

Art History Paper
CANYON

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"Canyon" (1959) is a combine painting by Robert Rauchenberg reflecting the highly developed perceptual lexicon of twentieth century Western culture. The perceptual lexicon of the twentieth century has evolved through the barrage of visual and verbal images called mass communication. Newspapers are one of the primary tools of mass communication and Robert Rauchenberg's interest in them as a medium is telling. The business of mass communication has explored methods of reaching and expanding its audience. For this reason advertizers and entertainers have devoted a great deal of time to understanding the range of human perceptual abilities. Rauchenberg, working as an artist, has also made himself an explorer of human perceptive ability.

Western culture has for many centuries operated on a tradition of rational order. The Italian Renaissance saw the apex of rational order manifested in art, science and philosophy. A reasoned approach to life's mysteries has, like any sacred belief, been questioned throughout history. However in the twentieth century the overwhelming capacity for creation and destruction, especially in modern warfare, has created a nervous apprehension which has shaken society to its core. An obsession with intellectual supremacy has in part given way to a fascination with chance. Chance, or random choice, has a logical appearance akin to the rational

order it has in part supplanted. Chance often implies a lack of human determination, but this is not the reality with which the artist is concerned. The artist who deals with chance is in effect seeking the unrealized potential of a moment's inner cognition. This form of chance is not frivolous or effortless; it requires sensitivity and discipline in order to produce a manifestation of insight. Some examples of artists who have dealt with chance since World War II might include Jackson Pollack whose dripped paintings evolved in process. Also Wilhelm De Kooning and Hellen Frankenthaler who developed their own personal vocabulary of form and color from a personal inner source. The complex artistic pursuits of Marcel Duchamp were often realized with precise intellectual consideration, but he was also concerned with redefining the limitations of art when he chose and developed his 'readymades' as objects of chance. A realization of the presence and force of the subconscious has formed the basis for an acceptance of the chance modality which is, in many ways, a manifestation of subconscious propensities.

The mature work of Robert Rauchenberg, which can be dated from the early nineteen fifties, reflects his culture's preoccupation with the dissemination of information. One thrust of his work is to present a profusion of intriguing

images and ideas generated by his contemporary society. Rauchenberg's palette consists of any mass-produced or readily available materials. The images are generally self-contained and, the way they are applied in the works, they often maintain an individuation within those works. Rauchenberg disguises his careful arrangement of the elements in a work and thereby mimics the effect of random impressions inherent in an experience like watching television, reading a newspaper or walking down a busy city street. Rauchenberg's work insists that the viewer absorb and experience the sensory overload that the viewer is used to tuning out¹.

Rauchenberg grew up in Port Arthur, Texas where he was largely unaware of art as a professional pursuit. It was in the Navy (around 1944) that he had his first exposure to paintings in a gallery context. When he decided to seriously study art, he spent time at Kansas City Art Institute (1946-1947), in Paris (1947) and eventually he found his way to the highly stimulating Black Mountain College (1948-50) in North Carolina. At Black Mountain he studied under the strict discipline of Joseph Albers and struggled to find the best personal direction for his work.

While at Black Mountain Rauchenberg was prolific and controversial with his work. His all-white paintings and then all-black paintings were a part of the body of work he

produced between 1948 and 1950. He also did a collaboration performance piece with John Cage at that time. Though Rauchenberg's paintings from this period bear comparison with the monochromatic paintings by Yves Klein, the intellectual direction Rauchenberg was pursuing opposed the Western tradition in art which called for clear-cut order and definition. It would seem that Rauchenberg grasped his culture's attraction to the Bauhaus philosophy of simplicity and truth in form following function. However his work reflects what might be seen as the other side, perhaps even the dark side of a social personality which moves without reserve or control whichever way the wind blows. Rauchenberg was unable to meet any accepted standards with his work. In the long run he reordered the standards of acceptability in the same ways that Marcel Duchamp and Jasper Johns had done. Visual analogy of the work of Rauchenberg, Johns and Duchamp exhibits intense philosophic and technical differences and it is this individuality and unconnectedness which unites their goals as artists. The work of these three artists stands for a new direction in art which more than ever before in art depends on personal visual and intellectual equations that comprise the content of the work. The impact of their self-directed styles has snowballed in the work of contemporary artists of the late twentieth century.

The influence of Picasso and later De Kooning is seen in the gestural bravura of Rauchenberg's work. While it is true that Picasso worked with found objects whose reality as objects assumed a dual identity (as in his baboon with the toy car head), Rauchenberg has made the role of the object far more vital and self-important. Rauchenberg's work overflows with a seemingly random content which is brilliant in its disquieting, confused qualities.

A viewer approaching "Canyon" might find himself at first horrified and finally mesmerized by the work. "Canyon" is one of a series of combines, so named by the artist, and dating from 1954. The combines are the result of working with materials and ideas which couldn't be contained on a two-dimensional surface as a painting traditionally exists. The combines are collages in the sense that they are an assemblage of diverse two- and three-dimensional materials. The levels on which these fragments come together and operate is unlike the traditional formal use of collage. A person who is able to see something of what Rauchenberg is thinking and doing in the work sees something very different from someone who is casually observing as they pass by. In a society where incessant visual data is being provided, the tendency to select only what can be easily dealt with is natural. In the work of Rauchenberg this treatment might

cause the viewer to dismiss much of what he sees as incoherent and not much fun. The game-playing of Rauchenberg's visual puzzles is such that no set approach seems to work. Rauchenberg is always challenging himself to challenge the viewer's ability to see. He uses contradictory devices within a work which might make the viewer uncomfortable. The viewer may well leave the piece in confusion. But Rauchenberg seems to be trying to achieve the same effect of a clever advertisement with a strong impact that won't go away. A shocking image which continues to call itself to mind is what he is confronting one with. Some of Rauchenberg's works are more successful than others when subjected to close scrutiny. "Canyon" is one of these. The more successful combines introduce new perceptual possibilities to the viewer. These possibilities are evident in the content which is unreadable in any familiar context. The unreadable context of the combines forms the basis for reevaluating their intricacies.

In "Canyon" balance is derived through the use of three vertical rectangles of nearly equal proportions contrasted by a large horizontal rectangle across the bottom third of the painting. The disproportionately wide dimension of this horizontal rectangle is "held in" by the lesser width of the eagle's wingspread, the dark cavernous shadow created by the

bird and the arching "ceiling" of painted form above the bird. The nearly square shape of the canvas is both echoed and denied throughout the work. It is echoed in the small photographic image of a child in a pool which is all the way to the left and in the middle of the canvas. Also the large flat rusted metal in the upper right-hand corner. And finally the three-dimensional squared cardboard box on which the eagle is perched. There is an echo created by the repetition of the square elements and their rhythm moves the viewer's eye around the composition. The denial of the squareness of the painting is evident in the strong horizontal abyss from which the eagle seems to be emerging. The expanding aura is further suggested by the newsprint picture of outer space and several brightly shining planets.

Space in "Canyon" is presented in solid painted forms. The color scheme has a subtle influence on the forms as the painting has a somber overall color. The most lucid forms of the painting melt as the presence of first the eagle and box and then parts of a painted overshirt, photographs, bits of wallpaper, and posters all appear beneath these painted forms.

In "Canyon" large areas of monochromatic blacks, whites and grays are accented by quick notations of red, green, blue and yellow. A warm white is sparingly used to frame

several photographs. The lack of color intensity not only makes the painting somber, it makes it less attractive to the senses. The experienced viewer might expect to be led to some understanding of harmony and form by the color in the painting. In "Canyon" the color is indeed a key, but it is a different kind of key. The color is setting the mood for what is ultimately the haunting, cold, even ravaging content of the work.

The heterogeneous elements in "Canyon" operate on a number of very different levels. Seen at close range, for example, a painted-over image of the Statue of Liberty might be seen as an image of freedom. From a distance the details of this photograph melt and the strength of other images like the eagle dominate the composition. From a distant vantage the Statue of Liberty photograph is a patch of powder blue almost cloudlike in its texture. In another passage of the work close examination reveals a line of small round objects along the left-hand side of the rusted metal square. These objects are rapidly discerned as buttons and then the standard placket to which they are attached and then just as rapidly a shirt collar appears and yet this obvious evidence of the mass-produced standard men's shirt is just barely emerging from the involved compositional elements of the central vertical rectangles of "Canyon". The

viewer is further confused when, in the left-hand rectangle, a shirt sleeve appears and is equally overwhelmed and buried under other elements of the painting. At this point the viewer knows he is playing a visual game. Though the intellect of the game seems guileless and offhand, close consideration makes any other arrangement of the painting's elements ineffectual.

Perhaps the most powerful section of the painting is the bottom third which contains the strong horizontal rectangle. As the flat two-dimensional elements of the upper portion of the painting are related to the strikingly three-dimensional elements of the eagle, pillow, lumber and box, the significance of the shirt and tin take on new meaning. These flattened forms were once three-dimensional and now they are merely allusions to their volumetric forms. This meaning is augmented in the juxtaposition of the eagle and the pillow. The eagle is poised "in flight" and the impotence of its reality is striking. The pillow, whose reality is near weightlessness in comparison to its volume, seems to pull the piece of lumber down to its slightly diagonal configuration. The pillow is tied around its middle making no secret of its easy mollification. There is no refinement in the way the rope attaches to the piece of lumber and this seemingly careless treatment adds to the overall discordance

of the work. The vision of the eagle is further demeaned by the intellectual reality that it is nothing more than a precise configuration of feathers while below it hangs an encasement of a random jumble of feathers with a far more utilitarian function. In this way "Canyon" calls into question the patriotic symbolism of freedom and strength in American society. Further, the strength of order and rationality is demolished in context of this powerful combine².

The exercise and extension of one's perceptive ability is the result of a meaningful encounter with art. The question of beauty is likewise linked to that meaningful experience. On the surface beauty does not seem to be a part of a work like "Canyon", just as the content of the work is illusive. But what is beauty if not a communication of truth as it is perceived by an individual? "Canyon" is a representation of the intensity and consistency of Robert Rauchenberg's work. The work probes the reality of Rauchenberg's society and how that society sees itself. It often questions the solidity of the principles on which the society is based. At the same time the work operates within the boundaries of visual language and knowledge. It reflects many questions as they become part of the culture. The work illustrates the desirability of absolutes and also the absurdity of them. Rauchenberg does not do away with rational order; he illus-

trates a segment of the evolution of that order. Random choice becomes a kind of rational order at the point that the viewer reevaluates what he is seeing³.

Biography

Born Port Arthur TX. Oct. 22, 1925. Graduate High School 1942; 1/2 yr. at U. of TX.; 2 1/2 yrs. US Navy Neuropsychiatric Tech.; relocate family now living Lafayette LA; move to Los Angeles, move to Kansas City KCAI 1946-47; Paris 1947 Academie Julian; met Sue Weil Paris, Black Mountain College; North Carolina 1940-1950 study with Albers learned photo; contact with music and modern dance; "felt too isolated"¹, moved NYC with Sue Weil; Art Student League; 1950 marriage Sue Weil; Summer Outer Island Conn.; 1951 son Christopher NYC; First One Man Show, Betty Parsons; 2 accidental fires destroy most of work; divorced 1951, Italy with CY Twombly also Casablanca, Fr., Sp., Morocco; return Rome; show of box constructions thrown in Arno at critics suggestion; 1952 NYC loft Fulton St.; growing dirt paintings; Show paintings black and white; close friends dancers and musicians Merce Cunningham; 1953 red paintings, comic strips, lights and reflectors, 1956 show Egan Gall, Charlene last red painting; living earned free lance displays for Gene Moore; "began series in "crowd" color, insisting the object material keep its identity, paintings became awkward physically, began being free standing: combines stuffed animals, bed, shoes";

¹All quotes from autobiography in: Rauchenberg, Andrew Forge, Harry N. Abrams, New York 1965

wrote music, never performed; moved studio to Pearl St.,
Jasper Johns in same building, Johns paints first flag;
"it would be hard to imagine my work at that time without
his (Johns) encouragement, John Cage also generous source of
inspiration"; 1958 start Dante's Inferno drawings, 2 1/2 yrs.
34 drawings, Florida for 6 mos. for isolation and concentra-
tion; director light and design for Merce Cunningham; 1958
touring with company becomes important added dimension in
life; "the responsibilities and trust which are essential in
cooperative art because the most important and satisfying
element in my life worked positively with the privateness
and loneliness of painting"; "Carolyn Brown, Viola Farber
and Steve Paxton inspired me to the challenge of deserving
their love and confidence"; first one man show in Europe;
performance piece "Pelican" Washington DC; 1963 Jewish Mus-
eum Show; more dance collaboration pieces; first prize Vienna
Biennial 1964; work on lithographs; 1974 involvement Gemini
G.E.L.; work done in China late 1970's 1977 Mayors Award of
Honor and Culture NYC; 1/4 Mile Painting early 1980's.

Footnotes

¹Calvin Tompkins, Off the Wall, (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1980) My ideas were influenced by Tompkin's interpretation of Rauchenberg's development.

²Rudolf Arnheim, Art and Visual Perception, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954) My interpretation of Rauchenberg's use of perceptual devices was clarified by Arnheim's discussion of perception.

³Andrew Forge, Rauchenberg, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1975) My understanding of Rauchenberg's work was augmented by Forge's text.

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7. Krauss, Rosalind. "Rauchenberg and the Materialized Image"; Artforum, December, '74.