

*Stories Project. ACC 54.
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.*

Matt Magee is an artist. He worked for Robert Rauschenberg from 1994 until his death in 2008. From 2008 until May 2012, Magee continued to work for the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, particularly in the New York art warehouse and the archives.

Transcription of phone interview with Matt Magee conducted by David White, Senior Curator, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, on June 12, 2020. Reviewed and edited by the speakers November 4, 2020.

Matt Magee [MM]: My name is Matt Magee and I was born in Paris, France in 1961. My father was working there at the time. We moved to Tripoli, Libya in 1963 and then to London in 1967. In 1972 we moved to Texas where my father retired. In 1983, I moved to Brooklyn to attend Pratt Institute.

I did my undergraduate degree at Trinity University [San Antonio, Texas] in art history but was making art all during that time and decided I wanted to go to art school. I applied to Pratt and was accepted to the MFA program. I graduated in 1986 and began working in the art world at galleries in SoHo, first with Barbara Toll Fine Arts and then with Sean Kelly at Louver Gallery New York [also referred to as Louver New York]. In both situations I was hired as a preparator/art handler. Am I talking too much?

David White [DW]: No, no, this is perfect. This is wonderful.

MM: Louver Gallery New York closed in spring 1994 [1993]. I was then hired as preparator at Nancy Hoffman Gallery at the recommendation of my friend the artist Jim Hodges, who had been her preparator for eight to ten years. I worked for Nancy at her gallery on West Broadway for about six months. But then my friend Maureen Mahoney at Castelli Graphics told me about a position opening at Robert [Bob] Rauschenberg's studio as an art handler and preparator in the fall of 1994. And it is at this time in November 1994 that I interviewed with David White at 381 Lafayette.

DW: Well, I'm glad you remember that.

MM: That's where my years at Rauschenberg began.

DW: So, then you got hired at that point.

MM: I did, I was hired, I think ostensibly, as an art handler to help with the art shipments. Thomas Buehler was overseeing the transferal of all the art storage from Great Jones Street to the new warehouse on Thirty-eight Street on the west side of Manhattan. I worked closely with Thomas and helped with all the moving and organization.

DW: Oh, good job.

MM: So, at the outset of the job my focus was definitely helping with the transfer of all those crates and artwork to the Thirty-eight Street warehouse.

DW: Because I think we'd probably outgrown that Great Jones Street space.

MM: Yes, I honestly didn't ever have to work in that space. Thirty-eight Street had already been negotiated when I was hired so all the moving and organization started pretty quickly. Trucks started arriving from Captiva [Florida] with Bob's new work and I helped Thomas integrate it all into the new storage at Thirty-eight Street.

DW: You just mentioned that [they moved the work] whenever there was enough new art from the studio that filled the truck; that's because of the situation in Captiva being so close to sea level and the humidity and that was good to not store art there. That's why those trucks came up. And when did you first meet Bob? Do you recall?

MM: I think it was summer of 1995. He was in Manhattan on one of his trips up from Captiva for an event or two. All the windows were open on the third floor of 381, Rocky the tortoise was clunking around, and I was having lunch in the kitchen. Bob came in and said 'hi' and I immediately felt comfortable. He was very sweet and friendly and flirty and welcoming.

DW: Oh well, I guess that was . . . That was his personality. It seemed to make almost everybody feel comfortable, from all the stories I hear from other people as well, is just, he was so welcoming.

MM: Yes. Bob was easy to talk to. It wasn't stressful. He made us all feel comfortable and you always felt like you could say what you wanted to say and Bob looked at you directly.

DW: And did he ask you any specific things that he wanted you to do or was he happy that Thomas was doing that.

MM: No, as a boss, if we think of Bob as our boss, I don't think he ever did, maybe once or twice. I worked closely with you and Thomas in New York and took directives from you guys. Maybe if Bob wanted something special installed in his bedroom or on the second floor.

Actually, he did ask me to go to Hagstrom, the map store in midtown, to buy as many maps of world cities as I could find, for that Illy espresso cup project. [On January 6, 1998 Rauschenberg held a benefit party for his philanthropic organization, Change, Inc. that offers emergency grants to artists. He cohosted the party, held at Le Cirque 2000, New York, with espresso company illycaffè. In collaboration with illycaffè, Rauschenberg designed espresso cup and saucer sets, the proceeds from which also benefit Change, Inc.] That was an interesting field trip for sure.



Robert Rauschenberg
World Cups - Espresso Cups (Illy set of four),
1997
Porcelain cup and saucer
2 x 4 5/8 inches; diameter (5.1 x 11.6 cm)
RRF 97.E026

DW: Which seems to be Bob's case with all of us who've worked with him. If he saw things were going well, he was content.

MM: Yes, I agree.

DW: So then, were you then asked to go to Captiva at all for any delivering or picking up? Or?

MM: I was not. I was there all of about twice in my eighteen years with Bob and I think with his full staff there, they were perfectly capable. I was hired in New York and my job was there working at 381, Thirty-eight Street, and then up at the Westchester warehouse. Matt Hall or Lawrence [Voytek] would drive the trucks up and deliver the art which Thomas, you, and I would organize, sometimes with a crew of helpers from Boxart [Inc.] or Crozier [Fine Arts, New York].

DW: So, all that trucking always started from Captiva, so that brought the truck up, but then the idea was to get it back home.

MM: Yes. I was always there for offloading but never drove a truck back down to Captiva. Processing shipments was an orderly business with Thomas at the warehouse and it was done carefully. It was very organized.

DW: And, did you remember times when Bob was cooking in the kitchen? Did he ever say, "Oh, come cook with me?"

MM: He would cook and Sachika [Hisachika Takahashi] would cook. During my time at 381 mostly Sachika cooked wonderful meals for all of us, he would always have interesting snacks around for Bob.

DW: Right. That was the case.

MM: Yes.

DW: 'Cause he never asked me to cook either for other people. He was so generous and open so I didn't know if you ended up being there and all of a sudden you were stirring the creole or the gumbo.

MM: The kitchen was right below our offices, so I was back and forth a lot and enjoyed many, many meals with you and Thomas and Denise [LeBeau] and then Gina [Guy]. That's an unusual situation for any job to have wonderful meals every day, not every day, but a lot of days wonderfully prepared lunches, long lunches with fun conversation and wine. That made for a very interesting work environment for sure. And maybe Bob's love of food carried over to Sachika and that's why Sachika made such wonderful things.

MM: Bradley [Jeffries] would always fax up the list of groceries from Captiva for me to buy before Bob arrived at 381. It was fun to go to Dean and DeLuca for caviar and flowers and then to East Village Cheese and then to Astor Liquors for cases of Montrachet.

DW: That's one thing I do remember, the idea of a room without flowers in it was not something that Bob was comfortable with.

MM: Those shopping days were always so busy. I would get loads of beautiful flowers for 381, the kitchen, his bedroom and our offices.

DW: But I know he also loved to send flowers to his friends on special occasions for them.

MM: Yes, what were his favorite? Calla lilies or Easter lilies or . . . ?

DW: Lilies and tropical flowers and birds of paradise and all those kinds of things. Yes.

MM: If things were blooming on the roof Sachika would bring them down to the kitchen and put them in vases. We'd have big branches of apple blossoms in the kitchen sometimes when Bob was coming into town. Flowers were definitely part of the workplace. And you would even bring flowers from your garden in East Hampton.

DW: Wherever they came from. He was . . .

MM: Yeah. So that was unusual to have all these flowers around. I mean, working for Bob, the atmosphere was always creative.

DW: And didn't you find that he never made small talk? It was always very specific and what he wanted to say made sense.

MM: Yes. He had a very quick tongue and quick mind and could play with what you were saying in a very clever way. He spoke so directly and also looked at you directly.

DW: No, he was incredible about word play and quick responses.

MM: Yeah. Yeah. I saw his wordplay firsthand for sure. And there was something about his timing and how he spoke, he was definitely a quick wit. I never held back what I wanted to say, but was never ready for what he might say back.

DW: And I'm sure he appreciated that you didn't hold back. He wanted forthright conversation.

MM: Yes. You want honesty if you're the leader of twelve to sixteen employees. You want everyone to tell you how it is. I always felt completely natural around him and thought of him more as friend, but understood he was also the head of this place I worked at. He was the boss.

DW: Oh, it's interesting one could have him be the boss, but still not have that kind of overriding feeling when you were around him.

MM: Yes. There was respect. We all respected him and it was like a family. People have written that. Everyone who knew or met Bob became part of this big extended Rauschenberg family.

DW: And then you . . . So you did work at the Westchester warehouse as well.

MM: Yes. Thomas oversaw the move then from Thirty-eight Street to Westchester. We went from a building in Manhattan to a 30,000 square foot one floor warehouse in Westchester. We were able to organize the various periods of Bob's work in a much more efficient way in the various spaces within the warehouse. You, Gina, Thomas and I would spend days and days making inventories and archiving Bob's photographs and preparing things for exhibition.

DW: That reminds me of one thing about the Thirty-eight Street building next door. Do you have any recollections about what was there?

MM: Well, it was the horse stables for the Central Park carriage rides. Behind Thirty-eight Street, directly behind on Thirty-seventh [Street], were the stables and oftentimes you could smell the horses and their hay in the warehouse. If you opened the back door at the top of the fire escape on the third floor you could see the horses down through tiny windows and get a sense of their lives. It was interesting to see.

DW: But I also remember that building had these ramps so the horses could go to upper levels for their stalls or whatever. And to be on the third floor of the Rauschenberg warehouse and look out the window, you're looking at a horse looking at you. Funny thing to see in New York City.

MM: Yes, it was. That building used to be Mark Kostabi's studio. When I first started working there the freight elevator doors were painted neon yellow and pink. One of the first things I did was paint them a battleship grey—a color or variations of it that was painted on the floors and throughout the building. Thomas made uniform kinds of spaces all through the warehouse and it reminded me of the look of the Dia [Art] Foundation spaces.

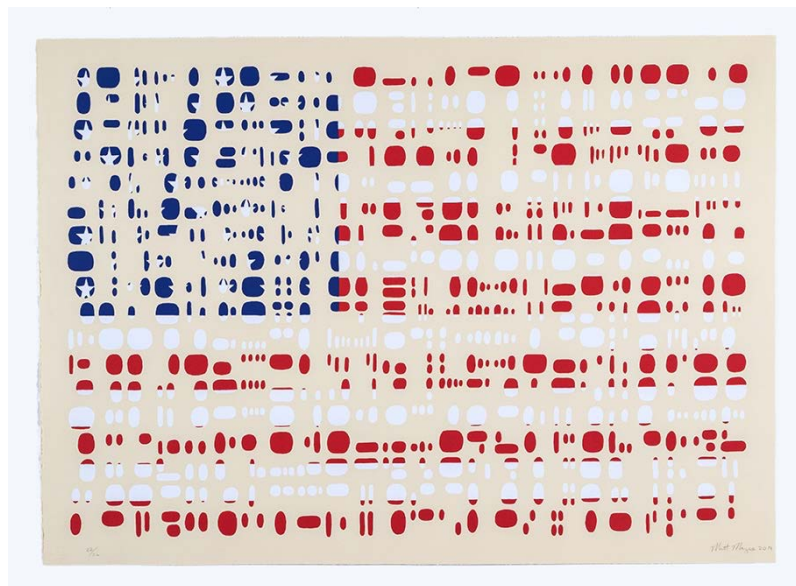
DW: Well, these are all very nice stories and that connection, just the kind of thing we're looking for with these. Not just . . . but specific things from somebody that worked for Bob in a certain

way or another place. And so, this is fine, unless there's other things that you specifically want to add.

MM: Okay. Thank you, David. I think I've said all that I want to say.

DW: So, what are you working on now in your own studio?

MM: A year or two ago I created what I'm titling *Fragment Flag*, an image of the American flag that's fragmented.



Matt Magee
Fragment Flag, 2019
Three-color Silkscreen on Rives
BFK
30 x 41 1/2 inches
Edition of 22

DW: Actually, I know exactly what you're speaking of. I've seen it.

MM: It was originally drawn out as an image for a commission and then it became a print project and now, I'm actually making a painting of it. It's a fitting symbol for the state of our union in 2020.

DW: Seems very appropriate for the moment.

MM: So, I'm working on the third or fourth iteration of this flag image. It seems to be popular. The Beinecke [Library] at Yale [University, New Haven] acquired one for their permanent collection. I'm realizing timing is everything in the case of this particular project.

DW: Okay. Thank you ever so much, Matt.