

EIP



LGBT+ History Month 2022: Robert Rauschenberg and Transformation Through Context

We are excited to celebrate LGBT+ History Month, helping to increase the visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, their history, lives and their experiences. The theme this year is Politics in Art: 'The Arc Is Long'. [Schools Out UK](#) explored five influential artists: Keith Haring, Doris Brabham Hatt, Fiore de Henriquez, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Mark Aguhar.

This article shares the life and work of Robert Rauschenberg who also used his talents to express his orientation through his work.

LGBT+ History & Art

Artists, opined Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008), have the job of being witnesses to their time history. Witnesses, perhaps, that we sorely need.

Attempting to distil "LGBT+ History" into a single subject is an effort doomed to failure. Much as attempts to celebrate "Black culture" frequently end up cramming a multitude of disparate customs, cultures and traditions into a far-too-small box, trying to squeeze a history ranging from Athens to Pendarvis to the Lavender Menace down and down until it becomes neatly digestible is nearly impossible. The arc of the universe is so long that its bend is often unobservable to the individual; it is hard, from our limited perspective, to grasp the depth and complexity of our shared history. Each thread we pull begets

another, unravelling into a hydra of history, hype and half-truths.

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For perspective, if nothing else, we turn to our witnesses. We turn to the sculptors who literally carved out evidence of our past, to the songs that have outlived their singers, and to the poets whose pens gave to airy nothing a local habitation and a name.

In doing so, we perforce observe not only the artist themselves, but how they influence the world around them. Like a stone dropped into a lake, we see how their presence disrupts the surface of the world around them. We watch the ripples of their passage bounce off people and places, their impact felt culturally, personally and – almost inevitably – politically.

The Life of Robert Rauschenberg

In this particular piece, we turn to the gentleman with whom we started – Robert Rauschenberg.

Rauschenberg was one of the iconic Neo-Dadaists of the 50s and 60s, holding the view that painting related to both art and life, and placing his work in the space where the two could not quite meet. His collaborations with friend John Cage and partners Cy Twombly and Jasper Johns would become some of his most defining work.

The Influential Work of Robert Rauschenberg

One of Rauschenberg's most enduring artistic traits was his combination of unrelated, everyday items, incorporated into the context of art. His aptly-named "Combines" took discarded objects from the streets of New York City – displaying a particular affinity for taxidermied animals – and lent them new significance, pairing them with traditional paints and canvas. This change in context, he claimed, changed the nature of the object itself, making it a new thing entirely. He worked to eliminate the boundaries between art and sculpture, between the conceptual and the real. One of his earliest Combines, *Bed*, took a quilt, sheet and pillow from his own apartment and smeared them with red paint. The piece broke a barrier between the artist and audience, and is often considered a self-portrait, Rauschenberg's imprinting of his consciousness and life onto the artwork.

Rauschenberg's disruptive metier has made him a source of much consternation in the artistic community. The imagery of the art world at the time was described by Tom

Folland as “the mythmaking material of a hypermasculine and heroic avant-garde movement,” and some have claimed that Rauschenberg’s inherently chaotic style drew on that gestalt. However, others maintain that his work is both a satire of and a resistance to that heroic, aggressively male notion. His work can be seen through from an iconographic perspective as directly opposing the conventional, and even directly alluding to his own identification as a gay man.

Perhaps, though, like the artist himself, Rauschenberg’s work is best appreciated as fluid. Rauschenberg maintained a flexible sexuality his entire life; he was married for several years to fellow artist Susan Weil, with whom he fathered a child, but after divorcing her was involved in romantic relationships with his collaborators Cy Twombly and Jasper Johns. For the final 25 years of his life, his former assistant Darryl Pottorf was his romantic partner. That he was queer there is little doubt, despite the efforts of past critics to ignore this fact.

Viewed through superimposed lenses of stereotypical masculinity and homosexuality, Rauschenberg’s work takes on further transformative nature. This view makes eminent sense in context – Rauschenberg was a passionate believer in the ability of art to effect social change, something that shines through both his work itself and his own actions. Scholars point to his work as expressing signs of longing and revelation, of the transcendental potential within each of us. *Booster*, a work from 1967, shows an X-Ray of the artist’s body. This literal portrait of the artist from inside-out is surrounded by motifs rubbed from magazine pictures relating to space exploration, together with mundane images of a chair, or machinery. The human element serves both as the most prominent, and yet as a backdrop, surrounded by both the facticity of life and the borderline transcendence of exploring the cosmos. Through Rauschenberg’s work we see two worlds occupying the same space and time – that which is, and that which can, or may, be.

His portrayals of tokens of gay subcultures in domestic surroundings enhance this impression of a man doing that which he can to drive the world towards what it ought to be, with pieces like *Satellite* being framed by some as an artistic normalisation of a non-heterosexual life. His work, it is said, can be seen as a natural progression from *Bed*, charting a coming-out story broadcast directly from the author’s own awareness. His later silk-screen work *Mirthday Man* shows perhaps the final step of this – with *Booster* at its centre serving as both an image of himself and as reflection of that which was, the artwork is riotously colourful, a flamboyant and beautiful array of colours transforming the original monochromatic piece into something much...more.

Robert Rauschenberg & Social Change

Rauschenberg's efforts to drive progress outside of his work are well-documented. In an effort to facilitate understandings across cultures, he initiated the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange, and created the foundation that bears his name to promote awareness of various causes. He was, to steal a line, too absorbed by the future to think about the past. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the man was unabashedly political, responding to a request for a modern-day Inferno by transporting political figures of the day such as Kennedy into Dante's circles of hell. He vented his rage at the violent and malicious, railing against the war in Vietnam and political assassinations, and poured forth the anger and contempt for the treacherous and hypocritical with matter covering racial violence, homophobia, ecological disaster.

Rauschenberg may have felt a duty to be a witness to his time in history, and in that capacity he was more than adequate. His work speaks of frustration and revelation in equal measure, displaying the aggressive and forceful characteristics of Folland's hypermasculine mythology, offset with the touching inclusion of animals and wholesale adoption of the discarded and unloved. His use of mass-media elements in intensely personal work allows to put these elements of the time in new context, not merely artistically but also as a study of their place in history.

Yet Rauschenberg is so much more than a witness. "You begin with the possibilities of the material," he said, but he has taken those possibilities to their illogical extreme. Rauschenberg's work does not merely observe, it observes and transforms, taking snapshots of history and turning them into stepping stones, paving a way forward.

Robert Rauschenberg was a witness to history, a transformative force, and one of the most transcendently disruptive queer artists to have existed. His bold, transgressive work, given the acknowledgment of its fundamental aesthetic queerness it deserves, grants him his place on the long arc of history to which we become witnesses in our own right.