

MNUCHIN GALLERY

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

Robert Rauschenberg



Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Venetian)*, 1973. Tire tread, wood, and water, 28 x 78 x 55 5/8 inches, variable. © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. Courtesy the foundation and Gladstone Gallery. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

By Charlotte Kent

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The self-seriousness of American imperialism is its tragic flaw. Some artists recognize the need for humor to dispel and taunt the high-handed efforts that sometimes come with world-building. Such aspirations are gently derided with a wit that reveals the uncertainty of such pompous narratives. Robert Rauschenberg is the master. This spring, the Rauschenberg Foundation partnered with Mnuchin Gallery and Gladstone Gallery to present two distinct but connected exhibitions that portray the lightness and irreverence that is integral to his works' continued success.

Exceptional Works, 1971-1999 at the Mnuchin Gallery presents works from fourteen different series. It could seem disparate and cobbled together, but Rauschenberg's consistency of approach allows a material style to permeate across the different series. His approach to media and objects showed him possibilities for what he might produce. In the entrance to the gallery, an enormous, broken-down cardboard box from Leo Castelli Gallery is wittily titled *Castelli / Small Turtle Bowl (Cardboard)* (1971). One can imagine him seeing the huge securing container for some small delicate object and with amusement carting off the cardboard, tagged with the word "Small" in the left-hand panel of the box, to poke fun at the preciousness of the art world and the gallerist who launched his career by including him in the seminal Abstract Expressionism show, *Today's Self-Styled School of New York* (commonly known as the "Ninth Street Show") in 1951.

Rauschenberg's combinatorial style is unmistakable, evident across media. Having noticed that the cloth rags used to clean the lithographs in the print shop retained the imprint of the image, he introduced them into *Untitled* from the "Hoarfrost" series (1974–76). The veil of cloth over paper bags then reappears in sheer form for *Mirage (Jammer)* (1975), laid over a stunning silk square of mustard yellow with orange stripe from India. Another segment appears in *Caucus (Spread)* (1980), a large plywood work with solvent transfers of men scrambling for a baseball, on horseback, in wrestling gear, alongside decorative collage papers; this work is from the "Spread" series (1975–83) that frequently included additional objects so here we have a partial ladder leaning into the work with two metal fire buckets hanging from it. There's humor in the disparate images and our attempt to make some sense of them, and the buckets suggest a dousing if we do so with too much intensity.

Even the syncopated grid undermines self-serious interpretation. The eye moves across *Favor-Rites (Urban Bourbon)* (1988): from the food cart at the bottom, up and over to a five-pointed star, then drops through a silk-screened window into an ambiguous splatter of red and white heat-pocketed, acrylic paint. The motion hints at a narrative but getting closer, viewers find themselves reflected in the mirrored and enameled aluminum base, their face next to the printed ass of a Neapolitan garden statue covered in dick graffiti. It's a distraction from and a funny addition to the silkscreen print of a photograph of a replica of Giambologna's *Rape of the Sabine Women* (1579–83).

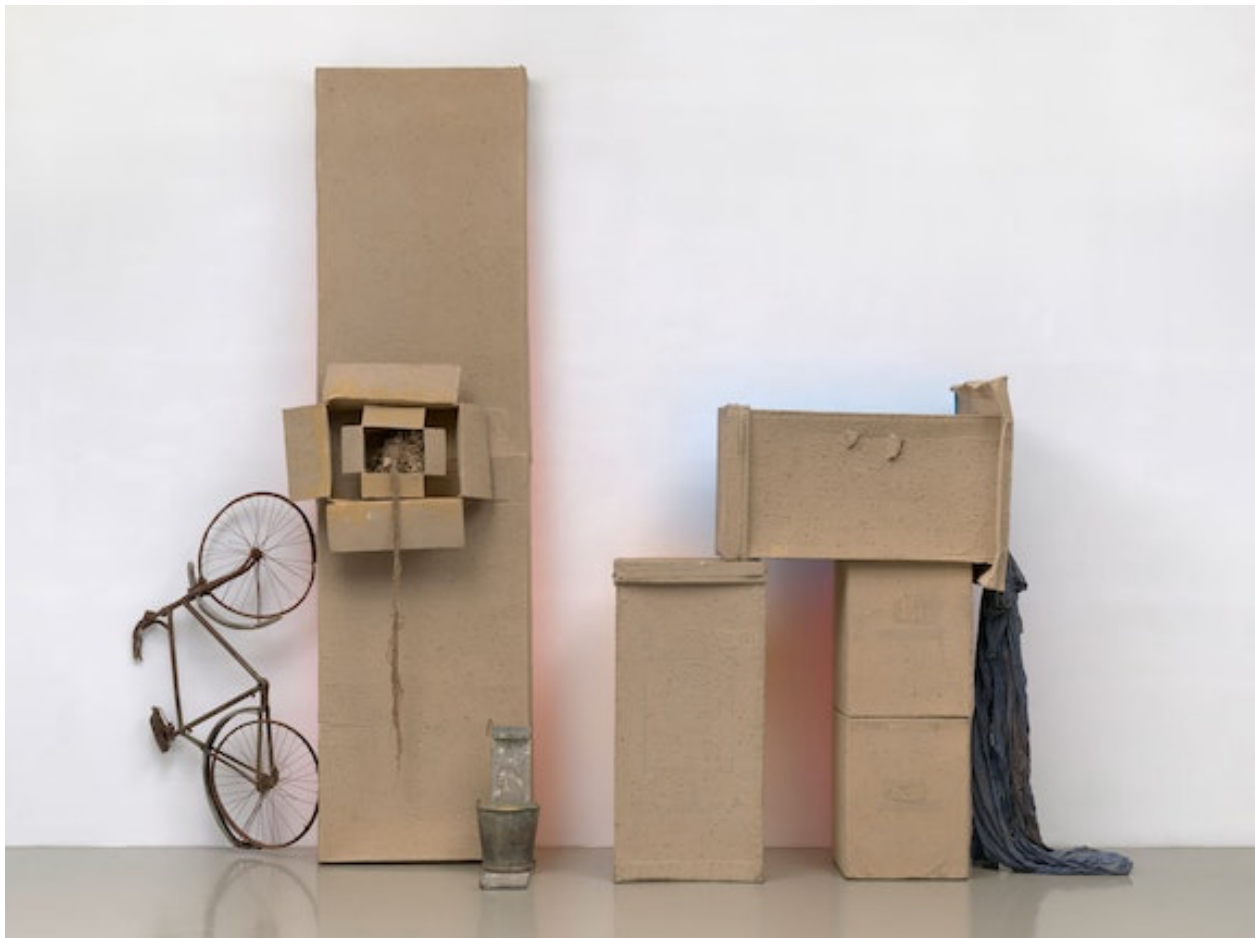
In 1985, Rauschenberg launched the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange (ROCI), committing his lens over the next five years to travels in Mexico, Chile, Venezuela, China, Tibet, Japan, Cuba, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Malaysia, and Germany, because as he stated at an exhibition of the works in Tibet:

I feel strong in my beliefs, based on my varied and widely traveled collaborations, that a one-to-one contact through art contains potent peaceful powers and is the most non-elitist way to share exotic and common information, seducing us into creative mutual understandings for the benefit of all.

The statement is sincere but many of the works from this period have a playful relationality that stems from what he learned in communication with the people he met. Much of the left side of *My Panare Dream with Yutaje / ROCI VENEZUELA* (1985) is obscured by a brownish pigment covering photographs of boys and recalling use of annatto seeds in medicinal and ritual body painting in the Amazon (most notably still among the Wari' people). Prints of foliage and

trees on the right appear in various hues, with a blob of green and white paint seemingly blooming out of the bold red silk-screened branch, undercutting the indexical representation with a stronger gesture.

There's a temptation to assure the significance of a work by defaulting into seriousness, sifting through the semiotics to produce certainties, but Rauschenberg defies such efforts by never completely abandoning them either. As Hilton Als writes about Rauschenberg in the catalogue accompanying *Venetians and Early Egyptians, 1972-1974* at Gladstone Gallery's two locations in Chelsea: "you never leave stories with a moral behind, which makes you for better or worse a critic of the world, immersed in joy, sometimes, while keeping an eye on it." On Captiva Island, Florida Rauschenberg returned to a kind of minimalism, though one more interested in disused objects and the deception of materials than any kind of essentialism.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Early Egyptian)*, 1973. Sand and acrylic on cardboard with bicycle, fabric, twine, metal bucket, and wood, 153 1/2 x 193 3/8 x 46 1/8 inches. © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. Courtesy the foundation and Gladstone Gallery. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

Between two wood trestles, a worn tire tread trails along the floor in *Untitled (Venetian)* (1973), its thickness like a brushstroke, the worn out edges as if from the feathery softness of bristles. It's impossible to replicate and some archivist's anxiety dream. A similar shape occurs with the pale white mosquito net hung between two chairs for *Sant' Agnese (Venetian)* (1973), with corked glass jugs hanging between the netting for no fathomable reason except as funny buoys or to make viewers like me nervous that something will break. Most of these works are

monochromatic, creating a simple palette that allows the found or gifted objects he incorporates into these combines to emphasize form. A 16-foot-long work *Untitled (Early Egyptian)* (1973) with a bicycle at one end and several cardboard boxes, barely held together or dubiously stacked, suggests a temple ruin, but that grand notion dissipates as the twine and bucket and fabric introduce the elaborate architectural imagination of a character akin to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's little prince.

The "Venetian" and "Early Egyptian" series were inspired by his travels. At the end of a corridor, Gladstone Gallery placed four tall cardboard boxes smothered in glue and encrusted with sand and shells, the detritus of his beachside landscape after so many years in New York City. They sit atop cardboard pedestals, referencing the four baboons—originally at the base of Luxor Obelisk—but positioned in the Louvre when early twentieth-century Parisians could not allow the monkeys' significant male genitalia to grace a public monument along a very public walkway such as the Axe historique in Paris. The pink and orange backs of the four cardboard figures glow on the wall and make viewers peer behind, creating a peep show of nought. The day-glo paint covering the backs of some works reflects against the white wall, emanating a glowing hue that forcefully draws the eye. One wants to look at that side, as if the front of the painting were facing the wall and we are somehow positioned behind the frame. It's all topsy turvy and questions the monumentality that sculpture so easily invokes.

Rauschenberg found materials and made of them art ... is that not funny? How marvelously outrageous. Here's a cardboard box. Beaten. Dilapidated. Here's a stick. Here, some frayed fabric. From such detritus arises something gentle and beautiful. There is delight in making something from the abandoned and lost. Do we not often as artists and writers feel that way about our own lives? Rauschenberg's is not a cruel wit, which is often what we presume when humor is mentioned. This is the laughter that bubbles up from recognition of the frailty and fallibility of being. We make monuments out of rare materials but when Rauschenberg does so from the mundane, he doesn't elevate one material over another but shows the material basis for our intellectual constructions, as well, revealing an instability to the ideologies we adopt. That uncertainty, like shaky cardboard, means accepting the role that doubt can play in critical thinking. It's funny that we ever thought otherwise.