# ARCADIAN RETREATS

by Bernice Rose

**Robert Rauschenberg** is again on the track of heroes and gods. In his early work, *34 Drawings for Dante's Inferno*, he had followed Dante and his hero, the Greek poet Virgil, through the Inferno, canto by canto, down through the layers of Hell and back on a mission to rescue Dante's love Beatrice. In this most recent work, *Arcadian Retreats*, Rauschenberg, the hero of his own imagination, is on a parallel quest, again following the "poetic cipher's of his self's self-discovery as it travels among the objects of the material world and inserts itself into the chaotic, arbitrary world of nature." [1] This time Rauschenberg's journey retraces the conquests of the Macedonian hero, Alexander the Great, through the multilayered ruins and contemporary incarnations of the ancient Greek city-states of Asia Minor.

These ruins of ancient places and the poets and heroes, half-human, half-god, who peopled them have haunted the artistic imagination throughout the ages. In the Renaissance and again in the Romantic era, they inspired visions of an ideal present in the form of Arcadia, that legendary region of Greece exalted by philosophers and poets as a rural paradise. The fable of Arcadia was celebrated by Milton and Byron in epic poetry inspired by Homer; for Claude and Poussin it inspired a genre—a combination of history painting and landscape, a romance of ruins, the classicizing locus of an ideal retreat. For the Romantic imagination had elevated ruins to the most affective of fragments; ruins are the place in which "the past with its destinies and transformations has been gathered into this instant of an aesthetically perceptible present." [2]

The aesthetic instant in which past and present meet on equal terms is the focal point of Rauschenberg's cosmos, his version of Paradise. Rauschenberg is a visionary of the material world, rescuing all sorts of detritus, the dead and discarded, the disregarded, the broken and ruined; they are the raw stuff of his work—his version of working from nature. His is a landscape of fragments organized according to a self-made law of media variation. Rauschenberg has taken art's material operations as the object of investigation: he is absorbed by the *making* of the making of a work of visual art. In a sense, Dante was a medium in this process, a direct line to the metaphysical origin of art in God's mind and man's participation in it through divine grace: God gives the Idea to man.[3] Each event in Rauschenberg's poetic cosmos features an encounter with a new means, a new vehicle for

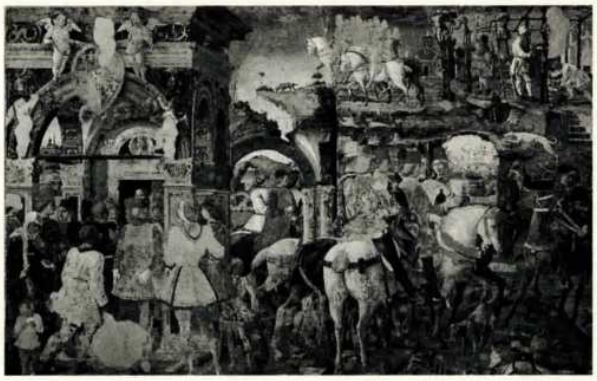

figure 1:

Francesco del Cossa
*The Month of March*, fresco in the Hall of the Months,
Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara, c. 1469-70.
Lower register: the duke administering justice; falconry; vine growing.

breaking the constraints of time and place. Through constant invention, he makes himself the instrument of his own art—a self-created force of nature. In the *Inferno* series, impelled by the transfer technique, he had translated the episodic literary form into a visual one, outside the syntax of the culminatory masterpiece, and had changed the canon of modernist representation. Reviving an old form had established a new autorial strategy: by circling back and around an old place, Rauschenberg arrived at an entirely new one, outside of boundaries and hierarchies. The revelation of the Dante drawings was that human fulfillment could be conceived as a continuous encounter between individuals and their material realm.

In the *Arcadian Retreats*, Rauschenberg turns to another Renaissance model in his search for a still richer synthesis of means and of forms for articulating his adventures in the realm of the subjective. This quest for the self's self-knowledge, cast in the guise of making art itself, parallels the philosophical quest in which consciousness takes itself as its own object and sees itself as a part of nature.

For the *Arcadian Retreats*, Rauschenberg has chosen an ideal form of affective fragment as a model, the ruins of wall paintings, usually described in more familiar terms as "frescoes," after the primary technique in which wall painting was historically executed. Wall painting works as a visual parallel to epic poetry—it is formally "efficient," displaying the same Aristotelian virtues of the economy of time, place, and action; and it is a tool of instruction as well as aesthetic delectation. But in the now ruined state of most frescoes, the medium incorporates virtues close to Rauschenberg's heart: formal transparency, in its many layers of stories exposed to one another; narrative and authorial opacity, for the original specific meanings of frescoes have often been lost with the passage of time, as has the distinction among hands (figure 1). To the modern eye, these complex chronicles read either as ravishing formal fragments or pieces of puzzles whose secret messages are to be deciphered. Fresco thus becomes a perfect formal ground for imprinting the constantly shifting field of memory and identity—for the change of substance of material form and ideas; by nature *and* device, wall painting is transparent to time.

Since his involvement with E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology), Rauschenberg has maintained a long-term romance with technology. His associate in many of his explorations into new techniques and media has been his close friend Donald Saff, an innovator in the technology of art. Saff, with whom he has produced many multimedia works, was his point man for ROCI (Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange), the constantly varying traveling road show of Rauschenberg's work that the artist followed around the world, collaborating with local artisans. Rauschenberg had been talking to Saff about fresco since

1968, the year of the Metropolitan Museum's exhibition, "The Great Age of Fresco." The result of this latest collaboration and almost twenty-year-long conversation is the revival of an old form by the invention of a new technology. The technical problem: to find a means to allow Rauschenberg to work within his own convention—transferring photographic images and screening them layer over layer—in fresco, which in historical practice had to be fresh and moist for the pigment to bind properly with crystals in the plaster. The plaster ground could only be worked into once—and that only in the span of a day. Saff came to Rauschenberg with a prototype ground and suggested that he could prepare the supports and create the technology that would allow Rauschenberg to realize the *Arcadian Retreats*. Saff had already developed a digital-printing process using vegetable color dyes to reproduce Rauschenberg's photographs on gels so that they could be used for watercolors, as in his series *Anagrams*. Now they developed a new solvent as a vehicle for dissolving the color dyes for transfer into plaster and a unique plaster compound which they troweled onto panels. The solvent also provides the moisture to bind the dye into the support, enabling Rauschenberg to begin work with a dry ground and work into it repeatedly, floating color over color and image over image. While it is sometimes as difficult as in traditional fresco to judge how the color will look as the moisture evaporates and it binds with the ground, once the support has dried, remoistening does not cause any damage.

Three factors are in play in the frescoes: pressure, viscosity, and absorbency. Although one of fresco's attractions is the effacement of the authorial hand, in this case Rauschenberg's transfer tools are his own hands, which he finds the most efficient instrument for controlling the pressure of the transfer. Through touch he can monitor how deeply the image will sink into the ground. If the agent is thinned, the image sinks deeper into the bed of plaster, and as it sinks it softens and weakens, as though obscured by time. The more viscous the agent, the more closely the image is bound to the surface and the fresher, the more contemporary it appears. The liquid agent binds the layers of disparate stories into the flat plaster bed and to one another, creating the illusion that the fragmentary images and ground they inhabit are as transparent to time as the archetypes they imitate.

As always, Rauschenberg's camera is the initial study means, a machine for copying, for duplicating the world of appearances. Sophisticated developing and printing techniques facilitate the rapid production of numerous replicas—imitations of imitations. The memory of the image inheres to the photographic matrix. And unlike traditional techniques, in which each day's work (a portion of the drawing) had to be transferred to the fresh plaster, continuity is a function of selection, not of time, as Rauschenberg chooses from a

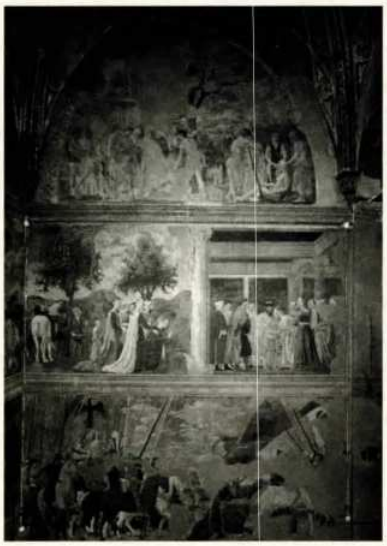

figure 2:

Piero della Francesca

From *The Legend of The True Cross*, fresco, San Francesco, Arezzo, 1470.
Lunette: *Tree of Life* and scenes from the life of Adam.
Middle register: *Queen of Sheba Praying to the Tree of Life* and *Meeting Between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon.*
Lower register: *Emperor Constantine's Victory under the Sign of the Cross.*

profusion of images, then replicates and deploys them onto modular panels—imitating the panels of frescoes that had been removed for preservation from their original sites as early as the 16th century. The panels are assembled in a variety of formats, from single "masterpiece" to diptychs and triptychs. This ease of recycling and the equally easy recycling in the work of the same images from panel to panel converts the images from simulations/simulacra to stereotypes.

Rauschenberg's time frame is not the *giornato*—the day's work of a Renaissance painter. If his image-making depends on creating the surface illusion of an apparently seamless marriage of disparate times and places through physical integration of the material, he nevertheless wants the structural interruption as evidence that each part of every work he makes in his construction of Paradise is a module in a constantly evolving larger work not bound by time or space. Its internal structure is an assembly of sets, the small mimicking the large, adding to the accumulation of sets of previous work, thereby assuring the continuity of the enterprise as it expands into a cosmic network.

The components within the network, although equal in value, display an extreme variety of scale no less than of technical means, for Rauschenberg confounds the decorum of the culminatory masterpiece not only with sets that oppose a comprehensive reading, but by making single works so large as to equally defy comprehension. Thus the 60-foot-long *Currents* (1970), a silkscreen on paper, or the 4-furlong (440-foot) painting *Furlong*. All parts are equal, regardless of scale; the part may stand for the whole, one may have one element or many—there is no single reading.

An important aspect of Rauschenberg's "imitation" of fresco are the blank spaces that evoke the lost images in frescoes restored in a historically "responsible" manner (figure 2). Fresco, meant by its patrons and makers to withstand the ages, was in the end vulnerable to the ravages of time; its contemporary opacity is among the ironies of art. But Rauschenberg's blank spaces return the work to its ground of origin as carefully artful illusion; and they interrupt the action as if deliberately calling attention to another ground of origin, the real space in which the artist is working—the blank flatbed of creation and, through it, the artist's miracle of (re)creation. Like a historical preservationist producing a "truthful" restoration, Rauschenberg works an artist's magic to conjure a "used" and "abused" appearance, lovingly reproducing the effects of natural forces—the pitting and scarring, the polishing and wearing, of the surface—turning art itself, through (meta)physical ruin, into an artifact that affirms its own indisputable, eternally valid identity, despite its constantly shifting memory pattern.

Rauschenberg had cited ruins before, and in his Combine paintings real things had stood in for real things. Now he is reading ruins through ruins, opening reality to illusion and illusion to reality. Stories are told through stories in an order natural to the narrator, who nominates a surrogate for himself. Rauschenberg's work originates in performance, and he remains a performer who wears many masks: each mask, each "set," is an aspect of the master-performance, another layer of reality and of "truth." For "why if one can afford to live in different ages and cultures, restrict oneself to the present, the locale?"[4]

Rauschenberg is always looking for new signs for image-identity—for working at a third remove from "truth." In the *Dante*, Virgil had been a stand-in for his own hero Aeneas, whom he had in turn appropriated from Homer's story of the fall of Troy, the *Iliad*, and both Dante and Virgil had been portrayed as contemporary heroes. In *Arcadian Retreats*, Alexander the Great may well be the dramatic *deus ex machina*—he or any of the heroes who haunt the ruins of Asia Minor. There are several likely masks for Rauschenberg *cum* Alexander: the ruined kouros figure that appears in *Catastrophe* (plate 5) and another in *Icons* (plate 6); and yet another—just a fragment of a statue, a leg—in *Ulterior Motive* (plate 11); the heroes on the fragment of the Gate of Herakles from Ephesus who appear in *Stadium* (plate 2). We may read these ruined beauties as signifiers of the futility of glory, of the values of a humanism that lies in ruins. For Alexander—who was educated by Aristotle—has an identity even beyond that of the legendary Hellenistic hero, half-man, half-god, who claimed descent from Herakles and Achilles, retook the ancient Greek cities of Asia Minor from King Croesus, and who dreamed of uniting the known world—and almost succeeded; it is the aspect of his personality which inscribes him in the canon of Western heroes. Alexander was a catalyst in the formation of our modern ideal of the individual, "crystallizing the subliminal Hellenic belief in the basic worth and importance of the individual—that idea of the divine spark which had always lurked just beneath the surface of Greek culture."[5]

It is this Alexander, whose tracks lead back through the layers of identities, whom Rauschenberg now follows through these ancient ruins, through all the conquerors and inhabitants before Alexander, the Greeks of antiquity, the Persians, and, after him, the Romans, the Christians, and the Turks. And it is the ghost of the Alexander that haunts the ruins of Ephesus, a city reborn across the Aegean as a sign for the original Arcadia, adopted by the Romantics. Evidence of Ephesus appears over and over in the *Arcadian Retreats* in the masks on the wall of the ancient theater and the steps, repeated over and over, but most recognizably in the ruined facades of *Muse Archive* (plate 8) and *Estuary* (plate 9).

Images of Ephesus and all its ruins may evoke other ruined cities; other ages may unify the *Arcadian Retreats*, on a mythic, and even on an ethical level. But it is a unity interrupted by constant reminders of the chaotic modern marketplace in which the ruins form islands, stranded in the present; often they are overtaken by it; one must always return to the present. In a sort of cinematic kaleidoscope of images, stories of other pasts and of the present interweave throughout the *Arcadian Retreats*. Rauschenberg's wanderings through "colloquial" Turkey, from images of signboards to the farmyard animals that roam among the ruins, form unifying threads through the work, as do references to his own past, his ubiquitous bicycle wheels, chairs, and pushcarts, which are the signs of his presence. In *Party Line* (plate 10), the present has completely overwhelmed the past; the images of the newsstand in particular indicate that we are invited to read Rauschenberg's work as we read the daily newspaper. For Rauschenberg does not restrict himself to appropriating "identities" (or objects as surrogates for identities), or styles, or even whole conventions, exotic or familiar. He lives through them, and in living through them he allows them to be re-experienced in the present, not as dead, but as living: as the daily news.

Rauschenberg is a genius at pastiche, and in this case reality presents a ready-made pastiche. As the narrative is tracked erratically figure by figure, panel by panel, through numerous repetitions, reversals, changes of scale, and shifts of focus that duplicate and reduplicate the world of appearances, the elements and layers of reality appropriated by Rauschenberg in his photographic rovings get rearranged to tell the story of "reality"—of images—living through one another more efficiently.

Rauschenberg, a poetic painter, is fond of using cliché to (un)cover cliché—of proposing opposites as equals, as a disguise for larger truths. The *Arcadian Retreats* thus operate on another level as a parable of art itself; they are about the truth value of illusion, as practiced by visual artists. For Rauschenberg, authenticity—originality, authority—is not so much a question of applying imagination to reality as the substitution of one reality for another, the operation of one reality through another.

In 1953 Rauschenberg had attacked the problem of one of modern art's sacred cows, spending a month trying to erase a de Kooning drawing, in an effort to get de Kooning and the whole problem of "spontaneous creative originality" behind him. In two paintings of 1957, *Factum I* and *Factum II*, he devised a more openly artful approach to the problem of truth in art. In a parody that may have been a disguised nod to Monet's serial imagery, he signaled the easy replication of "originality" by painting two apparently spontaneous "Abstract Expressionist" brushstroke paintings, one as an exact duplicate of the other,

reducing originality and the universal to a stereotype. Yet parody and stereotype have truth value—and are forms of homage. As Bruce Nauman put it, "the true artist is an amazing luminous fountain" and, what is more, one who knows there is no single, unalterable, eternal form—there is only the search through the world of "sense-perceptible reality," the search through those illusions of illusions, and, if one is lucky, there are trophies to display.

*Grove* (plate 3) is a trophy, its title a pun on its images. Its oranges have been imported as signs of present-day reality, the collapse of virtually all barriers. They read like ads for orange juice: low-culture stand-ins for that idyll the word grove signifies, correctives for an illusion that was always allegorical, a historical imposition that was, perhaps, as much an illusion in Alexander's time as in the Romantic era. The illusion is perfectly represented by a Poussin painting in which four figures, two of them shepherds, are portrayed kneeling before a classical tomb inscribed "Et in Arcadia ego"—"even in Arcady I am." The conventional reading is that "I," death, reign even in Arcadia. The contrast of Poussin's reconstructed Arcadia—his Paradise lost—with Rauschenberg's deconstructed view of Arcadia as an overrun ruin could not be sharper or more absurd if it were deliberate. In Rauschenberg's images, as in life, these artifacts, so prized by so many, are now surrounded by the heaps of a scratchy, scruffy, contemporary civilization that swarms among them—probably as it always did. But whether in Poussin's or Rauschenberg's hands, whether Poussin's tomb or Alexander's Ephesus, the images seem to embody an irony, both functioning as signs for old clichés: time equalizes all things, grinding them into the dust, old heroes never die, they just fade away—unless, of course, another hero revives them.

Notes:

1. Bernice Rose, *Robert Rauschenberg: Anagrams*, exh. cat. (New York: PaceWildenstein, 1996), p. 7.
2. G. Simmel, quoted in David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 272.
3. For a full explanation of the Platonic Idea, see Erwin Panofsky, *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).
4. Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (1984), quoted in Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 301.
5. James Steele, *Hellenistic Architecture in Asia Minor* (London: Academy Editions, 1992), p. 19.