

GLADSTONE

Jan Avgikos, Robert Rauschenberg, *Artforum*, September 20, 2022

ARTFORUM



Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Venetian)*, 1973, cardboard, driftwood, fabric, 90 × 28 1/2 × 110". From the series "Venetians," 1972-73

Robert Rauschenberg

GLADSTONE GALLERY | WEST 24TH ST
MNUCHIN GALLERY

Just when you think you've fully parsed the historical significance of Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), more is revealed. Kudos to New York's Rauschenberg Foundation for collaborating with three exhibition spaces—Gladstone and Mnuchin Galleries in Manhattan, and Thaddaeus Ropac in Salzburg, Austria—to open the vaults on the artist's practice with a concentration of rarely shown works made between the 1970s and the 1990s, following his momentous move in 1970 from New York to Captiva Island, right off Florida's Gulf Coast.

The trove situates us at an important dividing line in his career. Rauschenberg's art had been emblematic of the gritty urbanism of New York and recorded, with exquisite aplomb, the sociopolitical pulse of mass culture. When he decamped to the remote barrier island, he didn't leave just personal circumstances behind. In effect, he walked away from America, too—or, rather, the hypermediated, chaotic, conflicted, glorious, and diverse America that had fueled his Pop art via the all-encompassing metropolitan hub. In a way, he was going back home, back to the Southern water world that he'd known as a boy growing up in Port Arthur, Texas; back to the distinctive smell of the briny salt air that mixes with undernotes of rot and decay. Perhaps a Proustian desire fueled his need to return to an Edenic realm of endless sun, sand, and sea—an urge that catalyzed a recuperation of fugitive freedoms he had once known and lost along the way. The seismic shift blew open a door to entirely new sensibilities and dispositions in his art, with emphasis on intimacy, pleasure, sensuality, and happiness.

These qualities are fully on display in the rarely presented "Venetians" series, 1972–73, and the equally obscure "Early Egyptians" series, 1973–74, both of which were on view at Gladstone. Cardboard became a primary material in these pieces because, as Rauschenberg once noted, it satisfied his desire for "waste and softness." The corrugated boxes from "Early Egyptians"—their surfaces encrusted with glue and Captiva sand—masquerade as ancient

artifacts. In one construction, a stack of sabulous containers is tethered by a rope to a driftwood stick that resembles a prow. Draped over the box barge, a sheer scarf appears almost to float in some languid breeze. . . . Could we be drifting on the Nile? And what about that red aura radiating from the work? Closer inspection reveals that bright-coral paint has been applied to the backside of the sculpture, bouncing off the white gallery wall it before which it stands, simulating a neon glow.

Throughout the “Venetians” series, weathered found objects function as undeniably authentic markers of times past. With them, Rauschenberg undertakes an archaeology of the material world, but what he ultimately activates is a psychic space primed to accommodate personal experience. We see it in *Sant’Agnese (Venetian)*, 1973, in which lengths of mosquito netting are attached to two chairs facing opposite directions and set roughly six feet apart, creating something that calls to mind a child’s fort, built from everyday household items—a place of protection, comfort, and, perhaps most important, *privacy*. This psychic space also appears in *Untitled (Venetian)*, 1973, a construction that presents a set of boxes skewered on a driftwood stick propped against the wall, and from which a lace panel cascades to the floor. The assembly calls to mind the proverbial white flag, but a decorative and frilly one that reads as being a bit “swish,” embodying a quality that, irony of ironies, dissuaded the queer artist and his former lover Jasper Johns from being too friendly with Andy Warhol (at least according to the Pop master himself), who was famously, to use a classic Britishism, “as camp as a row of tents.” One could also characterize Rauschenberg’s use of shimmering silk panels and drapes throughout the series “Jammer,” 1975–76, and “Hoarfrost,” 1974–76, which were on view at Mnuchin, as being pretty swish, too. Rauschenberg was always reticent about publicly discussing his sexuality, but the suppler aspects of these pieces connect across the decades with more contemporary Conceptual romantic works, such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s diaphanous blue silk-chiffon curtains (*“Untitled” [Loverboy]*, 1989), or Jim Hodges’s evanescent screenlike pieces constructed from silk flowers. Perhaps Rauschenberg’s escape from New York gave him the space and solitude necessary to grow as a thinker, maker, and person—to locate the desirable “softness” he found in a certain art material deep within himself and to embrace it unreservedly.

— *Jan Avgikos*