of flattened and whitewashed paper bags pasted to white paper, and which the artists categorized as drawings. The delicacy of the pale, often unbleached, fibers and the purity of the paper supports directly influenced the *Tablets* and *Pyramid Series*. *Untitled* is a bridge between these initial experiments



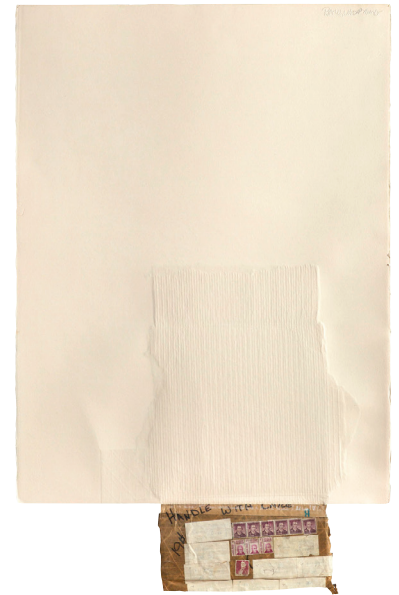
fig. 5

Robert Rauschenberg, *Pyramid Series*, 1974. Embossed paper and fabric, dimensions variable. Collection San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Purchase through a gift of Phyllis Wattis.



fig. 6

Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Tablet Series)*, 1974. Embossed paper, tape, and cardboard, with stamps, 35 3/8 x 22 3/8 inches (89.9 x 56.8 cm). Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.



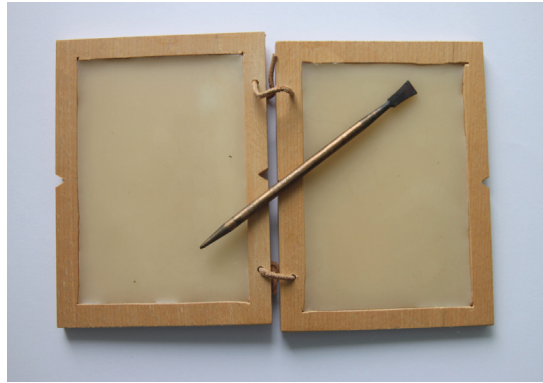
with the Captiva presses and Rauschenberg's subsequent *Hoarfrost* series (1974–76), which combines transfer printing processes with a variety of natural fabrics, including silk and gauze.

*Untitled* consists of paper bags, graphite, paint, and gauze, all applied to a vertically oriented, large piece of linen-backed paper. A prominent crease runs the full height of the work. This fold, which Rauschenberg used as an organizational principle for the entire composition, resulted from a technical limitation: measuring nearly seven feet long and four feet in width, the paper was too wide to fit in the Captiva presses.<sup>7</sup> The artist partially obscured the left side of *Untitled* by overlaying a diaphanous piece of gauze on which ghostlike traces meld with the images that are printed below, including a heart, a house, and a crane. The transfer prints in *Untitled*, however, were achieved differently from Rauschenberg's standard practice, which he had initiated in his *Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno* (1959–60): "He moistened clippings from photo-illustrated magazines and rubbed their backs with an implement to transfer them to drawing paper."<sup>8</sup> For *Untitled*, the artist used the pressure of the printing press, rather than his hand, to imprint on the supporting surface, resulting in a more uniform appearance. These transfer images are flat and mostly even, the only inconsistency in their application coming from the varying pressure of the press, and the relative saturation of the original source materials.

From an analysis of the overall construction of *Untitled*, it can be deduced that Rauschenberg made the work as follows. He folded the commercially produced linen-backed paper support in half lengthwise in anticipation of running it through the bed of the press.<sup>9</sup> Onto the right side, he glued five flattened paper bags (their edges traced in fine lines of graphite), horizontally oriented but loosely aligned in a vertical column. On the left, he placed pages of newspaper, saturated with a solvent, as well as a rectangular piece of white gauze that runs the height of the work. This "sandwich" of materials was fed through the press, allowing the solvent soaked newsprint to transfer onto and through the gauze on both sides; the right is a mirror image of the left.

fig. 7

Example of a *cerae*, a roman wax tablet used for writing.



The artist continued by applying thick strokes of white paint to the left of the central fold, obscuring both the images and text previously transferred there, but leaving the rectangular imprint of the newspaper page intact. Finally, with the paper support fully open and flat, Rauschenberg flipped over and adhered the gauze rectangle to the top edge of the left side so that it draped over and concealed the already veiled images beneath; in turn, the transfer

images on the gauze mirrored those on the right side of the paper. The effect of these layers and reversals of already ghostly traces of imagery is like looking through a haze, creating a sort of palimpsest that beckons the eye and encourages deep looking.

The five flattened paper bags bring to mind *cerae* (the wax writing tablets favored by the ancient Romans; fig. 7), *stelae*, or *ostraca* (broken shards of pottery used in antiquity as writing surfaces), especially when seen in proximity to the gauze and its material and cultural associations with antiquity (as in the linen or gauze strips used to prepare a body during mummification). Underneath the gauze, the five rectangular shapes—the product of the solvent transfer printing and the white paint—echo the flattened brown paper bags to the right. The shadowy forms of the heart, house, and crane are discernable on each side of the vertical fold, reversed and replicated symmetrically. Various threads of text also weave through the faint imprint of the newsprint. Seen through the gauze, they become ciphers, both inviting and confounding decryption. The total effect is that of layers of pale fragility, abetted by the mobility of the gauze as the air currents around it shift, imparting a sense of movement between the layers of solvent transfers, as though they were not stuck in place, but rather loose and shifting.

Never before identified, the transferred images that faintly emerge, echo, and reverse came from the April 14, 1974, edition of the *News-Press*, a daily newspaper published in Fort Myers, Florida, not far from Captiva. Both the heart and the house appear on the same page and advertise a musical review and a construction company, respectively (figs. 8 and 9). The crane illustrates an article about fast-paced construction development in Florida. Most interesting in its provenance and possible personal connotations is an image that lies below the gauze transfer print of the crane (figs. 10 and 11), a page in which Rauschenberg has blocked out almost all the text with white, except for the faintly visible flipped words that declare “We May Burst Your Bubble” (figs. 12 and 13). This is an advertisement for Priscilla Murphy Realty, a real estate company that worked with Rauschenberg in Captiva.<sup>10</sup> Priscilla Murphy Realtor maps found in the Rauschenberg archive show the artist’s notes on possible locations for his Florida home (fig. 14).<sup>11</sup> The overlay of the images related to construction and the realtor’s advertisement alludes to Rauschenberg’s staunch opposition to overdevelopment on Captiva. Indeed, he purchased additional acreage on the island in an effort to thwart the destruction of its unique rural environment. The choice of imagery is not by chance, linked as it is to the subject and emotion of home owning, and reveals the autobiographical themes present in *Untitled* despite



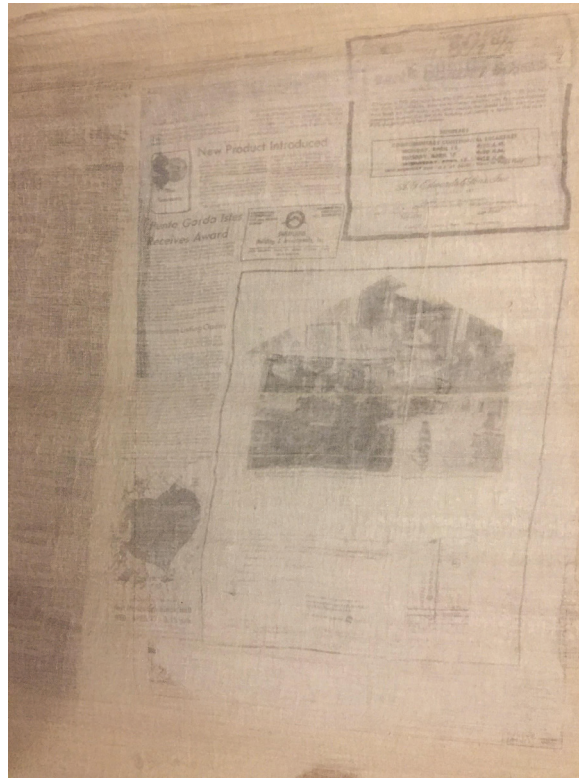


fig. 8  
Detail of Untitled, 1974, rotated 90 degrees counterclockwise. The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

fig. 9  
Source material from the Fort Myers News-Press, April 14, 1974.



fig. 10  
Detail of Untitled, 1974, rotated 90 degrees counterclockwise. The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

fig. 11  
Source material from the Fort Myers News-Press, April 14, 1974.





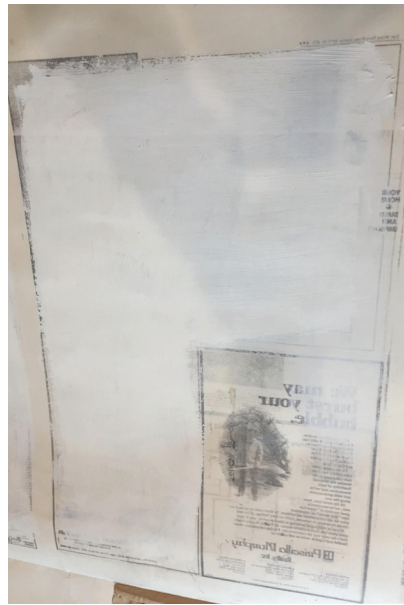


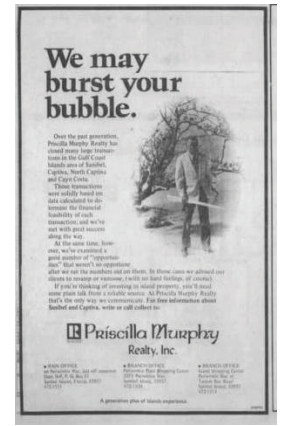
fig. 12

Detail of Untitled, 1974,  
below gauze. The Robert  
Rauschenberg Foundation.



fig. 13

Source material from  
the Fort Myers News-Press,  
April 14, 1974.



the deliberate veiling. One has to "excavate" this knowledge, as if the work itself becomes a kind of archeological site—a theme consistent with the series titles of *Tablets*, *Pyramid Series*, and *Scriptures*.

Indeed, Untitled shares a visual lineage with a number of works in Rauschenberg's oeuvre. From the early Untitled (1951; fig. 15), to the 1971 *Cardboard*, *Nabisco Shredded Wheat* (fig. 16), and Untitled (1973; fig. 17), the artist based his compositions on the repeated use of columns, rows of boxes, or rectangular forms. The flattened paper bags of Untitled (fig. 1), outlined in graphite and pressed into the surface of the paper, follow upon the *Egyptian Series* and evidence a sort of personal leitmotif. Like many of Rauschenberg's works, it is a product of both self-referential ruminations and of the restraints and possibilities of the material that he chose to employ.

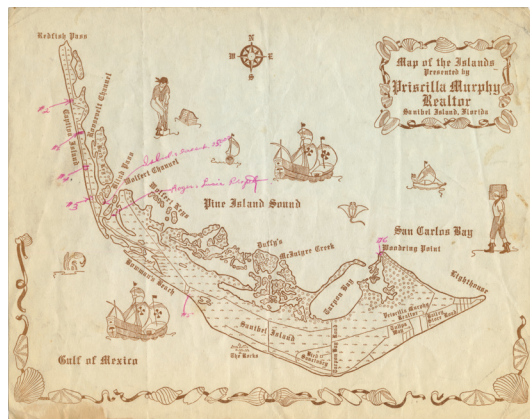


fig. 14

Maps of Sanibel and Captiva  
Islands from the office of  
Priscilla Murphy, Realtor, ca.  
1968. Robert Rauschenberg  
Foundation.

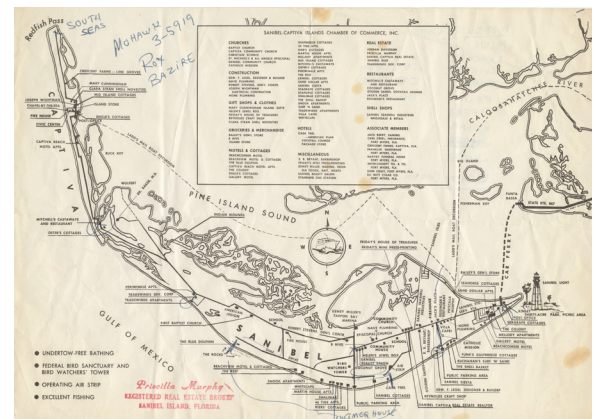


fig. 15

Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled*, 1951. Acrylic, enamel, graphite, newspaper, tissue paper and mirror on canvas, 30 × 41 inches (76.2 × 104.1 cm). Private collection.

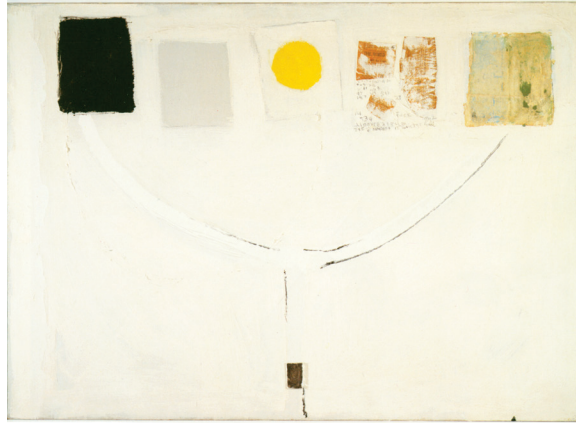


fig. 16

Robert Rauschenberg, *Nabisco Shredded Wheat (Cardboard)*, 1971. Cardboard, 70 × 95 × 11 inches (177.8 × 241.3 × 27.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Gift of Robert Rauschenberg Foundation and Committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds.

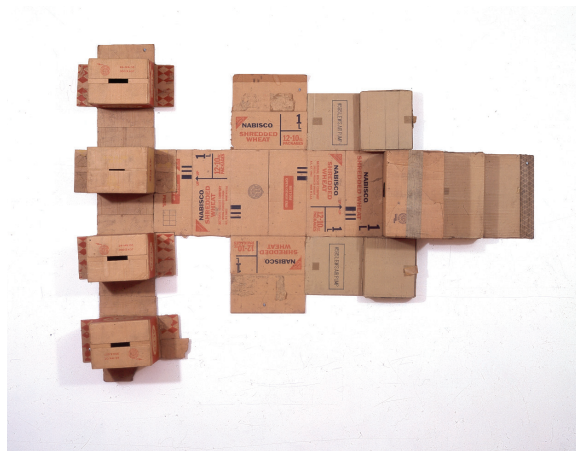


fig. 17

Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled*, 1973. Acrylic paint, graphite, tape, paper bags, and envelopes on paper, 72 × 60 inches (182.88 × 152.4 cm). Collection San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Gift of the Frederick Weisman Company.



In general, it has been assumed that Rauschenberg's visit to Israel informed the artworks relating to that biblical land and ancient Egypt, namely the *Egyptian Series*, *Early Egyptians*, *Tablets*, and *Pyramid Series*, as well as the works he made during his trip to Israel, the *Scriptures* and *Made in Israel* series (both 1974). But the reality is otherwise.<sup>12</sup> The artist had shown an interest in the Middle East before he traveled to Jerusalem for this residency at the Israel Museum from May 14 to June 1, 1974. Through Senator Jacob Javits he had earlier met high-level diplomats from Israel and Egypt who extended invitations to view their respective countries, a trip that was cancelled due to the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War in October 1973.<sup>13</sup> Rauschenberg had reference material in his studio related to Egypt and had begun the *Egyptian Series* that same year.<sup>14</sup> He may well have visited the extraordinary collections of Egyptian art at the Brooklyn Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York over the years, as well as the Egyptian collection at the Louvre while in Paris.<sup>15</sup>

*Untitled* represents a critical juncture in this chronology. It evolved out of the *Egyptian Series*, *Tablets* and *Pyramid Series*, though without their specific historic and biblical references. Moreover, it departs from these series by introducing transfer images from popular media, now printed on gauze, for startlingly new effects. *Untitled* provided the aesthetic foundation for the *Scripture* series that he subsequently produced while in Israel. While in that country, he brought his own preconceived ideas—

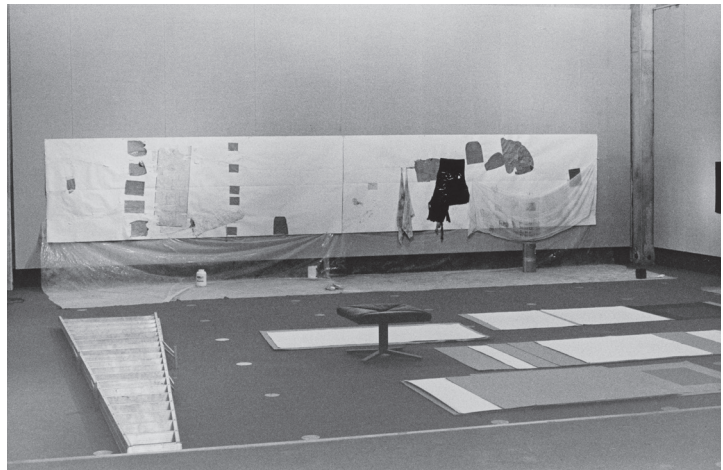




fig. 18

Top left:  
Hisachika Takahashi, Robert Rauschenberg, and Mayo Thompson working on the *Scripture* series (1974) for the *Rauschenberg in Israel* exhibition at the Israel Museum, May 1974. Photo: Nir Bareket. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

Top right:  
Robert Rauschenberg, Hisachika Takahashi, and Robert Petersen, with students at the Bezalel Academy where they worked on the *Scripture* series (1974) for the *Rauschenberg in Israel* exhibition at the Israel Museum, May 1974. Photo: Nir Bareket. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.



Bottom left:  
Robert Rauschenberg, probably at the Bezalel Academy where he worked on transferring newspaper texts on paper to create the *Scripture* series (1974) for the *Rauschenberg in Israel* exhibition at the Israel Museum, May 1974. Photo: Attributed to Nir Bareket. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

Bottom right:  
Preparations for the *Rauschenberg in Israel* exhibition at the Israel Museum. Work shown in background is *Scripture I* (1974), May 1974. Photo: Attributed to Nir Bareket. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

and compositional formats—to share with audiences there. True, while in Israel, Rauschenberg saw the Dead Sea Scrolls and absorbed the local culture, but these encounters would seem to have reinforced and enriched his fascination with the ancient Middle East, rather than inspiring the related series.<sup>16</sup> Documentary photographs from Rauschenberg's Israel trip show him working with materials and motifs that clearly follow *Untitled* (fig. 18); one image captures Rauschenberg holding a piece of gauze that has the shadowy outline of the shape of a house (fig. 19). The title *Scripture* evokes writing, and indeed, many of the pieces contain transferred printed text, which comes after the absence of any kind of writing in the other Middle Eastern inspired series. *Untitled* and two of the other three collages in the Castelli exhibition were direct precedents to the *Scriptures*. They were the first to use this veiling technique of transfer prints on gauze.

As noted at the beginning of this essay, *Untitled* was first shown at Leo Castelli gallery from May 4–25, 1974, in *Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly*. Though no checklist has been found, installation photographs allow for the identification of many of the works that were exhibited



fig. 19

Robert Rauschenberg during preparations for the *Rauschenberg in Israel* exhibition at the Israel Museum, May 1974. Photo: Nir Bareket. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

for the first time (figs. 2, 3, and 4). For his part, Twombly contributed a variety of drawings from different dates, some with the name of the Egyptian pharaoh, Sesostri II, inscribed across their surfaces. As a result of this show, *Untitled* was later associated with Rauschenberg's *Early Egyptians*, *Tablets*, and the *Pyramid Series*—and their allusions to the ancient Middle East. True, *Untitled* shares their evocative materials and colors: sand and gauze, and a palette of buff, desert tans, and pale washes of luminous white. But the transfer prints of contemporary newspaper texts and images across the gauze and paper support represent a new development, while the source material from the Fort Myers *News-Press* places his intended references firmly in the continental United States. *Untitled* is a prototype both for the *Scriptures*

made in Israel, and for the new works made of transfer printing on textiles that fully emerged in the *Hoarfrosts*, begun immediately thereafter. *Untitled* thus links all of Rauschenberg's various series from 1973 to 1974, while belonging properly to none of them. It also reaffirms that chronological and stylistic developments in this artist's career are never quite as linear as they might first seem.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 *Untitled* premiered in *Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly*, Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, May 4–25, 1974. No checklist exists for this exhibition, only a few installation photographs (Leo Castelli Gallery Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.), so the title of the work at that time remains unknown. When shown in 1975 at the Visual Arts Museum (at the School of Visual Arts in New York) in *Robert Rauschenberg: Drawings*, it was listed as *Untitled, 1974* (and categorized as a drawing). In the 2007–08 exhibition *Robert Rauschenberg: Em Viagem 70–76 / Travelling '70–'76* at the Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, Porto, Portugal, it appeared in the catalogue as *Untitled (Early Egyptian), 1974*. For a time, it was categorized in the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation records as a drawing and, until recently, was mistakenly identified on the Foundation's website as part of the *Scripture* series. Research for this essay has confirmed its status as *Untitled* and not part of any series.

- 2 Hayden Herrera, "Reviews: Cy Twombly, Robert Rauschenberg," *ARTnews*, October 1974, p. 110. Herrera refers to "large unframed collages": four are pictured in the installation photographs, including the Untitled piece that is the topic of this paper. The others are: Untitled, 1974 (74.093), Fabric, paper bags, gouache, wood, graphite, and objects on fabric-laminated paper, 72 3/8 x 62 1/8 x 31 7/8 inches (183.8 x 157.7 x 80.9 cm); Untitled, 1974 (74.095) Solvent transfer, paper bag and fabric on fabric-laminated paper, 80 x 65 inches (203.2 x 165.1 cm); and Untitled, 1974 (74.091), Paper bags, gouache, cardboard, and graphite on fabric-laminated paper, 84 1/4 x 50 inches (214 x 127 cm). The last work, unlike the other three, does not contain gauze or transfer prints, and, significantly, was installed separately from them in the Castelli installation, set between the *Pyramid Series* and the Twombly drawings.
- 3 "Chronology," Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, accessed December 13, 2018.
- 4 Katherine Reid, "Portrait of The Artist," *Gulfshore Life*, September 2010, accessed November 1, 2018.
- 5 Robert Petersen, "Biography," Robert Petersen Fine Art, accessed June 1, 2019.
- 6 Robert S. Mattison, "Pyramid Series," Rauschenberg Research Project, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, July 2013, accessed December 13, 2018.
- 7 The other like works in the Castelli show were similarly creased down the middle as noted in Herrera, "Reviews," p. 110: "Each consists of a sheet of white paper, which is folded down the middle, unfolded, imprinted with newspaper transfers, scarred by tearing previously glued elements away and collages with paper bags or cardboard ... In these collages, the throwaways of daily life become a game of concealment and visibility as sly, seductive and mysterious as Salome's dance of the seven veils."
- 8 Leah Dickerman, *Robert Rauschenberg: Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2017), p. 7.
- 9 Untitled, 1974, was examined by the author on September 29, 2018, at the Rauschenberg Foundation, New York with conservator Christine Frohnert, where it was determined that the paper support is most likely a commercially available linen-backed paper.
- 10 Priscilla Murphy Realty, Inc. advertisement, 1974. Consulted via Newspaper.com; see figure 13.
- 11 Maps of Sanibel and Captiva Islands, n.d. Robert Rauschenberg Papers. Curatorial Files. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. See figure 14.
- 12 Mattison, "Pyramid Series." See also "Scripture (1974)," Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, October 23, 2014, accessed January 08, 2019. The inclusion of works from the *Tablet Series* and *Pyramid Series* in the May 4–25, 1974 Castelli show may force some to reevaluate how these works are considered. Most literature describes these series as being produced after Rauschenberg's 1974 Israel trip, and contextualize them as objects whose creation was inspired by Rauschenberg's travels in Israel. This is simply not the case, as they were clearly exhibited at the May 1974 Leo Castelli show, which predates his travels to Tel Aviv (see figs. 2–4 from the Castelli Gallery Records). Thus, these works should be understood as works inspired by his move to Captiva, his reengagement with printmaking, as well as an interest in Egypt and Israel, which was connected to his introduction to various Arab and Israeli individuals in the early 1970s.
- 13 Mattison, "Pyramid Series."
- 14 Rauschenberg was given a book on the pyramids by Marion Javits (the wife of Senator Jacob Javits), which "captivated him." Mary Lynn Kotz, *Rauschenberg: Art and Life*, rev. ed. (1990; repr., New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2004), p. 194.
- 15 In an interview with Karen Thomas, Antonio Homem, the director and owner of the Sonnabend Gallery, explicitly states that it was a visit (or visits) to the Egyptian collection at the Louvre that inspired Rauschenberg's creation of Untitled (*Early Egyptian*), 1974 (74.002; visible in fig. 4). The *Early Egyptian* series utilizes the qualities of cardboard, combined with sand from the beach near Rauschenberg's Captiva studio, to capture a sense of timelessness that many associate with Ancient Egypt. "Interview of Antonio Homem for the Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project," interview by Karen Thomas, March 14, 2011, Interviews with Rauschenberg Friends and Associates, RRFA 08, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.
- 16 Rauschenberg did not travel to Egypt in this period. "Chronology," Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, accessed January 08, 2019.