

RECORD REVIEW

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Classic Rauschenberg at Neuberger

By ABBY LUBY

The test of all great art is in repeated viewings. Does it hold up over time? Does the meaning change, is it still relevant to us collectively, individually? Passing this test overwhelmingly is the work of Robert Rauschenberg and part of his oeuvre will be exhibited at the Neuberger Museum of Art starting on Sunday, January 23. The show offers 57 pieces, the museum's total collection of Mr. Rauschenberg's work and includes lithographs, silk screens and collages.

The work spans 30 years with "Rauschenberg XXXIV Drawings for Dante's Inferno Canto I – Canto XXXIV, 1950 – 60," to the later "Surface Series and Features from Currents of 1970 to a couple of pieces created in 1981.

Rauschenberg's "Drawings for Dante's Inferno," are 34 facsimile drawings that were published by Harry Abrams and are strategically placed to be viewed, or 'read,' vertically from upper left to lower right dictating how the eye moves through the cantos. Within each framed illustration, images of human beings, random anatomy and animal faces seem to float and move in a thick, dense atmosphere of layered rubbings and brush strokes. Some illustrations are sparse or lightly treated, but all modernize Dante with a process that coats the cut-out images with chemical solvent, presses them into the surface of the paper and covers them with transparent gouache brush strokes and crayon or pencil markings.

Mr. Rauschenberg's layering and visual montage is not unlike the music of composer Charles Ives (1874 – 1954) who folded popular American songs into poly-tonal composition as an aural collage.

The zeitgeist started in the early 1920's with Russian film pioneer Sergei Eisenstein who edited together two or more arbitrary pieces of film allowing the viewer to connect the dots, make it one piece of art. Eisenstein's filmic montage, Ives' musical inclusion and Rauschenberg's collage emerged out of a culture that excessively pushed images and sounds at a frenzied pace into our every day lives.

Rauschenberg's use of media images are large, loud and unavoidable, especially in the "Surface Series and Features" from "Currents," which are two silkscreen print series that create a linear commentary based on newspaper collage drawings from the socio-political events of the 1960s. "Features" from "Currents" was originally a 60 by 6 foot silkscreen exhibited in the Dayton Gallery 12. The pieces that made up that silkscreen are now 40 by 40 inch silkscreens, framed, separate works that use headlines from newspapers from January and February, 1970. Headlines collide with fragments of articles, words are upside down and inside out, partial stories are paired with random pictures from other stories. Standing back from a long wall of these silkscreens is the best way to get the full impact of the original piece. Headlined events in these pieces are not so different than today's: "Runoff Flushes Raw Sewage to River," "Bertrand Russell Dies," "Vietnam War takes toll." Pictures of John R. Kennedy, rockets, folks huddled around a fire hydrant for drinking water are mixed in with simple hand drawings of hands, 'for sale' signs, tiny icons.

Making sense of abundant images in our lives was writer Susan Sontage, who just died in December. In her book "On Photography" (1973, McGraw Hill) Ms. Sontage writes "Out very notion of the world.....is like a

photographic overview” and “the spurious unity of the world is affected by translating its contents into images.”

Mr. Rauschenberg use of images is not so much about the images themselves but about the process and the materials he used to put them together. He silk-screened on Plexiglas, special “Aqua B’ paper, mirrors. The piece “Star Quarters I-IV” is a silkscreen on Mylar with Plexiglas and is four panels, each 47 by 47 inches. The mirror piece used constellations superimposed over wide winged hawks, diving fish, flying gymnast, old diner, spacecraft, and while you are looking, your own image interacts with each.

Accompanying the exhibit, the bookstore at the Neuberger Museum will offer three books about Mr. Rauschenberg. One is a large coffee table book - "Rauschenberg/Art and Life," by Mary Lynn Kotz, (Harry Abrams, 2004), another is a catalog from an 1985 show entitled “Robert Rauschenberg Drawings 1958-1986 that has 61 color plates and a book called “Posters” by Marc Gundel (Prestel, 2002). The book by Mary Lynn Kotz is the result of seven years work interviewing Mr. Rauschenberg’s writing his biography, observing how he works. In the book, Ms. Kotz said “Rauschenberg wants people to participate and respond to his work, to discover their own way of understanding it. He says perhaps if they have a new way of seeing maybe then they can find a new way of thinking.”

The Rauschenberg exhibition was Curated by Dede Young, Neuberger Museum of Art Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art and is part of the museum’s 30th anniversary. The exhibition will be on view from January 23 through April 10, 2005.