ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG AND ANDY WARHOL
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"US SILKSCREENERS..."
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THE SILKSCREEN CONNECTION

BY RICHARD POLSKY

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In 1962, Andy Warhol realized one of his dreams he got Robert Rauschenberg to take him seriously. In the late 1950s, while working as a prolific illustrator for magazines and advertising agencies, Warhol had fantasized about befriending Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg, wanting desperately to be part of their circle which included representation by the Leo Castelli Gallery. Johns and Rauschenberg had written Warhol off as a commercial artist, even though they supported themselves as a window dressing duo for Tiffany, who went by the collective name "Matson Jones." Hoping to ingratiate himself, Warhol even went as far as painting a number of portraits of Robert Rauschenberg. Now, things had come full circle. It was Rauschenberg who found himself pursuing a relationship with Warhol, lining up a studio visit through the curator Henry Geldzahler, to learn more about the silkscreen technique.

As Rauschenberg and Warhol went on to become major historical figures, there's been much speculation over who came up with the idea of using photographs as a basis for silkscreen paintings, in lieu of using drawing-based silkscreens, to make art. The general consensus is that Warhol deserves this distinction, though there are some dissenters.

Not only was Warhol the first artist to utilize a commercial technique to make fine art, he took it to the next level when he switched from using a basic silkscreen, as seen in *200 One Dollar Bills,* to a photo-silkscreen, utilized in *Baseball.* How interesting then, that not long after Rauschenberg visited Warhol's studio to get some technical pointers, one of *his* earliest photo-silkscreen paintings, *Brace*, paid homage to his new "mentor" and America's national pastime. Or did it?

Brace was emblematic of Rauschenberg and Warhol's friendly rivalry. In *Baseball*, Warhol depicted the home run king Roger Maris. Though Rauschenberg also selected an image of Maris, it turned out to be a different pose. It makes you wonder whether Rauschenberg was honoring Warhol for introducing him to a new approach to painting. Or perhaps, just like in competitive sports, he was vying to come up with a superior visual image of the same subject. In 1961, the year before *Baseball* and *Brace* were executed, Roger Maris had broken the beloved Babe Ruth's long-held home run record, upsetting many sports fans. Much was made of Maris hitting 61 home runs in 162 games, edging out the Babe, who slugged 60 dingers in what was once a 154 game season. Major league baseball put an asterisk next to Maris's name in the record books. Now the question was whether Rauschenberg deserved one next to his.

Sometimes called a neo-Dadaist, Rauschenberg was known for juxtaposing unlikely objects, from a stuffed bald eagle to a stuffed old pillow, creating provocative visual connections within a painting. Warhol was also a gatherer of images. But his selections

were less random. He was enthralled by celebrity film stills, newspaper photographs of current events, and consumer goods — images he repeatedly screened onto the same canvas. The transition from Rauschenberg's Combines to his silkscreen paintings was aesthetically seamless. After eight years of producing Combines, Rauschenberg had grown restless. Though he loved scavenging for found objects, slathering them with paint and incorporating them onto the surface of his canvases, he was ready for a new challenge. As a matter of fact, another group of works, namely Rauschenberg's classic transfer drawings, contributed to this new development in his art. This long-running group of works (1958-1968) were made by squirting lighter fluid over a magazine reproduction, which loosened the ink and allowed it to be rubbed onto a sheet of paper, leaving impressions which resembled faded tattoos.

One could argue that Rauschenberg had sought out Warhol, hoping to re-energize his painting. While no one knows exactly what transpired when they got together at the original Factory, in midtown Manhattan, it is safe to assume that Rauschenberg walked away ready to give silkscreening a try. His concept was to substitute found images for found objects. Rauschenberg continued to incorporate paint into his compositions, sometimes brushing colour over screened images, or occasionally rubbing them out with turpentine. The result was a rich hybrid of Abstract Expressionism and Pop art. As Rauschenberg grew more involved with the silkscreen process, he made his well-known comment to author and art critic, Calvin Tomkins, "Us silkscreeners got to stick together." With "us", Rauschenberg was referring to himself and Warhol. When considering this comment as a genuine statement, one could conclude that, according to Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol had finally arrived.

Though Rauschenberg's black and white silkscreen paintings (1962-63) were exceptional, it was his efforts in colour (1963-64) that earned him the grand prize for painting at the 1964 Venice Biennale — an event that signaled the triumphant arrival of American art on the international stage. Rauschenberg embraced the optimism of the early 1960s. His paintings, such as *Retroactive I* and *Retroactive II,* celebrated America's youthful president, John F. Kennedy. His canvas, *Stop Gap*, chronicled the country's impressive scientific achievements, synonymous with the Mercury space capsule and astronauts walking in space. By contrast, Warhol had embarked on his *"Death and Disaster"* paintings, which featured another member of the Kennedy family: the recently widowed Jacqueline Kennedy. The intersection between Rauschenberg's paintings depicting John F. Kennedy in his prime, and the small sub-set of Warhol *Jackies* that show JFK while he was still alive, standing in the background next to his glowing wife is especially poignant.

Once Warhol completed his Jackie portraits, he took a break from depicting carnage and destruction. He momentarily refocused his attention on celebrities, specifically Marilyn



Monroe. Choosing Warhol's most successful group of paintings is certainly open to debate, but in this writer's opinion it was the Marilyns — hands down. Warhol's original Marilyn series was painted in 1962. In 1964, Warhol completed five relatively large 40 x 40 inches (101.6 x 101.6 cm) Marilyns that may have been the strongest of the series. The irony is that even here, Warhol couldn't get away from violence. One day, Dorothy Podber, a friend of the photographer Billy Name, arrived at the Factory. She spotted four Marilyn canvases stacked one in front of the other against a wall, and proceeded to pull a handgun from her purse and shoot a hole right between Ms. Monroe's eyes — earning her a lifetime ban from the studio. These infamous pictures became known as the *Shot Marilyns*.

Given the significance of the Marilyn series, both in the development of Warhol's silkscreen process and their place as historic icons, it was with great interest that a new discovery was made — *Early Marilyn Thirty-Five Times* — that could arguably be Warhol's first foray into photo-silkscreening. Research revealed that it was likely an experimental piece. The story that I was able to reconstruct was that early in 1962, Warhol came upon a photograph of Marilyn Monroe taken by the well-known photojournalist, Bert Stern. Warhol was infatuated with her image, having collected nearly 1,000 photos of the movie star. After Warhol had a screen made of Stern's portrait, he experimented with both the multi-image format and the photo-silkscreen process itself. The result was a painting that preceded *Baseball*, and other celebrity paintings of 1962, including Warren Beatty, Troy Donahue, and Natalie Wood.

During the second half of the 1960s, Warhol's painting production diminished as he focused more on filmmaking. His *Mum Voyeur* self-portraits were his last hurrah before he was shot in 1968, and almost died. As for Rauschenberg, his post-silkscreen paintings evolved into "Photo-Transfer" canvases, where he employed vegetable dyes to print his photographic images onto canvas. While the colour was more realistic than the slightly garish silkscreens, which used the four-colour separation process, necessitating a red, yellow, blue, and black screen for each image, it lacked the medium's unvarnished beauty. Lurking behind the scenes of both groups of paintings were Rauschenberg's aforementioned earlier transfer drawings, which had preceded his silkscreen works.

Rauschenberg's photo-transfer drawings brought a more elegant sensibility to his painting; gone were the smears and drips of the Silkscreens. Over time, Warhol's pictures grew more refined, too. There was a shift from embracing accidents in the screening process to striving for more crisply screened subjects. What remained a constant was that Rauschenberg and Warhol continued to harvest images gleaned from the world around them.

While Warhol's paintings peaked in the 1960s, and Rauschenberg's may have too, both artists produced brilliant work late in their careers. In 1986, Warhol began to look inward,

painting his famous *Fright Wigs*, perhaps his finest self-portraits. In 1997, Rauschenberg created the tour de force canvas *Mirthday Man*, a painting clogged with images that quoted his storied past, including his famous print *Booster* and its life-size x-ray of a human skeleton.

But what will forever yoke the two artists together in art history is a sense of camaraderie that no longer exists in the art world. A generosity of spirit pervaded Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol's relationship and early work. They understood it was a win for the home team if either one of their silkscreen paintings received recognition. Can you envision, in today's hyper-competitive art world, Jeff Koons visiting Julian Schnabel's studio to talk shop and exchange pointers? Warhol and Rauschenberg's connection represents something more than two great artists learning from each other. Their initial powwow was about art, not the art *market*.

While all of this may sound overly romantic, it was authentic. The remarkable paintings made by both artists, between 1962-1964, continue to thrill us. When Rauschenberg contacted Warhol to learn about the silkscreen process, it triggered a number of events that eventually led to his historic breakthrough in Venice. Rauschenberg returned the favour by welcoming Warhol to the acme of the contemporary art world — which became official when he joined Rauschenberg as a member of the Leo Castelli Gallery. As the expression goes, how cool is that?

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