

Catastrophe (Arcadian Retreat)

By [Roni Feinstein](#), July 2013

Part of the [Rauschenberg Research Project](#)

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1 In the *Arcadian Retreat* series, of which *Catastrophe (Arcadian Retreat)* (1996) is a part, Robert Rauschenberg combined images of the ancient and modern worlds in paintings that blend antiquated techniques of picture making such as fresco painting with the state-of-the-art technologies of digital printing. These majestic and physically weighty works exemplify his ongoing efforts to navigate uncharted creative territory and experiment with previously unexplored processes and materials. As this essay will demonstrate, both impulses were intimately connected with Rauschenberg's artistic and personal history.

2 From 1962 until the early 1990s, the silkscreen process was the means by which Rauschenberg transferred photographic images onto his large-scale canvases. This method involved the use of commercially prepared screens imprinted with images he had found in mass-media sources. Over the course of three decades the artist created dozens of series in which he combined silkscreened images on any number of surfaces, among them canvas, paper, fabric, and a range of metals, including copper, brass, bronze, and aluminum.¹ Sometime in 1991 Rauschenberg became aware of large-format color inkjet printers, which employ continuous, high-pressure sprays of ink to push pigment deeply into the paper, producing even, dot-free color prints.² He quickly began to explore the digital print's rich potential as a means of incorporating photographic images into artworks. His attraction to the medium was motivated by a number of factors, among them the fact that once he acquired an inkjet printer he no longer had to rely upon commercial screen makers and the time-consuming silkscreening process but instead could have literally hundreds of digital color images printed by assistants using computers in his Captiva Island, Florida, studio. Silkscreen printing, moreover, is cumbersome, and can be complicated when numerous colors are used, whereas the digital printing process is easy to manipulate and can readily produce a wide range of colors and tones. A critical change that accompanied Rauschenberg's move away from silkscreening to inkjet printing was that from the time of the switch the photographic imagery used in his work came not from mass-media sources but from the cache of thousands of photographs and slides he had taken over the course of the previous decade during his travels around the globe.

3 Concomitant with Rauschenberg's move to this new method of working was a desire to avoid toxic and flammable chemicals and to transition to more earth-friendly materials, changes that were inspired by his health and environmental concerns. In 1970 Rauschenberg had designed the first Earth Day poster for the benefit of the American Environment Foundation (fig. 2) and in 1990, just before he began to explore inkjet printing, he was asked to design the poster commemorating the event's twentieth anniversary. In 1992 he was invited to attend the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the so-called Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro, for which he also designed a poster.³ The conference further alerted him to the hazards posed by chemical use; moving forward, he sought to limit his and his assistants' exposure. That same year, Rauschenberg released his aptly named *Waterworks* series (1992–95), a group of vegetable dye transfers on paper (fig. 3). The production of these works involved digitally printing photographs, which Rauschenberg variously cropped, enlarged, reversed, or otherwise manipulated on his computer onto clear gelatin surfaces using water-soluble, biodegradable soy inks (rather than conventional inks containing chemical contaminants).⁴ Once the digitally inked sheets were placed face down upon the paper surface, water rather than a chemical solvent was used to release the image. Although in *Waterworks* an electric press was used to perform the transfer, in subsequent works, such as the *Anagram* series (1995–97), the transfer was effected by rubbing the backs of the images with a handheld squeegee or directly by hand, techniques that



1. Robert Rauschenberg, *Catastrophe (Arcadian Retreat)*, 1996; inkjet transfer and wax on fresco panels, 111 x 75 in. (281.94 x 190.5 cm); Collection SFMOMA, Gift of Vicki and Kent Logan; © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY



2. Robert Rauschenberg, *Earth Day*, 1970. Lithograph and collage on paper, 52 3/8 x 37 1/2 in. (133.1 x 95.3 cm). © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation and Gemini G.E.L. / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY; published by Gemini G.E.L.

lent the resulting images a gestural immediacy and produced more freely conceived compositions. Although many of the *Waterworks* pieces feature crisp images and evenly toned fields of color, most of the later works the artist made using water and water-based media have a fluidity, transparency, and luminosity reminiscent of watercolor painting, with its stains, puddles, and passages of liquid wash.

- 4 Rauschenberg had been working with Iris prints for three to four years when in 1995 his close friend Donald Saff bought him an Italian fresco fragment of unknown origin (likely Pompeian or Neapolitan) that he encountered in New York at a Madison Avenue gallery (fig. 4). Saff, an art entrepreneur and maker of experimental prints, whose printmaking workshops (first Graphicstudio at the University of South Florida, Tampa; then Saff Tech Arts; and finally Saff and Co. in Oxford, Maryland) Rauschenberg had been frequenting since the early 1970s, relished the challenge of working with his friend using new technologies and materials.⁵ Rauschenberg and Saff had begun discussing the possibility of printing with frescoes since 1968, when they saw the exhibition *The Great Age of Fresco: Giotto to Pontormo* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Now, almost thirty years later, Saff devoted himself to developing a method that would enable Rauschenberg to transfer inkjet prints onto wet plaster grounds. It took several months of trial and error to identify the optimal inks to employ as well as a special paper that could be used in lieu of his usual print surfaces, which proved unsuited to the task. The challenge was to develop a means of ensuring that the water-moistened paper would remain intact and the printed images would retain their form and coloristic intensity rather than disappearing into the wet gypsum plaster.⁶ Once the process had been perfected, Saff consulted with Rauschenberg to determine which surface texture he preferred; although a smooth and even texture was attainable, the artist favored a pitted and abraded surface and deckled (slightly raised, wavy) edges that simulate the distressed and tactile appearance of ancient wall paintings. Yet unlike traditional frescoes, which become fixed as each section of the plaster on which they are painted dries, Rauschenberg's frescoes could be rewet and "loosened" (rendered in more fluid fashion). Other images could be layered upon them. Once the works were considered final they were allowed to dry and were sealed with wax.



3. Robert Rauschenberg, *Blue Smile (Waterworks)*, 1994. Inkjet dye transfer on paper, 48 x 31 1/2 in. (122 x 80 cm). Private collection; © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY



4. Italian fresco fragment (likely Pompeian or Neapolitan).
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

- 5 Rauschenberg's enthusiasm for fresco painting was prompted by the fact that his preparations for and execution of *Arcadian Retreats*—the first and only series in which he used this technique—coincided with a visit he made to Turkey in conjunction with the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), held in Istanbul in June 1996, for which he again designed a poster. He had long been interested in classical sculpture and mythology,⁷ and while in Turkey he visited Ephesus, an ancient city on the country's western coast, as well other archaeological sites. His photographs of the ruins and classical statuary he saw during that trip are prominently featured in the *Arcadian Retreat* works. The series title itself points to the romantic notion of Arcadia, a lost classical world where humankind lived in blissful harmony with nature, a paradigm that echoed the utopian ideals put forward at the Habitat II conference.⁸ The photographic

images Rauschenberg used in *Catastrophe (Arcadian Retreat)* and the other *Arcadian Retreats* juxtapose views of ancient and modern Turkey, seeming on one hand to assert the need for optimism and on the other to highlight the gap between reality and ideals. As Bernice Rose muses in her eloquent writings on the series, which engages not only the fable of Arcadia but also tales of gods, heroes, and the legacy of Alexander the Great: “The aesthetic instant in which past and present meet on equal terms is the focal point of Rauschenberg’s cosmos, his version of Paradise.”⁹

- 6 Measuring 111 x 75 inches, *Catastrophe (Arcadian Retreat)* represents the largest of the twenty-five pieces in the series (given the weight of these four- to five-inch-thick solid plaster works, which are supported by [aluminum armatures](#), it would have been impractical to make them any larger). It consists of three rectangular panels organized in a quasi-architectural post and lintel scheme (a horizontal panel surmounting two vertical panels) that echoes the classical elements pictured in the composition, such as the Corinthian column surrounded by pigeons and the sculpture from the Ephesus Museum of a beautiful nude male youth that has been identified as Dionysus (Bacchus) (AD 150–200). More contemporary structures include a crumbling stone wall covered by a spray of roses, a wooden building with a barred window (and a pile of stones and tilted wooden table in front), fragments of a street-front wall covered with a large map that is perhaps an advertisement for a travel agency (the word *agency* is clearly visible above a map in the lower right quadrant of the image), and a modern Turkish apartment building whose classicizing details make it a modern-day iteration of the Library of Celsus at Ephesus, a structure that appears in a number of the *Arcadian Retreats* frescoes¹⁰ (fig. 5). Below the blue and yellow forms near the center of the work, which appear to be fragments of upholstered chairs, are two separate images of cats and a grid of six different images of colorfully turbaned Turkish musicians. Taken together, this imagery offers a study in contrasts, representing such juxtapositions as Turkey’s classical heritage (Ephesus) and its artistic present (the musicians), the exalted (the Corinthian column) and the derelict (the pile of stones and discarded table), high art (Dionysus) and low (the kitsch image of the cat at lower right), and glimpses of nature both flourishing and struggling to survive (the blossoming roses and the skimpy plants in pots and cans in front of the map).



5. Detail of Robert Rauschenberg’s *Catastrophe (Arcadian Retreat)* showing a Turkish apartment building (left). Recent photo of the Library of Celsus at Ephesus, Turkey (right). Photo: Raymond Ostertag, 2009

- 7 Nothing in the work seems “catastrophic,” which leads one to speculate about its title. The composition does, however, feature two images of cats, so the name might be a pun, reflecting Rauschenberg’s ongoing interest in wordplay, a theme that is underscored in the titles of the series immediately preceding and following *Arcadian Retreats*: *Anagrams* and *Anagrams (A Pun)*. Taking the suggestion offered by the cats further, a witty reference to a potential catastrophe involving the felines might be indicated in the relationship between the image of the cat at lower right and the adjoining fragment of the map of central Turkey, in which the English words “Bird Paradise” are clearly visible.¹¹
- 8 The inclusion of the reference to a “Bird Paradise,” or preserve, in this work may operate on a more serious level as well and seems hardly coincidental given that Rauschenberg had just attended the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements in Istanbul.

Among the projects undertaken by the Small Investments Fund of the United Nations Development Programme in Turkey since then, and which may well have been under discussion, was the establishment of bird sanctuaries to promote tourism to the country's underdeveloped regions, thereby generating income for the locals and contributing to the protection of wildlife.¹² *Catastrophe (Arcadian Retreat)* would therefore seem to stand as a record of things Rauschenberg had seen, experienced, and learned in Turkey, combining both ancient and contemporary techniques of art making to visualize and represent the country's past, present, and future.

Notes

1. Since the 1950s Rauschenberg had been employing an alternate method of image transfer to produce smaller scale works on paper. In his transfer drawings he placed newspaper or magazine clippings that had been soaked in chemical solvents facedown on sheets of drawing paper and rubbed over them with a dry pen nib to release their images. For more on the transfer drawings see Lawrence Alloway, *Robert Rauschenberg Drawings: 1958–1968* (New York: Acquavella Contemporary Art, Inc., 1986) and Lewis Kachur, *Robert Rauschenberg: Transfer Drawings from the 1960s* (New York: Jonathan O'Hara Gallery, 2007).
2. Although Bernice Rose credits Donald Saff with having “developed a digital-printing process using vegetable color dyes to reproduce Rauschenberg’s photographs on gels so that they could be used for watercolors” (Bernice Rose, *Rauschenberg: Arcadian Retreats* [New York: PaceWildenstein, 1997], 7), it was Laurence Getford, a former staff member at the artist’s studio on Captiva Island, Florida, now digital archive manager of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, who first began to experiment with digital color prints and called them to Rauschenberg’s attention (as was confirmed by both Saff and Getford in email correspondence with the author, June 2012). Rauschenberg first began to work with digital color prints using the color inkjet printer that had been developed by IRIS Graphics, Inc., in 1987. The Iris printer was the first large-format digital printer acquired for Rauschenberg’s studio; according to Getford, it was likely purchased in 1992. Three other brands of printers were subsequently purchased and used: NCAD, Roland DGA, and Epson. According to Getford, the “gels” (or gelatin surfaces) referred to above in Rose’s discussion of the printing process used in *Arcadian Retreats* were in subsequent years replaced with a variety of other supports, including sheets of transparent polyester, poly-Mylar, and yet other, generally transparent, surfaces. Laurence Getford, interview by Sarah Roberts, December 4, 2012, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York.
3. Rauschenberg’s poster for the Earth Summit featured the oath “I pledge to make the earth a secure and hospitable home for present and future generations.” For a detailed study of Rauschenberg’s environmental activism see Robert S. Mattison, *Last Turn-Your Turn: Robert Rauschenberg and the Environmental Crisis* (New York: Jacobson Howard Gallery, 2008).
4. Both Saff (email to the author, June 14, 2012) and Getford (email to the author, June 15, 2012) have indicated that the descriptive term *vegetable dye*, which Rauschenberg liked to see used in conjunction with his late work, is something of a misnomer. Soy-based inks and vegetable dye-based inks were used initially in conjunction with the Iris printer, then replaced by pigmented inks. At least four different commercially produced inks were used by Rauschenberg in conjunction with digital printing from 1992 to 2008, all of them water-based. As Getford indicated, “The switch to water-based inks was very important. Before that they were using blanket wash (from the litho printing process), which is very toxic and flammable.” Getford, interview by Sarah Roberts, December 4, 2012.
5. Saff and Rauschenberg’s first collaborations were the technically challenging *Made in Tampa Clay Pieces* made at Graphicstudio, University of South Florida, Tampa, in 1972. From 1984 to 1991 Saff served as artistic director for ROCI (Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange), an initiative that circumnavigated the globe and culminated in an exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. The series that immediately preceded the *Arcadian Retreats* frescoes was *Shales*, made with Saff Tech Arts in 1994–95 using photo-transfers on wax. For more on collaborations between Rauschenberg and Saff see Marilyn S. Kushner, *Donald Saff: Art in Collaboration* (New York: Prestel, 2010). For discussion of ROCI see Jack Cowart, ed., *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1991).
6. Donald Saff, telephone conversation with the author, June 13, 2012. Saff indicated that in the *Arcadian Retreats*, a solution of gum arabic and water was used to transfer Iris (inkjet) prints to plaster. For further information on the processes used in the creation of these works, see Rose, *Arcadian Retreats*, 7–8.
7. Rauschenberg’s interest in ancient artifacts is revealed in some of his early photographs, such as the gelatin silver print *Cy + Relics, Rome* (1952). He executed a series of Combines devoted to themes from Greek mythology, among them *Gift for Apollo* and *Pail for Ganymede*, in 1959.
8. The official report of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements includes the following statement: “We commit ourselves to implementing the Habitat Agenda . . . taking into account that human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development, including adequate shelter for all and sustainable human settlements development, and that they are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.” See “United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II),” United Nations: Outcomes on Human Settlements, August 7, 1996. Accessed June 26, 2013, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G96/025/00/PDF/G9602500.pdf?OpenElement>.
9. Rose, *Arcadian Retreats*, 5.
10. The Library of Celsus at Ephesus (fig. 5) is also referenced in *Muse Archive*, *Contest*, and *Aquavitae*, all of the *Arcadian Retreat* series (1996), as well as in subsequent works such as *Marble Surf (Runs)* of 2007.
11. That the map is of central Turkey is indicated by the visibility of the city names Güzelöz and Soğanlı.

12. Because Turkey has plentiful marshes and is situated along important bird migration routes, bird-watching has long been a source of tourism for the country, which has many national parks and Bird Paradise facilities featuring observation stations and towers. In 2007 the newsletter of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Turkey announced the opening of a Bird Paradise financed by UNDP's Small Investments Fund to "generate tourism income for the locals, while also contributing to the protection of natural life." See "Turkey's New Bird Paradise," *New Horizons*, March 2007, <http://www.undp.org.tr/Gozlem2.aspx?WebSayfaNo=837>.