

# GLADSTONE

Robert Rauschenberg

*Arcanums*

September 21 - November 2, 2024

Opening Reception: September 21, 5pm – 7pm

130 East 64<sup>th</sup> Street

New York, NY 10065

In collaboration with the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, Gladstone presents an exhibition of Rauschenberg's *Arcanum* series (1979). Derived from the Latin word for secret, *arcanus*, the title of these artworks and this exhibition underscores Rauschenberg's ongoing fascination with the esoteric aspects of both the spiritual and physical worlds. The drawings in the series explore the fragmented and layered nature of thought and communication, demonstrating Rauschenberg's instinctual ability to transpose the human experience into his artistic practice.

Since the beginning of the artist's career, Rauschenberg's work has been rooted in experimentation and pushed boundaries across a myriad of media. Resisting conventional modalities and avoiding association with a singular historical movement or style, he was guided by an ideology that intersected art and life. In a 1989 interview, he was asked "How would you describe the importance of the metaphysical, the transcendental content of art?" to which he replied, "I don't think you can separate them. The object of art is to not separate those things. You don't make an icon for either of them. You just indulge in the process of putting them together."<sup>1</sup> Rauschenberg's practice was centered around looking beyond the sole possibilities apparent in real-world objects, deftly bringing together an expanse of ideas that contend with the interplay of mysticism and technological innovation within his work.

In the late 1960s, after an astrologer advised him to "head for the water and the sun," Rauschenberg frequented trips to Captiva, Florida, a remote island off the coast where he would eventually relocate his residence and studio from New York in 1970. Captiva became a major source of inspiration for the artist, who continued to integrate found objects and readymade materials into his later works. Fabric was a key material in Rauschenberg's *Arcanum* series. While Rauschenberg had used fabric in his earlier works, his new drawings were invigorated by the richly colored cloth that inspired him during his visit to a textile center in Ahmedabad, India in 1975. Expanding the potential of recognizable imagery across artistic mediums and forms, Rauschenberg transferred images depicting religious iconography, natural phenomena, popular culture, symbolic diagrams, and architectural monuments onto his drawings. This imagery was incorporated into his drawings using a solvent transfer technique, where a printed source is treated with a solvent, placed face down, and then the image is transferred through pressing. The resulting images are low-resolution and fragmented, and Rauschenberg further obscured the legibility of the initial image by adding grids and meshes of fabric, and layers of pencil, gouache, and watercolor. This process, both mechanical and spiritual, reflects the artist's desire to connect with the incomprehensible and communicate the sublime.

Rauschenberg's work examines the complexities of human perception and understanding, often juxtaposing handmade and machine-made imagery and techniques. In the *Arcanum* drawings, the artist's compositions attempt to define a symbiotic relationship between art and technology using imagery drawn from mass media. The source imagery communicates more than the fragments transposed on the works, reflecting Rauschenberg's emphasis on the process of connecting objects and ideas—glimpses of technological innovation contrast with decorative illustrations of architecture and old master paintings within his abundant visual fields. A sense of relevance permeates these works as Rauschenberg integrates images into his drawings of contemporary advancements and digital tools from scientific magazines and newspapers. The *Arcanum* series manifests Rauschenberg's enduring dedication to capturing the elusive relationship between images and ideas in his work, underscoring his relentless pursuit of understanding and innovation throughout his career.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Rauschenberg, quoted 13 September 1989, Captiva, Florida, in *Art Meets Science and Spirituality in a Changing Economy* (The Hague: SDU Publishers, 1990), p. 45.

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A catalog featuring an essay by Jennifer Higbie accompanies the exhibition.

## Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008)

Born on October 22, 1925 in Port Arthur, Texas, Robert Rauschenberg worked in what he called the gap between art and life. Over the course of his sixty-year career, Rauschenberg's art embodied a spirit of experimentation with new materials and techniques. Dubbed an *enfant terrible* for his assemblages of urban detritus (the Combines of 1954–64), Rauschenberg engaged a radically minimal palette in the years following his 1970 decampment to Captiva Island in the Gulf of Mexico, off the Florida coast. Although he demurred from affiliations with any particular movement, he has been called a forerunner of essentially every postwar artistic development since Abstract Expressionism.

In addition to his own artmaking practice, Rauschenberg became an advocate for artists and the creative community at large. In September 1970, he founded *Change, Inc.*, a non-profit organization that helped artists with emergency expenses. From 1984–91, he personally funded the *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange* (ROCI), traveling to ten countries outside of the United States to spark cross-cultural dialogue through art.

Rauschenberg died on May 12, 2008 in his Captiva studio. His artistic legacy and his lifelong commitment to collaboration with artists, performers, writers, artisans, and engineers worldwide was recognized long before his death. His expansive artistic philosophy lives on through his highly innovative and influential work to the present day.

## Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation builds on the legacy of Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) who believed strongly that creative practitioners could serve as catalysts for social change. He shared his appreciation for chance and the everyday by seeking to act in the “gap” between art and life. He was also a gifted collaborator, breaking disciplinary boundaries by experimenting with scientists, performers, and visual artists. As such, the Foundation celebrates new and even untested ways of thinking and acting.

The Foundation promotes in-depth research and partnerships for staff, curators, critics, scholars, and students that open the artist's life and work to wider interpretation and understanding. Its philanthropic activities primarily support small to midsize arts and socially engaged organizations that are contrarian and experimental, even courageous, in driving towards equity. The Foundation holistically sustains the creative life and well-being of artists across the disciplines by providing for a range of needs including time to think during multi-week residencies, funding for new commissions, and emergency medical grants. The Foundation supports exhibitions, publications, and special projects across the globe that reflect Rauschenberg's joyful, responsive, and irreverent approach to making art while living an empathetic and meaningful life.

[Rauschenbergfoundation.org](http://Rauschenbergfoundation.org)

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