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Vast look at major visionary

By Charles Desmarais

More or less midway through the exhibition "Robert Rauschenberg: Erasing the Rules," one comes upon "Autobiography," made in 1968. It is large — at 16½ feet high but only 4 feet wide, too unwieldy to reproduce accurately except as a four-page foldout in the catalog. Regardless of its scale, though, it is no match in presence for the exuberant, irreverent, radiant works that literally pop off their canvas supports throughout the rest of this ever-lively presentation. Still,

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Robert Rauschenberg's "Bed" (1955) is part of the "Erasing the Rules" exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

SFMOMA’s vast look at Rauschenberg

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if it’s not a showstopper, it is a key that might be used to unlock the major themes of the exhibition.

“Erasing the Rules” opens Saturday, Nov. 18, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and continues through March 25. It’s enormous — the checklist runs to 170 objects — but, unlike the vast Walker Evans show also on view at SFMOMA, it is varied and well paced.

Despite an edition of 2,000 impressions, “Autobiography” is not as well known as the artist’s multiple “Booster” (1967, edition 38). The two are both self-portraits and share certain visual elements. But “Autobiography” was offset printed (the same process used to produce a newspaper) by a billboard company, and it looks it; “Booster” was made by the more vivid stone lithography process, with screen-printed color additions.

That’s important in the context of Rauschenberg’s work. It reveals two seemingly contradictory attitudes toward the art object. One is basically conceptual — focused on the idea, with a kind of “get it done and get it out there” stance, coupled with an openness to using a new tool that would make a really big picture. The other, though also technically innovative, is rooted in the visual pleasures of tone, color and subtle detail.

A negotiation between these two ways of working, conceptual and formal, is evident throughout the artist’s career, and it is highlighted by astute curatorial choices all the way through the show. The first rooms of the chronologically arranged exhibition reveal just how early Rauschenberg made some of his most profoundly original moves.

Alongside some very good photographs, collages and boxed assemblages that owe a debt to Joseph Cornell, we come upon the utterly original 1953 work “Erased de Kooning Drawing.” It is an argument for drawing as a thought process, not a technique: To put down a mark is no more significant a decision as to take one away.

It was also, of course, a challenge. The 1951 “White Painting [three panel]” (which is just that) leaves us to discover the gestures of chance — a scratch, a scuff, a variation in the warp and weft of canvas — and the shapes and colors of shadows and reflections. Beyond its Zen-like concept, it also implies ridicule of the passionate artistic signatures of de Kooning and the Abstract Expressionist generation that preceded Rauschenberg, then 26.

Black paintings, red paintings, paintings composed of gold and of earth; a long, inky “Automobile Tire Print” on 20 sheets of paper; “Elemental Structures” of found stone, wood and metal: The early ‘50s were a fertile time intellectually for the young artist.

By the time the exhibition reaches 1954, though, we see him break away from controlled thought experiments and simplified forms to include a new raw material: the image. For Rauschenberg, the image might be a photograph or reproduction from a magazine, or it might be an actual object — a chair, a bed quilt and pillow, an Angora goat with a car tire around its belly. Narrative at their source, the images carry with them a host of denotations and associations. At the same time, collaged, collapsed, overlapped or overpainted, they can



Photos by © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation



Above: Robert Rauschenberg’s “Collection” (1954-55), part of the “Erasing the Rules” exhibition. Left: “Erased de Kooning Drawing” (1953) is an argument for drawing as a thought process, not a technique. Above: “Monogram” (1955-59)

become independent formal elements, unchained from (or, at least, less tightly shackled to) their sources in the world.

Released from the boundaries of Abstract Expressionism as a defined movement, Rauschenberg became free to borrow the intensity of its non-rational vocabulary. He adopted a vigorous, muscular use of paint and color suited to his newly invented forms.

And here is where we see Rauschenberg’s most significant impact on the art and artists that came afterward. Marcel Duchamp had charted a course away from merely “retinal” art. The Abstract Expressionists had re-depicted emotion as an operation of the subconscious. Rauschenberg resolved the tension between these two great 20th century energies by combining them.

Rauschenberg, in fact, called the works he was making at this juncture “combines,” a word generally interpreted to mean combinations of painting and sculpture, but which I take to also mean a more elemental

Robert Rauschenberg: Erasing the Rules: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Fridays-Tuesdays; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays. Saturday, Nov. 18-March 25. \$19-\$25; ages 18 and younger free. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., S.F. (415) 357-4000. www.sfmoma.org

fusion, with all its explosive implications. “Collection,” “Bed” and “Monogram,” all made in the years around 1955, stand as monuments of the art of the past century — as transmutations emerged from that reaction.

Parallel activities in dance and performance, generally in partnership with such close friends as John Cage, Merce Cunningham and others, added music and movement to his scope.

The marriage of concept and form might alone secure a central place for Rauschenberg artistically, but there was another apparent opposition to be resolved. That would be what we often see as an inviolable

boundary between the public and the private. His use of images from magazines, newspapers and other popular media might make one think of such Pop artists as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and others working at the same time.

But Rauschenberg was more revealing of his personal and emotional life than we generally assume the Pop artists to be. He certainly touched on social and political issues in works like “Retroactive I” (1964), made in the year after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. But as “Erasing the Rules” makes clear, the images often had deeply personal meaning to the artist as well.

Friends and lovers show up repeatedly in pictorial references and in communal art projects, many of which are nicely documented in the exhibition with supplemental video and photographs. Other personally meaningful images and what the curators call “coded references” to his life and loves as a gay man abound.

Which brings us back to

“Autobiography,” that tall and plain midpoint of the exhibition. Beyond that gallery is a range of engaging art, which becomes increasingly formal and, frequently, a recapitulation of earlier ideas. New processes make the work easier and faster to fabricate.

But here, at the center of the exhibition, is an artistic totem. At the top, a full-body X-ray of the artist is overlaid with his astrological chart. Wheels and umbrellas, which abound in Rauschenberg’s art, refer to one of Duchamp’s best-known works, perhaps, or slyly suggest the sexual. A photograph, taken from a performance, of Rauschenberg on roller skates, wearing an open parachute, anchors the work at the bottom.

And, at the center, a spiraling biographical text ends with a simple self-description: “A responsible man working in the present.”

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