

Rauschenberg/Rosenquist

RAMSCHEWSTRECK

In the early sixties, as the result of a revolt against Abstract Expressionism, a new movement—Pop art—emerged in America. In this new style the painterly rawness of the Abstract Expressionists was replaced by the use of industrial and commercial techniques—silkscreen, stencil, and photo transfer—and prosaic images from contemporary American culture were favored over amorphous, abstract forms. Both Robert Rauschenberg and James Rosenquist were key participants in the fertile art activities that took place during this period. Joined by other artists such as Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselman, and Roy Lichtenstein, they incorporated images from mass media, technology, and popular culture in their paintings and prints.

Since its appearance in the sixties, however, the major impact of Pop art has waned. Nonetheless, as represented by the recently executed prints in this exhibition, both Rauschenberg and Rosenquist have continued to be stimulated by those themes and ideas that appeared in their earlier work. Still attracted to banal images drawn from popular culture, they have persistently viewed the world at large as their museum without walls.

Although Rauschenberg is not generally considered a Pop artist, he was a pioneer figure who helped to bridge the division between Abstract Expressionism and Pop art, opening up new possibilities in subject matter and technique. His “combine paintings”—a hybrid between painting and sculpture—began in the mid-fifties are perhaps the most famous of his early mature *oeuvre* which helped to lay the groundwork for the Pop artists. In these works found objects such as rubber tires, stuffed animals, pillows, and bed quilts were attached to the sides and surfaces of his

painterly canvases and introduced as subject matter fit for art. Rauschenberg once succinctly explained his choice of such imagery by stating that “A pair of socks is no less suitable to making a painting with than wood, nails, turpentine, oil, and fabric.”¹ This interest in incorporating commonplace images and found objects from American society—newspapers, sports photographs, political posters, fabric remnants—has been consistently expressed throughout Rauschenberg’s career in paintings, prints, sculpture, and performance pieces.

In 1977 Rauschenberg created his *Chow Series*, a group of six prints which confirmed his continuing attraction to images and materials drawn from contemporary society. In this series, bags of animal feed—for goats, monkeys, minks, calves, rabbits, and hogs—manufactured by the Ralston Purina Company, were literally torn apart, flattened, and reproduced via photo silkscreen. Undoubtedly attracted to the inherent “beauty” of the feed bags—the colorful red and white checkerboard patterns, the individual animal portraits, and the bold, commercial lettering—Rauschenberg, through these prints, nudges the viewer into sharing his visual delight in these banal, commercial artifacts.

The *Chow* prints are more than literal reproductions of feed bags, however. For upon closer examination it becomes apparent that the artist has altered each print by adding various collage elements, such as fabric or graph paper, and incorporating radically disparate images culled from magazines and newspapers. In *Calf Chow*, for example, a piece of beige silk is stitched to the top of the bag and in the center, imprinted over the

picture of the calf, is a schematic drawing of a scientific apparatus and a delicate image of a yellow crocus. Subtly apparent at the bottom of the bag, amidst the bold red and white checkered border are, among other images, a truck, postage stamps, a clock, and an aerial view of a ship at sea, all transferred images from popular glossy magazines.

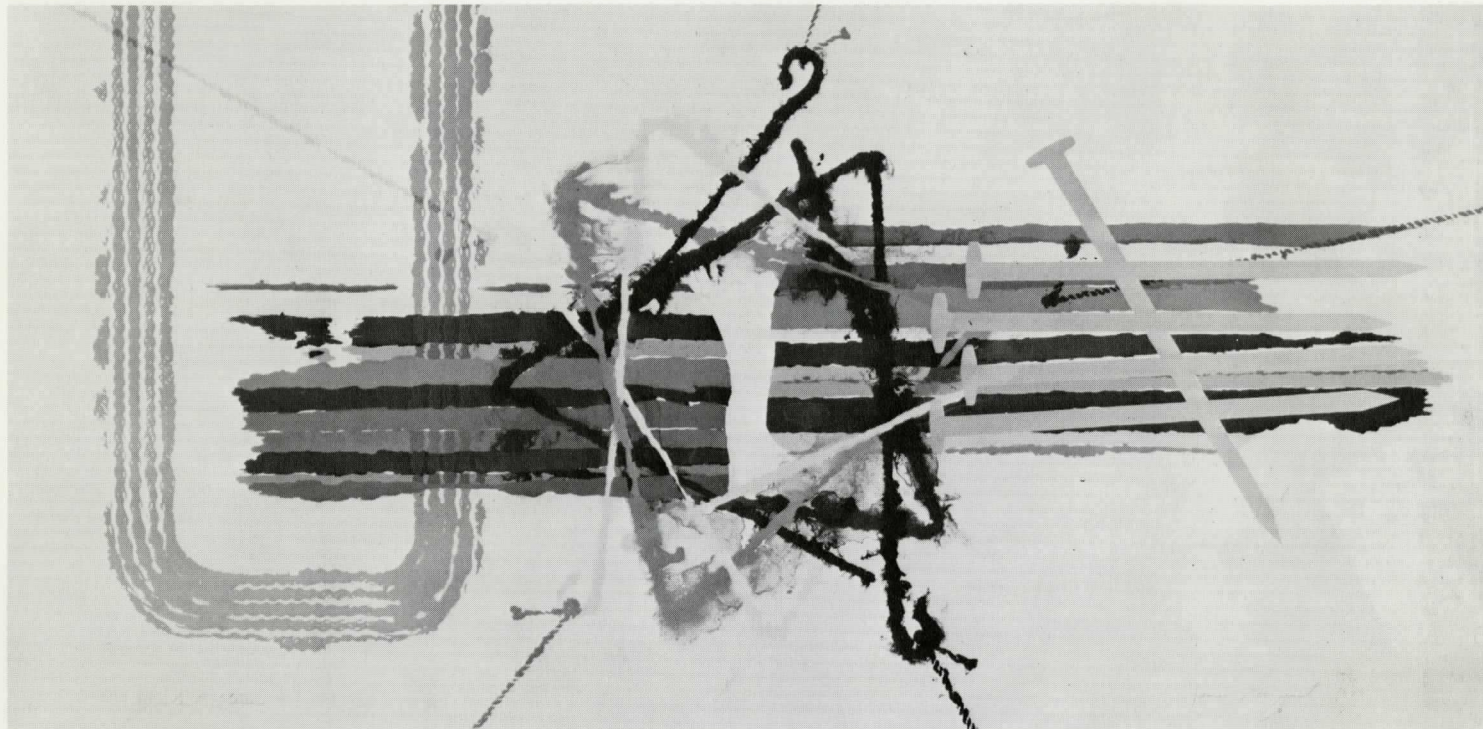
This random selection and enigmatic juxtaposition of unrelated images are basic compositional principles that have been at the heart of Rauschenberg’s work since the early fifties. Paraphrasing motifs from American culture and displacing them in the context of fine art, he seems to be creating a microcosm of contemporary society. These images as a whole, however, are rarely selected to make a specific point or to exploit social commentary. Rather, they constitute Rauschenberg’s chosen tools for expression. They are his “found” vocabulary of colors, lines, and shapes with which he creates statements of formal structure and pictorial metaphor.

Rosenquist, like Rauschenberg, has been primarily interested in images drawn from everyday American culture juxtaposed in unexpected relationships. Perhaps the most well-known of his paintings in this vein is *F-111* (1965). Eighty-six feet long and ten feet high, the painting incorporates a full-length depiction of an F-111 jet fighter interrupted by fragmented images of an angel food cake, spaghetti, light bulbs, an automobile tire, a deep-sea diver, a child under a hair dryer, and an atomic bomb-shaped cloud covered by an umbrella. The perplexing selection and placement of these unrelated objects, enlarged in scale and painted in bright billboard colors, epitomize Rosenquist’s classic style. Yet, like Rauschenberg,

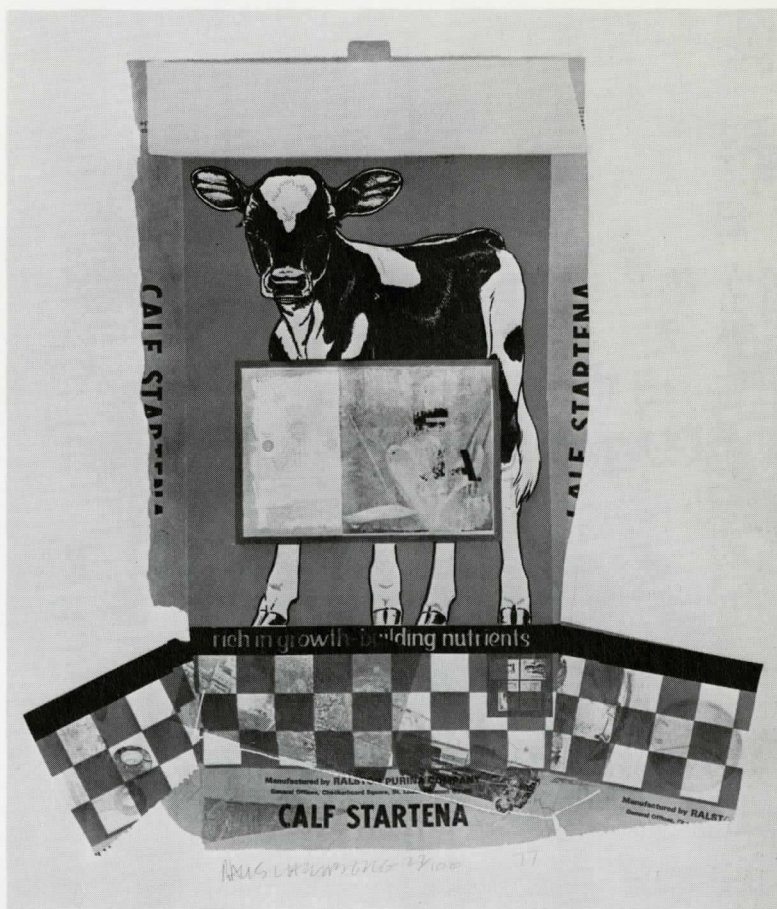
Rosenquist is not concerned with overt political commentary or social symbolism. In fact, he once spoke of these images as “no-images”—objects that he felt were free from nostalgic or emotional content.² The objects per se are thus not the meaning of his work. Rather, he is interested in the charged relationships these images spark in the viewer’s mind. “When I use a combination of fragments of things, the fragments or objects...are caustic to one another, and the title is also caustic to the fragments,” Rosenquist once explained. “I only hope for a colorful shoe-horn to get the person off, to turn him on to his own feelings.”³

The six prints executed by Rosenquist in 1977 which are included in this exhibition are equally as puzzling in their content as *F-111*, although they lack the slick billboard style of his earlier paintings. Long and horizontal in format, each print is dominated by a trio of images seemingly unrelated and arbitrary in choice. In *Violent Turn*, for example, the print is characterized by a tire track on the left and five simple household nails on the right. In the center, the image of a musical triangle is repeated in a circular motif in bright colors of red, pink, yellow, purple, and blue. Underscoring this bewildering selection of objects are multi-colored stripes which hover in the background. The exact meaning of these images is mysteriously obscure although the title may provide a clue to a possible aural interpretation of the print. The “violent turn” of an automobile, symbolized by the U-shaped tire track, suggests the screech of rubber and metal, while the musical triangles in the center obviously recall the gentle, high-pitched tinkle of this metal instrument. The nails on the right might also suggest the pounding and

James Rosenquist
Violent Turn, 1977
lithograph
37 x 73¾"
San Francisco Museum of Modern
Art; Gift of John Rosenthal
Photo credit: Phillip Galgiani



Robert Rauschenberg
Calf Chow from the *Chow Series*,
1977
silkscreen with hand-sewing, pencil,
silk collage, and plastic thread
48½ x 36¾"
San Francisco Museum of Modern
Art; Gift of John Rosenthal
Photo credit: Phillip Galgiani



heavy din of construction work. Perhaps Rosenquist is creating a cacophonous symphony of noise using these images as his musical score—but the answer can never be certain.

Not all of the titles for the prints can be taken literally, or even metaphorically, however. In fact, they are often as ambiguous as the images they identify. As Marcia Tucker pointed out in 1972, Rosenquist's titles are generally neither symbolic nor nonsensical, but often come from the artist's private associations or experiences.⁴ In *Black Tie*, for instance, the dominant trio of images includes from left to right: a spoked-wheel shape made from the pages of the New York Stock Exchange listings; a roughly circular organic form; and a swirling nebula or pinwheel. Is Rosenquist possibly suggesting some obscure relationship between the worlds of commerce, science, and the universe as symbolized by these forms? Or is he merely exploring the aesthetic possibilities of a circular motif? Unfortunately, the title for the print is as perplexing and vague as the image itself.

The possible interpretations of Rosenquist's six prints are infinite, and to a marked degree their meaning is contingent upon the personal experiences and perceptions the viewer brings to the works. This, in fact, is a vital key to understanding not only Rosenquist's but Rauschenberg's work as well. Interested in multiplicity rather than definition, each artist conjures up a potpourri of human experiences and associations which are triggered by familiar, mundane objects. Bringing together common elements that would not otherwise exist in the same realm, they have

created open-ended visual metaphors which stimulate new perceptions and nourish our imagination.

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¹Robert Rauschenberg, statement in *Sixteen Americans*, edited by Dorothy C. Miller (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1959), p. 58.

²James Rosenquist, answer to "What is Pop Art?" Interviews by G. R. Swenson, *Art News*, February 1964, p. 41.

³Ibid., p. 63.

⁴Marcia Tucker, *James Rosenquist* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1972), p. 26.

Robert Rauschenberg
American
Born 1925
Chow Series, 1977
A portfolio of six individually titled prints, numbered 27/100

1. *Calf Chow*, 1977
silkscreen, pencil, fabric, stitched thread
image: 37 1/16 x 34
sheet: 48 1/8 x 36 3/8
2. *Goat Chow*, 1977
silkscreen, paper, stitched thread
image: 41 3/4 x 34
sheet: 48 1/8 x 36 5/16
3. *Hog Chow*, 1977
silkscreen, stitched thread
image: 41 5/16 x 36 5/16
sheet: 48 x 36 5/16
4. *Mink Chow*, 1977
silkscreen, paper, fabric, pencil, stitched thread
image: 34 7/8 x 33 5/8
sheet: 47 7/8 x 36 1/4
5. *Monkey Chow*, 1977
silkscreen, stitched thread
image: 33 1/4 x 34 1/8
sheet: 48 1/8 x 36 3/8
6. *Rabbit Chow*, 1977
silkscreen, stitched thread
image: 37 1/16 x 34
sheet: 48 1/8 x 36 3/8

James Rosenquist
American
Born 1933

1. *Black Tie*, 1977
lithograph 31/100
image: 36 7/8 x 73 3/4
sheet: 36 7/8 x 73 3/4
2. *Coin Noir*, 1977
lithograph 31/100
image: 34 1/2 x 71 5/8
sheet: 36 1/2 x 74
3. *Derriere L'Etoile*, 1977
lithograph 31/100
image: 36 5/8 x 74
sheet: 36 5/8 x 74
4. *Elbow Lake*, 1977
lithograph 31/100
image: 26 1/2 x 67
sheet: 36 3/4 x 74
5. *Fast Feast*, 1977
lithograph 31/100
image: 36 x 70 1/2
sheet: 37 x 74
6. *Violent Turn*, 1977
lithograph 31/100
image: 37 x 73 3/4
sheet: 37 x 73 3/4

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Gift of John Rosenthal

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