

Art in America

The World's Premier Art Magazine

By Claire Wolf Krantz
November 2006

This 25-year retrospective of Robert Rauschenberg's career comprised 49 glowing watercolor paintings and graphite drawings. His images depict men's heads transformed by fragments of foliage or plumage into strange and fantastic masklike forms. Ranging in scale from 2 inches square to 40 by 50 inches, the works reflect his personal engagement with birds and flowers. While his earlier works express a certain sexuality and violence, his recent paintings have become more portraitlike but no less wildly imaginative. Long associated with the Chicago Imagists, Rauschenberg also writes richly evocative poems, several of which were shown with the works.

The exhibition examined Rauschenberg's methodology by displaying 31 preliminary sketches and paint swatches as well as studies for 18 larger paintings; the studies are finished works in themselves. It's interesting to see all the decisions that went into the final works. His technique is unusual: tiny strokes of opaque watercolor paint are built up on heavy paper to create precise, seemingly static pictures of fantastical creatures. Yet a closer look reveals compositional choices and color relationships that animate the pictures. In *Red Masdevallia* (2004), the vibrant purple nose and green crestlike hair and the opposing thrusts of two red flower petals add a dynamic energy to the entire configuration.

Although his basic imagery has remained similar throughout his career, Rauschenberg continues to experiment with his technique and to deepen the pictures' emotional content as the colors become richer and more beautiful, the shapes of the flowers more alluring, and the birds' beaks and crests more assertive. In his earlier works, the foliage, flower petals or birdlike features seem added on to the heads, whereas in the later works these elements have been so skillfully integrated into the human features that the faces appear to belong to an entirely different species, both gorgeous and terrible, and exerting a strange attraction.

Until lately, Rauschenberg's brilliant colors were influenced by several trips to Mexico, where he photographed birds and flowers. Recent visits to Thailand have led to modifications in both color and subject matter: in some works, the colors are less flamboyant and the heads elongate into the shapes of Thai stupas. In *Lepanthes--After Thailand* (2000), a vinelike rope is tightly wound around the head, causing the flesh to crinkle, its tip piercing the cheek. Providing a counterpoint to the implied brutality of the image, the face sprouts a beautiful orchid from its nose and cheek.

Rauschenberg's paintings are simultaneously grotesque and beautiful, the amalgam of man and nature so perfect and so disquieting in its implications that we are drawn to examine them closely and to remember them vividly. [The exhibition traveled to the Chicago Cultural Center, July 29-Sept. 24.]

COPYRIGHT 2006 Brant Publications, Inc.