

Harvey, Doug. "A full serving of Rauschenberg, with a side of Youngblood and Hundley."
LA WEEKLY, 24 May 2006.

In 1943, a young sailor named Milton on furlough from his duties in the psych ward at Camp Pendleton wandered into the Huntington Library in San Marino and stood stock-still, transfixed by the aesthetic epiphany of seeing Gainsborough's *The Blue Boy* and Lawrence's *Pinkie* in the flesh. He remembered having seen them reproduced on packs of playing cards back home in Port Arthur, Texas. "It sounds corny," Milton later recalled, "but my moment of realization that there was such a thing as being an artist happened right there."

Ten years later, Milton Rauschenberg had changed his name to Bob and the seed planted by that unholy marriage of male and female *über-kitsch* archetypes, having passed through an art history wormhole called *Erased de Kooning*, spawned an outpouring of virtuosic and revolutionary visual artifacts unsurpassed in the history of 20th-century visual culture. Rauschenberg's "Combines" — collagey, rigorously sensual paintings that erupted into the third dimension with the attachment of functioning light bulbs, rows of Coke bottles and, most famously, a taxidermied Angora goat with an old tire encircling its torso — derailed the juggernaut of smug elitism that was the decaying New York School with an upsurge of joyous populist pastiche that was as informationally complex as *Finnegans Wake* and as sensually ravishing as Satyajit Ray's *Apu Trilogy*.

Although widely acknowledged as the most influential and controversial body of work in Rauschenberg's ongoing oeuvre (the artist, in spite of a debilitating stroke early in 2002, continues to work), the Combines have never been the subject of an in-depth museum survey — until now. MOCA's "Robert Rauschenberg Combines" deploys 70 of the sprawling works (10 of which were not included in the show's debut at the Met in New York, although several signal pieces — the infamous *Bed* and the exquisite *Charlene* among them — were also lost in the translation) in chronological order across half the museum. This matter-of-fact format allows the subtle strategic shifts that cumulatively transformed the subdued formalist lyricism of works like *Red Interior* into the raucous confrontational exuberance of *Monogram* (the goatwork) to emerge gradually, in an almost narrative fashion.

Which is entirely appropriate, for as much as anything, the individual Combines are records of their own making. The deliberate, often roughly systematic accumulation of component photos, comic pages, children's drawings, bills of lading and other paper ephemera; the self-consciously casual, faux-arbitrary application of paint; and the over-the-top spatial play conjured by the dangling and jutting scraps of urban detritus all serve to draw attention to the controlled improvisational decision-making process of Rauschenberg's virtuosic compositions. It's made patently clear in the periodically reunited *Factum I* and *Factum II* (owned by MOCA and MoMA, respectively), which re-creates the same seemingly random cascade of calendar pages, news photos and drippy paint marks in two nearly identical canvases.

This performative aspect of the Combines is a key undercurrent. It's often forgotten that Rauschenberg was also an important figure in the development of performance art, and he regularly collaborated with dance companies, particularly that of Merce Cunningham. The exhibit, and Rauschenberg's Combine period in fact, opens with *Minutiae*, a freestanding multipanel explosion of primary colors that was commissioned by Cunningham for a 1954 dance of the same name. About halfway through, one encounters *First Time Painting*, created onstage at a "concert" in honor of composer/pianist David Tudor at the American Embassy in Paris in 1961. Alongside other simultaneous entertainments, Rauschenberg painted the canvas in a position so that the audience couldn't see, although it was rigged with contact mikes to amplify the sounds of its creation. When an alarm clock attached to the surface went off, an assistant helped the artist wrap the painting up, still unseen, and carry it off to end the concert.

Gold Standard from 1964 closes the show, and was created under even more absurd circumstances — Rauschenberg was ostensibly being interviewed on Japanese television, but rather than respond to any of the translated questions, he simply began attaching an array of bric-a-brac (shoes, another alarm clock, a Coke bottle . . .) to a traditional gold folding screen. The frustrated interviewer had the translator write out a question on a sheet of paper and hand it to the artist, who immediately added it to the mix, where its unanswered plea, "If someone paints a Marilyn Monroe portrait on canvas they say it is a creative act, and if I paint *Mona Lisa* they say it is an imitation. Why?," remains dangling plaintively to this day.

Good question, though. Just what is it that makes Rauschenberg's piles of junk so different, so appealing? For one thing, the patent, LOL ridiculousness of many of Rauschenberg's juxtapositions was the first significant rupture in the high (and highly paranoid) seriousness of the AbEx generation (de Kooning excepted, of course) and opened the path for Pop, Arte Povera and the layered psychedelic complexities of European artists like Sigmar Polke and Oyvind Fahlstrom. But if you look at the other end of the spectrum of influence, the thousands of artists who — to this day — try and fail to replicate the apparent ease of Rauschenberg's offhand brilliance, any whiff of my-kid-could-do-that evaporates instantly.

What remains is an encyclopedic template for operating in what the artist famously described as "the gap between art and life." Again and again, Rauschenberg invites us to awaken into a creative, transformational sensory engagement with everyday life. It's an invitation that remains as valid and urgent as it was 40 years ago, when he made the first Combine, and 30 years ago, when he made the last. And you don't have to look far for proof. Across town in Westwood, two of the young artists who were included in last September's First Annual L.A. Weekly Biennial have work on view that shows how utterly contemporary Rauschenbergian strategies can be.

You'll have to hurry down to UCLA's Kinross Building to catch Brenna Youngblood's MFA thesis show, which technically ends today (though it may be up another day or two), but if you're familiar with her primarily photo-collagist work from the *Weekly* show or her subsequent project at the Hammer, you'll be shocked by the sudden and powerful outburst of painterly nuance in these new large-scale works. And speaking of the

Hammer, Elliott Hundley has transformed the always-challenging “vault” project gallery with an array of his exquisite, intricate accumulations of tiny, mostly pin-mounted fragments of photographs, illustrations, plastic flower parts, cocktail umbrellas, etc., clinging in clusters to scraps of distressed fiberboard or monstrous kite skeletons of bamboo and doweling. Both Hundley and Youngblood pursue Rauschenberg’s risky balancing act between symbolic and formalist modes of visual communication, between chaos and control, between the mundane and the sublime. It’s an awesome combination.