

Dear All,

I am writing more formally to follow up on the thank you note I sent out earlier, for your support of the acquisition of Rauschenberg's *Autobiography*, 1968.

It is a monumental and important work in many ways, and gives the Museum a classic and important statement by Robert Rauschenberg, arguably one of the most important American artists ever. The print records significant aspects of Rauschenberg's life at the age of forty-three, and was produced at a press founded by Rauschenberg, who was always interested in technology. He used a billboard press—the first fine art print to be produced on this scale and using this kind of press. *Autobiography* follows on a print he had done the year before at Gemini, in Los Angeles, *Booster*: the x-ray of his own skeleton in the top third of the *Autobiography* tryptich is the subject of *Booster*, which, given Rauschenberg's height (5'10") and its reproduction on a one-to-one scale, was the largest lithograph ever pulled. This is no surprise: Rauschenberg is, after all, one of the most prolific and inventive printmakers ever.

Rauschenberg permitted the print to be exhibited side-by-side but he preferred seeing it vertically—which AD&AM is very lucky to be able to do so—so few museums have galleries with 16 foot heights! The vertical makes a lot of sense to me, and one way I read the print is as a series of images having to do with water and air. The art historian Tom Crow has a beautiful reading of Rauschenberg's imagery as always governed by gravity—the images are concerned with falling, or feeling the tug of the earth. I see that here, but not in a negative way.

In the lowest image, we see Rauschenberg performing in *Pelican*, his first big performance piece—first done in 1963 in Washington DC but this photograph is from 1965, in New York, from the First New York Theater Rally—an event that Rauschenberg had helped organize. Along the left is the Manhattan skyline; below are watertanks (the kind of thing he'd have seen on any rooftop in the city) and above is a slice of a map of Port Arthur, TX, his home town. I find it wonderfully appropriate that the piece features so prominently this performance, which grew out of Rauschenberg's involvement with Judson Dance Theatre and which formed part of my research on *Radical Bodies*, the exhibition I co-curated for the museum a few years ago. And that there's a bit of Texas, since it was Elyse, a Texas native, who bought the print.

In this image of *Pelican*, Rauschenberg is literally skimming over the Gulf waters which lie off the coast of Port Arthur: the image of the map extends down and to the right, the full length of the print. He is sailing or skating or even flying. The imagery refers to where he lives, where he comes from, and combines all the arts. He is a living combine, a form of assemblage that Rauschenberg perfected.

The middle print features a photograph of Rauschenberg with his parents on a boat—back in Texas again—and the whorl of text around it references a fingerprint (referring to the self-portrait he sent to the New Yorker in 1964—an image of his fingerprint) and consists of his c.v., listing the important events of his life and career (and at the top, listing three performances at LACMA, which, as you know, I was once Deputy Director of). So another reference to water—this time floating on it—and all centered on the smiling face of a very innocent little boy.

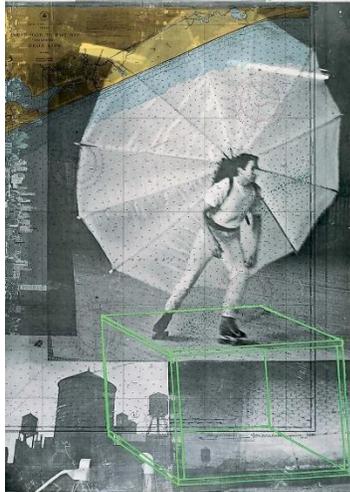
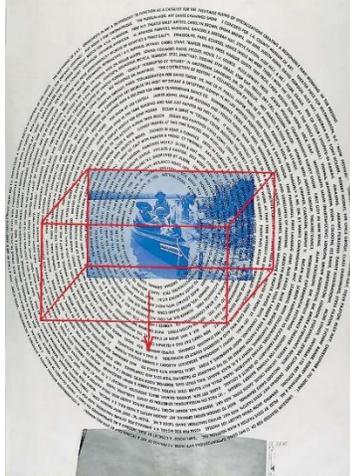
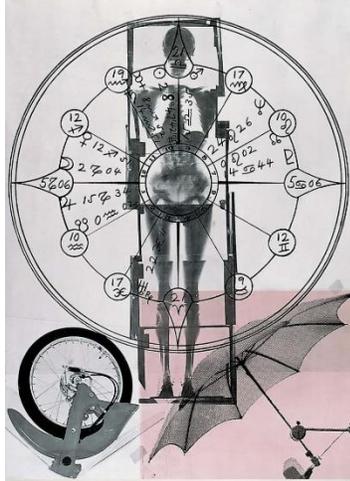
The top image features Rauschenberg's skeleton, with a wheel and an umbrella (and fishing tackle?) beside it. The body has been dematerialized away and floats above the other images, lighter than the umbrella and faster than the wheel. Over the skeleton is superimposed Rauschenberg's astrological

chart of Libra. We are now in the heavens. There's a progression in the prints from images of the land-bound, to water, to air.

There's a lot more one can say about the print—Rauschenberg invites us to explore it endlessly. But I like the idea of this progression of the artist's spirit, from the effort of performance where he tries to rise above the mundane, to the effort of a lifetime spiraling out from his earliest memories, to his emplacement in the heavens. It's a wonderfully hubristic statement, but made up of the flotsam and jetsam (to use the right nautical term) of his life—falling upwards.

Many many thanks. The Museum is honored by your commitment to it, and this gift, which enriches the collection so profoundly.

Bruce



Thank you, Bruce