

MNUCHIN GALLERY

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A Rare Look at Rauschenberg's Second Act

In the early '70s the artist dispensed with collage, making airy cardboard sculptures that challenged the macho posturing that had overtaken American sculpture.



Installation view of "Robert Rauschenberg: Venetians and Early Egyptians, 1972-1974," at Gladstone Gallery. From left, "Sant' Agnese (Venetian)," 1973; and "Untitled (Early Egyptian)," 1973. Credit: Robert Rauschenberg Foundation and Gladstone Gallery/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

By Deborah Solomon

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Which one is better for making art: living in the city among gifted friends or isolating on an inconveniently located island? Robert Rauschenberg famously tried both. In 1970, at age 45 and acclaimed for his alchemical ability to turn detritus into art, he felt tired of living in Manhattan. He purchased property in Captiva, off the sandy west coast of Florida, and embarked upon the second half of his enormously inventive and influential career.

Rauschenberg's later paintings and sculptures have never had the visibility of his earlier work, which is perhaps inevitable in a culture that romanticizes youthful creativity. But the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, which acquired much of the artist's work upon his death in 2008, at 82, is inviting us to take a closer look and collaborating on several concurrent exhibitions at major galleries here and in Europe.

The main event is at the Gladstone Gallery, which is offering a revelatory look at works from the artist's Venetian and Early Egyptian series (1972-74), with an emphasis on a group of sculptures fashioned from the unlikely material of cardboard shipping boxes. A second show at the Mnuchin Gallery, by contrast, offers a broad survey of three decades of work (1971 to 1999) and bears the vague, self-promotional title, "Exceptional Works."

The show at Gladstone, which is spread between two locations in Chelsea, brings together 16 sculptures (and one work on paper) that continue the artist's trademark penchant for recycling. To walk in is to be astounded that so much commanding sculptural form, so many columns and pyramids, can rise up from such flimsy materials. Here is a world constructed from rags and shredded rubber tires and especially brown cardboard boxes, some of them coated with sand as if to simulate stone building blocks, others flattened into irregular polygons and left in their naturally wavering corrugated state.



Foreground, "Untitled (Early Egyptian)," 1974; and on the wall, "Untitled (Venetian)," 1973/1982, at Gladstone Gallery. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation and Gladstone Gallery/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

In truth, they bring us a new Rauschenberg, allowing us to see how an artist who began his career as a Texas-born heir to European Dada and Kurt Schwitters's scrap-paper collages evolved, in the early '70s, into an inspired post-Minimalist sculptor. He dispensed with collage, and other imagistic content to make airy assemblages that ingeniously challenge the cold steel surfaces and macho posturing that had overtaken American sculpture.

So in place of Donald Judd's famous metal boxes, Rauschenberg embraced a witty and ephemeral alternative — namely, the cardboard box. In lieu of the massive tonnage of Richard Serra's stacked blocks or plates of steel, Rauschenberg arranged his boxes into vertical or horizontal configurations that are almost weightless and whose installation does not require the virile drama of flatbed trucks and riggers and cranes.

The Gladstone exhibition opens with the artist's Venetian series, which he named for a city he loved. In the summer of 1964, he became the first American artist to win the top prize at the Venice Biennale. In those days, the jury's deliberations were seen by the art world as roughly tantamount to a papal conclave and led to assertions about New York's pre-eminence as an art capital.

The city of Venice evoked in the sculptures (which were actually created back home in the studio in Captiva), is the Venice of canals, a metropolis of stone and water and boats gliding by. Rauschenberg always had a boyish fascination with transportation. References to cars, planes and bicycles run through his work, and his definition of artmaking had less to do with secluding oneself in a studio and plumbing one's innermost emotions than in venturing into the object-strewn world, an inspired wanderer.

He relished physical movement, whether that meant foreign travel or 15 footsteps across a dance stage. For years he designed sets and costumes for the leading lights of avant-garde dance, including Paul Taylor, Merce Cunningham and Trisha Brown, and savored artistic collaborations. "The best way to know people is to work with them," he once said.



"Untitled (Venetian)," 1973, cardboard, driftwood and fabric, at Gladstone Gallery. Credit... Robert Rauschenberg Foundation and Gladstone Gallery; VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Ron Amstutz

One striking sculpture at Gladstone, "Untitled (Venetian)," 1973, wrests a sense of nautical adventure from materials that might wash up on a beach. An 11-foot-long piece of driftwood, with four ragged cardboard boxes skewered onto one end, leans against a wall, where it meets a curtain of ivory-colored lace that tumbles down and forms a right angle with the floor. At first the piece looks a little haphazard. But when you stand back, it suggests a makeshift boat, a triangle silhouetted like a tall sail against the open air.

Some of the works here have the traditional vertical oomph of sculpture, but others are amusing ground huggers. Surely no sculpture defines the word baggy more than "Untitled (Early Egyptian)," 1974, in which a row of 11 brown paper bags stand up on the floor with their sides touching, like so many repeating rectangular blocks. But Rauschenberg inverts Judd's cubic geometry into a kind of domestic comedy. A long strip of gauzy fabric weaves over and around the bags, sometimes veiling their openings and variously conjuring rococo frills, the female anatomy, and a sneaking suspicion that supermarkets-are-us.

As a prismatic bonus, the backs of several sculptures have been painted in solid neon-bright colors. When you peek behind them, you see glowy rectangles of orange or red reflected on the wall, mini-Dan Flavins minus the electric cords.

The best works in the show can put you in mind of Bruce Nauman, Eva Hesse and other leading American sculptors who sought to rescue contemporary art from the ice storm of Minimalism. Oddly, the critic Hilton Als, writing in the catalog accompanying the show, elects to place Rauschenberg in a different lineage, claiming that his later sculptures came out of Arte Povera, or “poor art,” that scrappy “ism” that flourished in Italy in the late 1960s and attached a special significance to materials of no significance — paper, burlap sacks, and so on.

Yet Rauschenberg surely shaped Arte Povera more than it shaped him. In the 1950s, long before the critic Germano Celant coined the term Arte Povera, Rauschenberg was finding his poetry in the forlorn and discarded, repurposing yesterday’s newspapers and bedsheets and tin cans into something all-new. His outlandish caprine sculpture, “Monogram” (1955-9), which lives at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, is dominated by an actual stuffed goat that is sometimes described as the artist’s alter-ego, and it is hardly irrelevant that goats are known as extra-curious mammals with a nose for scrap heaps.

The second show, at the Mnuchin Gallery, is a staid and more predictable affair, emphasizing paintings over sculptures and Rauschenberg’s return to collaged imagery. Most of the later paintings come out of his pioneering silk-screen paintings from the early 1960s, with their disjunctive patchwork of magazine cutouts and his own photographs. Some of the paintings, especially those on aluminum, do not advance his innovations so much as memorialize them with a solemnity that can feel slightly empty.

Still, Rauschenberg never lost his hankering for improvisation and no artist was ever better at banging mismatched objects into compelling configurations. The sculptures at Mnuchin have more energy than the paintings, and one defining piece, “The Ancient Incident (Kabal American Zephyr)” (1981), mesmerizes with its symmetry and strangeness. Shaped roughly like a pyramid with stepped sides, it stands about 7 feet high and in place of the usual costly sculptural materials (bronze, marble) makes do with assorted pieces of worn-out furniture. Two rough-hewed stepladders are positioned back to back a few feet apart, creating a door-shaped space between them, while overhead, a pair of curved-arm Windsor chairs appear almost magically levitated.

The motif of two chairs recurs in Rauschenberg work, though its meaning changes depending on the context. In this case, the chairs are notably unusable. They’re too high up and precariously balanced for anyone to sit on, and they face each other without leaving an inch of room for a person’s legs. But who would want to lounge in a chair anyway if instead you could walk in the charged space beneath it? Throughout his life, Rauschenberg, a self-diagnosed dyslexic, was too restless to sit down. He preferred to keep moving. “The Ancient Incident” is, in effect, a humble, do-it-yourself version of an old temple gate, capturing Rauschenberg’s dream of crossing thresholds, not knowing what lies on the other side.