

“On the Move”: Robert Rauschenberg’s *Silkscreen Paintings*

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Robert Rauschenberg
Express, 1963
(detail)
[\[+ info\]](#)

In June 1964, Robert Rauschenberg (Port Arthur, Texas, 1925–Captiva Island, Florida, 2008) won the International Grand Prize in Painting at the 32nd Venice Biennale. The award set off something of a panic among European critics who took it as proof of the preeminent position and vulgarizing effect of American art on the world stage. The leftist French newspaper *Combat* called the prize “an offense to the dignity of artistic creation”¹ while, from the other side of the political spectrum, *L’Osservatore Romano*, the official Vatican newspaper, ran an editorial denouncing “the total and general defeat of culture”² at the Biennale. In similar distress, the French magazine *Arts* bemoaned “the end of the School of Paris” at the hands of American Pop Art as exemplified by Rauschenberg’s silkscreen painting *Retroactive II* (1963).³ Featuring a large, partially striped portrait of John F. Kennedy near the center of the composition, *Retroactive II* also includes a smaller, less prominently placed detail of Peter Paul Rubens’s 1608 masterpiece, *The Toilet of Venus*, at top right. In the context of the Venice controversy, Rauschenberg’s painting thematized the displacement of European high art by American popular culture and political power.

1
Cited in Alexander Eliot, “All Roads Lead to Where?” *Art in America*, 52, 6 (December 1964), p. 127.

2
Cited in Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time*, Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1980, p. 235 (note).

3
Pierre Cabanne, “À Venise, L’Amérique proclame la fin de l’École de Paris et lance le Pop Art pour coloniser l’Europe,” *Arts*, 968 (June 24–30, 1964), p. 16.

The artist's personal response to the Grand Prize was, in its own way, no less dramatic than the public outcry of his European critics. In *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time*, Calvin Tomkins writes:

The day after he won the Biennale, Rauschenberg telephoned from Venice to a friend in New York, a Judson dancer named Tony Holder who occasionally helped out in his studio. He asked Holder to go to the Broadway loft, cut all the old silk screens out of their wooden frames, and burn them. There were about a hundred and fifty screens all told, representing a sizable financial investment as well as a rich bank of images. Destroying them was a form of insurance against the pressure to repeat himself.⁴

Tomkins reports this story coolly and without further comment. Since his account has become definitive in the art-historical literature on Rauschenberg, several questions have remained unanswered about the episode. If the artist wished for the silkscreens to be destroyed, could he not have done so himself upon his return to New York? Rauschenberg's trip to Venice coincided with his participation in a six-month world tour by the Merce Cunningham Dance Company for which he designed sets, costumes, and lighting and occasionally performed at the time.⁵ Since he remained abroad through December of 1964, Rauschenberg obviously had no access to the screens—and thus no chance of making new work from them—for several months. Why the need, then, to have them incinerated immediately? And why have Holder burn the screens rather than, more simply and safely, cut them up and throw them away? It is as though Rauschenberg could not abide the very idea of the silkscreens, as though, if they survived, they would be waiting for him back in New York, calling him to continue in the same creative direction.⁶

The destruction of the silkscreens strikes a decidedly modernist note, a decimation of artistic materials so total that it voids any possibility of their recurrence in future work.⁷

4
Cited in Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, p. 235.

5
In a bit of serendipitous timing, the company performed in Venice on the day before the Biennale jury awarded the Grand Prize. It has been suggested that Rauschenberg's dealer, Leo Castelli, orchestrated the coincidence to bolster the artist's visibility at the Biennale.

6
According to Dorothy G. Seckler, "It would have been easier to continue with these familiar ways [of silkscreening] and turn out a product that is now in great demand despite its high prices. But since the challenge as Rauschenberg sees it is not to ingratiate the audience but to constantly renew and expand its perception of the present, this was not an alternative that could be considered"; see Dorothy G. Seckler, "The Artist Speaks: Robert Rauschenberg," *Art in America*, 54, 3 (May–June 1966), pp. 73–85, here p. 73.

7
According to Rosalind Krauss, "The actual practice of vanguard art tends to reveal that 'originality' is a working assumption that itself emerges from a ground of repetition and recurrence"; see Rosalind E. Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 1986, pp. 151–70, here p. 157.



fig. 1
Ugo Mulas, *Rauschenberg in front of Express at the 32nd Venice Biennale, 1964*, gelatin silver print. Courtesy Archivio Ugo Mulas, Milan

8
Cited in Dorothy G. Seckler, "The Artist Speaks," p. 84. On the occasion of the artist's first one-man museum show in 1963, for example, the curator Alan Solomon wrote: "It is extraordinary how seldom Rauschenberg repeats himself... [E]ach picture tends to be a complete statement in itself, rather than a step in a progression... He deplores the compulsive repetition which some artists practice, for Rauschenberg two is a very large number, and he approaches the possibility of using three of anything with more than a little gravity"; see Alan R. Solomon, *Robert Rauschenberg*, New York, The Jewish Museum, 1963 (unpaginated).

9
As his commitment to originality would suggest, Rauschenberg's professional output in the years immediately following Venice departed dramatically from his preceding silkscreen paintings. Following the Cunningham tour (which ended, somewhat acrimoniously, in Rauschenberg's departure from the company), the artist focused on collaborative work in performance, dance, interactive technologies, and mixed media. Even as the prices of his Combines and silkscreens skyrocketed in part as a result of the Venice Prize, Rauschenberg studiously avoided the lure of repetition.

The act echoes Rauschenberg's pattern throughout his early career of discontinuing creative approaches once they became, in his view, rote or predictable. In a 1966 interview, the artist noted that "As far as style is concerned, I've run through a good many and it is always a pleasure to give them up [...]. When I reach a stage where working in a certain way is more apt to be successful than unsuccessful—and it's not just a lucky streak—when I definitely see that this is the case, I start something else."⁸ By these lights, Rauschenberg's professional triumph at the Biennale may have furnished him with the incentive to find a new creative path. A photograph from the day of the award ceremony shows Rauschenberg posed before *Express* (1963) [fig. 1], one of the paintings displayed at the exhibition. Seeing Rauschenberg in his linen suit and tie, graciously enduring the occasion, one cannot but think of his imminent decision to destroy the screens used in that work, not to mention all the others in his studio at the time.⁹ In its exceedingly public (if also highly controversial) recognition of the artist's success, the Prize all but decreed that he move on.

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Between fall 1962 and spring 1964, Rauschenberg created over six dozen photo-silkscreen paintings on canvas. The commercially fabricated screens used for these paintings were imprinted, at the artist's instruction, with imagery drawn either from his own photographs or from mass circulation magazines such as *National Geographic*, *Esquire*, *Look*, and *Life*. Initially working in black and white, the artist started using colored inks in 1963.

Like his abandonment of the silkscreen works in 1964, Rauschenberg's initial turn to them was motivated by a desire to break with his preceding work to, as he put it, "escape [the] familiarity of objects & collage."¹⁰ The compound phrase "objects & collage" refers in this context to the artist's Combines (1954–64)—combinations of painting, sculpture, collage, and assemblage—which he had produced since 1954. While working on the Combines, Rauschenberg became increasingly drawn to the possibility of translating his hybrid aesthetic onto a flat, two-dimensional surface. In his early "transfer drawings" (1958–60), the artist dipped photo-clippings from newspapers and magazines in lighter fluid, then rubbed them face down onto a piece of paper, thereby producing a glimmering, monochrome afterimage. He combined these photo-based images with free-hand drawing and watercolor painting. While the method yielded visually elegant results, it limited Rauschenberg to a fairly small scale since his source images could only be transferred to the paper at original size. Silk-screening, by contrast, enabled the artist to enlarge and multiply photographic imagery at will.

10

This text is included in the large spiral of words in the central section of Rauschenberg's 1968 lithograph *Autobiography*. The text, while dizzying to read as one follows its circular form around the composition, charts the artist's life and career dispassionately and in chronological order.

11

According to Roni Feinstein, Rauschenberg worked on as many as eight silkscreen paintings simultaneously; see Roni Feinstein, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Silkscreen Paintings, 1962–64* [exh. cat. New York, Whitney Museum of American Art], New York, Whitney Museum; Boston/Toronto/London, Bulfinch Press, 1990, p. 42.

12

Calvin Tomkins, unpublished notes, June 25, 1963, p. 8; as cited in Roni Feinstein, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Silkscreen Paintings*, p. 42.

In certain cases, Rauschenberg worked on several paintings at once, using the same silkscreen to imprint an image—whether of JFK, a glass of water, or Diego Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus* (1647–51)—on different canvases.¹¹ The advantage of this multi-tasking method, according to the artist, was that he was "not so likely to get hung up" on any one picture. "You keep moving. And when you come back to one, and it hasn't moved automatically while you were away, suggesting something new, you just go on to the next."¹² Rauschenberg's description of a painting having "moved [...] while you were away" is especially intriguing. By working on multiple pictures simultaneously, the artist could circle back to see whether one of them had "moved" since his latest inking or painting of the surface, that is, whether the picture seemed, in the interim, to be advancing toward a more dynamic flow of visual traffic. In a sense, Rauschenberg sought to create compositions that were "on the move" even after they had been completed. The works recall the layered process by which they were made, the flow of time required, and the seemingly endless mobility of images and information in the modern age.

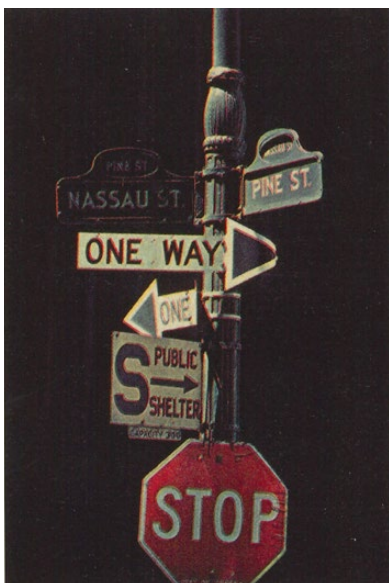


fig. 2
Hans Namuth, *Rauschenberg in his studio with *Retroactive II* and *Buffalo II*, 1964*

A marvelous Hans Namuth photograph from 1964 catches Rauschenberg on the floor of his studio as he pulls a squeegee across a screen so as to ink a portion of the canvas unfurled beneath [fig. 2]. The painting on the floor has been identified as *Skyway* (1964), a mural-sized picture first displayed on the façade of the New York State Pavilion at the 1964 World's Fair. Behind *Skyway*, two finished pictures, *Retroactive II* (1963) and *Buffalo II* (1964), are shown propped against the studio wall. While versions of the same, larger-than-life-sized portrait of JFK appear in both works, those portraits diverge wildly in terms of compositional placement, cropping, color blocking, overpainting, and pictorial surround. As captured in Namuth's photograph, the two works enact a visual dialogue between repetition and difference such that, for example, the President's pointing hand becomes all the more declarative as it appears, in almost perfect diagonal alignment, twice in the left-hand painting and once again in the right. The photograph suggests not only a potentially endless recurrence of the Kennedy image but also an infinite set of compositional variations within which that image might be set. In doing so, it echoes Rauschenberg's method of working the same silkscreen across different paintings in quick succession. The artist would, for example, screen the same Kennedy portrait twice more in *Skyway*.

fig. 3
Robert Rauschenberg
Overdrive, 1963
Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas,
213.4 × 152.4 cm
The Museum of Modern Art,
New York, Promised gift of Eva
and Glenn Dubin, PG740.2013

fig. 4
Philip Harrington, photograph
of the post on the corner of Nassau
and Pine streets in "The New New
York," *Look* magazine, March 26,
1963



As JFK's double appearance in both *Buffalo II* and *Skyway* attests, Rauschenberg exploited the intrinsic reproducibility of the silkscreen method within as well as across individual paintings. Even as he pursued the possibilities and pleasures of repetition, Rauschenberg also disrupted them. The lower section of his work *Overdrive* (1963) [fig. 3], for example, is largely given over to repeated views of a group of street signs appended to an iron post. Reading from top down, we see a pair of old fashioned "humpback" signs marking the intersection of "Nassau" and "Pine" Streets in lower Manhattan; two one way signs, each slightly dented, pointing in nearly opposite direction; a public shelter sign punctuated by a large "S" and a slender arrow, pointing in yet a third direction; and finally, the familiar red octagonal of a "Stop" sign. As is evident from the original photograph in *Look* magazine [fig. 4], Rauschenberg has exaggerated the oblique angle of the post and blacked out the part of it that continues beneath the partially defaced Stop sign. The result is that the iron post seems to be in mid swing, like the pendulum of a grandfather clock. What is more, the "One Way," "Shelter," and "Stop" signs resurface in various colors and positions

(upside-down, at right angles, skewed off-center) beneath the swinging post. Thanks to overpainting, inconsistent screening, and unpredictable spatial orientation, these signs break free of their supporting post, as if spinning away in multiple directions. “One way” now points every which way. The quadrupled “Stop” sign now instigates us to move and rotate around the composition. Rauschenberg stages a visual and conceptual “overdrive” such that signs lose their moorings as language loses meaning.

* * *

The relatively short time during which Rauschenberg made the *Silkscreen Paintings* is all the more striking when contrasted to the duration of the same pictorial method in the work of Andy Warhol. Warhol always saved his silkscreens for potential future use—whether to expand a prior series or launch a new one. First applying the technique to commercial photographs of movie stars, consumer goods, and news events in the early 1960s, the Pop artist subsequently silkscreened commissioned portraits based on Polaroids in the 1970s and 80s.

Although certain details of chronology remain murky, Warhol’s earliest silkscreen paintings just predate Rauschenberg’s and the former artist is widely credited with sparking the latter’s turn to the technique. We know that Rauschenberg visited Warhol’s studio on September 18, 1962, at which time he was shown silkscreen paintings of Marilyn Monroe as well as slightly earlier pictures in which hand-colored stencils and rubber stamps were used to create grids of imperfectly repeated images. Rauschenberg asked Warhol for the name of his commercial screen-maker (Aetna Silk Screen Products), from whom he ordered his first batch of silkscreens.

At virtually the same moment Rauschenberg started to make silkscreen paintings, the artist became Warhol’s pictorial subject. Warhol’s portraits of his fellow artist followed from Rauschenberg’s studio visit. The art critic David Bourdon, in attendance that evening, recalls the following exchange:

Warhol attempted to ingratiate himself with Rauschenberg by offering to make silkscreened portraits of him. All Rauschenberg had to do, Andy said, was to provide him with some photographs. Rauschenberg was enthusiastic about the project and immediately began to discuss what kinds of photographs would be suitable.¹³

Rauschenberg provided Warhol with five photographs ranging in date and format from a recent image of the artist alone to a childhood photograph of his family in Port Arthur, Texas. The latter image, repeated more than fifty times in a sepia-toned grid, served as the source for Warhol's painting *Let us Now Praise Famous Men* (1962). Warhol's title cites that of a 1941 book by James Agee and Walker Evans documenting the experience of Alabama sharecroppers during the Great Depression. Rauschenberg's photograph of his family grimly posed against the backdrop of a clapboard house under a cloudless sky recalls Evans's sober images of tenant farmers and their families from the same period.

Warhol produced ten silkscreen paintings based on Rauschenberg's photographs, including several featuring the face and torso of the artist, repeated and color-saturated in the manner of one of Warhol's movie star portraits. The Rauschenberg series marked Warhol's first silkscreened portrait of a fellow artist or, indeed, of anyone he knew first-hand. Might his striking, electric blue *Triple Rauschenberg* (1962) be taken as an emblem of the shared artistic technique in which the two artists were now engaged?

Rauschenberg would never use the silkscreen method to produce an individual or family portrait nor would he confine any of his paintings to a single theme or iconographic source. Rather than following Warhol's approach of serializing the same picture within a gridded format, Rauschenberg scattered multiple images of varying scale, color, and legibility across the canvas, which he further overlaid with oil paint. By contrast to Warhol's insistence on a single image repeated in the same orientation throughout the composition, Rauschenberg disorients his imagery by flipping, obscuring, overlaying, or otherwise distressing it.

13

Cited in George Frei and Neil Printz, eds., *The Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 1, *Paintings and Sculpture 1961–1963*, London, Phaidon, 2001, no. 300, p. 267 (illustrated on p. 265).

Warhol's counterexample helps clarify the special interpretive challenge posed by Rauschenberg's silkscreens. In the lines above, I have focused on the most prominent visual motifs in various paintings, whether a three-quarter-length view of JFK or a congregation of street signs. Such motifs carry a piece of the recognizable world but they do not stand as a coherent narrative or puzzle to be deciphered. Rauschenberg asks us to attend to subject matter, to the specificity of reference, without construing it as the master key through which his work may be unlocked or fully explained. The blank spots, moments of inscrutability, overlap, abstraction, and inversion are the meaning of Rauschenberg's silkscreens no less than the external references and recognizable people, places, and things captured on their surface.

Express [fig. 5], one of the works Rauschenberg displayed at the Venice Biennale to prizewinning effect, provides a vivid example. The composition is replete with human figures including dancers from the Merce Cunningham troupe in rehearsal, mountain climbers scaling a cliff, a horse and rider jumping over a hurdle, a stop motion photograph of a nude woman in motion that strongly evokes Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912), and, at lower right and slightly more difficult to discern, a U.S. Civil War photograph of Generals Grant and Lee shaking hands at Appomattox as the South formally surrendered. While Rauschenberg himself took the picture of the dancers, the other photographic imagery in the work is appropriated—the nude from *Life* magazine, for example, and the mountain climbers from a U.S. army recruiting advertisement. These figurative images are variously overlaid, partially obscured, and adjacent to painted brushstrokes. The painting is entirely black and white save for a slender, red rectangle of paint at the top of the canvas, just right of center. The rectangle provides a punch of color that simultaneously interrupts and highlights the black and white expanse of the rest of the work.



fig. 5
Robert Rauschenberg
Express, 1963
Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas,
184.2 × 305.2 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid, 721 (1974.34)
[\[+ info\]](#)

Rauschenberg's earliest silkscreen paintings were entirely black and white, his later ones featured multiple, vibrant colors. *Express*, with its lone red rectangle, marks a pivot point between the two. Beyond posing color against black and white, *Express* sparks a series of dialogues that remain in flux rather than fixed. These include dialogues between abstraction and figuration, photography and painting, movement and stillness, singularity and uniformity, the past (e.g. the U.S. Civil War) and the present (e.g. the Cunningham dance troupe).

Express requires us to move close to the work to take in its detailed, multiform imagery, then step back to consider its whirling composition as a whole. The large size of the work in combination with its intricate variations of imagery and abstraction make it difficult to capture in reproduction.

fig. 6
Ugo Mulas, *Transfer of Rauchenberg's Express at the Venice Biennale, 1964*, gelatin silver print. Courtesy Archivio Ugo Mulas, Milan



This raises a compelling paradox: a silkscreen painting that showcases photo-based imagery largely eludes the power of the camera to reproduce it.

Largely but not entirely. Consider a photograph of art handlers moving *Express* to the Giardini, the primary space of exhibition, at the 1964 Venice Biennale [fig. 6]. Off the wall, on the move, and seen in relation to the scale of the human body, the painting's grandeur and dynamism become more palpable. The horse and rider seem ready to gallop off the left side of the composition while the nude woman, should she continue her journey, would step right out of the painting. The vertical mountain climbers reorient the picture so that our gaze ascends vertically. One of the climbers is cut off by the lower margin of the work and therefore seems to be entering the composition from outside. When we see the painting in a way that captures full scale against its imagery, *Express* all but jumps, dances, and climbs before our eyes.

The majesty and dynamism of *Express* make it all the more startling that Rauschenberg had his silkscreens burned shortly after the Biennale. The over six dozen screen paintings he made between 1962 and 1964 stand as an intensive, though severely limited, artistic experiment. That experiment animated but was never duplicated in the artist's future work.

In works like *Express*, Rauschenberg combined everyday photographs, brushstrokes of paint, and a commercial method of visual reproduction to create something spectacular. The dynamism and grandeur of the silkscreen paintings belong not only to the artist. When we see one of his pictures, we break free of received meanings and visual restrictions. We are invited to join a pictorial world that is on the move. Our destination is, marvelously, unknown. ●