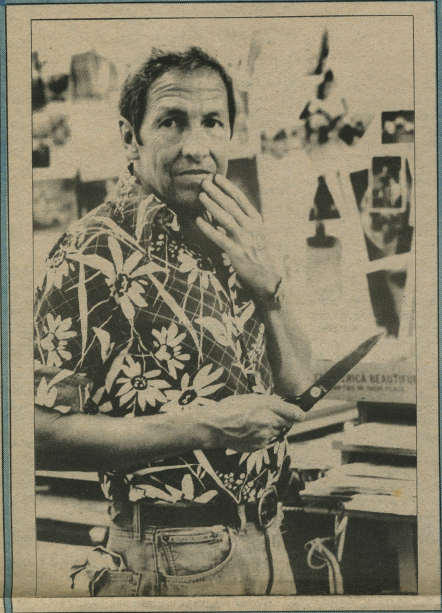


RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

Interviews: Harmel, Mark / "Rauschenberg" / Sanibel-Captiva Islander, 1980

The Sanibel-Captiva Islander April 15, 1980



Robert Rauschenberg, Texas native, ex-New Yorker, Captiva environmentalist, enfant terrible of the traditional art world; the artist who set the world on its ear with exhibits of, among other things, blank, imageless "white paintings," bed linen, tire prints and an angora goat.


Rauschenberg, exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco Museum of Art, The Guggenheim Museum, the Carnegie Institute, the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Art Institute of Chicago and virtually hundreds of other galleries, will be opening his first one-man photographic exhibition to ever be held in this country Sunday, at The Photographers' Gallery.

Rauschenberg, who loves dogs, wind surfing, fishing and television ("It's like having another window") and hates interviews and having his picture taken, consented to an interview with Islander photographer Mark Harmel.

The interview, taped over a two day period while Rauschenberg worked in his studio or relaxed at home, was edited only for clarity and length. What appears here is a verbatim transcript of Rauschenberg and Harmel's discussion on everything from his recent Edison Community College exhibit to the art of photography.

During the first session in his Captiva studio Rauschenberg stands over his press selecting, cutting, and carefully placing photographs clipped from magazines and newspapers over three sheets of paper covered with strips of fabric. Before the tape begins Rauschenberg is leafing through photographs in three identical copies of LIFE magazine. Not finding any suitable images he quips, "Not all the news is fit to print!"

RAUSCHENBERG



Q. What kind of images do you choose for your work?

A. "Images that can still melt into another context, or a series of images that are strong enough to neutralize each other so that the piece doesn't go in one direction or another. If a piece gets a notion that it wants to mean a specific thing then it's a weak piece. So I try to help it disburse itself."

Q. You try to stay away from themes?

A. "Yes. Or morals or emotions. I don't literally do funny pieces, sad pieces or serious pieces."

Q. You don't try to make statements?

A. "The statement is successful totality of possibly some of our highest moments and our heaviest. Whenever a piece starts taking a specific direction then it's moving away from me. I let it go and actually feed off of it as long as it remains ambiguous. So what I'm looking for is a specific ambiguity that will produce an intense reaction."

Q. It will drive historians crazy, won't it?

A. "Probably! But after all, we do the work so why shouldn't they have a few problems?"

Q. At your recent Edison exhibit everyone was noticing the bikes and rulers in your work and trying to make interpretations.

A. "Ok. I'm mostly interested in the bike because of its wheels. In nature there are very few naturally round things - and I mean man's nature too.
"The wood is playing up and down - a tree grows straight up. Fabric is woven, the warp begins to be a rectangle. Paper is not made in shapes other than rectangles, unless it's a custom job. So, there are very few circles. I also use umbrellas and tires and wheels because I try to round out - no pun intended - the experiences. Everything is not perpendicular, horizontal or diagonal. These are the most common objects around and their images tend to reoccur.
"Things that measure, like tape measures or rulers, are just an extension of the straight line. They're either just one step before or one step after. Rarely, do I find an object that is ready for total recycling. The rest tend to be, more or less, familiarities. I wouldn't want to use materials in the work that would be too exotic to anyone. So there is always the search for a common denominator. The intention is not

mystery - at least not mystery on the level of, 'What in the hell is that?' but mystery of 'How does this world exist?' So, the mystery exists in the totality and the continuum rather than the isolated detail.
"See, if you deal with mystery then the possibility of embarrassing or intimidating a spectator is a lot closer. The idea is not to make anyone uncertain of anything other than themselves."

Q. Are people only supposed to accept your work visually then and not look for meaning?

A. "Right. I run into things like, 'We like your work but we don't understand it.' Understanding has nothing to do with it, that's a cop-out. The work is not made for understanding because the work is not a problem, not a question and not an answer. It's just a lack of verbiage there or a condition or embarrassment about thinking that things can only have a value if they can be understood. Understanding usually means having an almost habitual, practical use for something. Very rarely is it considered a special moment for yourself."

Q. Do you get most of the pictures that you use in your work from magazines or newspapers or where?

A. "Nearly all the transfer material comes from pre-printed material that is available. I've been working at a disadvantage because most of the publishing houses are reducing their scale. Even though a lot of them have turned to color the size of their photographs is much smaller. So, one of our best sources is 'Soviet Life', the only imported Russian magazine that is allowed into this country! 'Life' magazine isn't so interesting anymore because with their new deadline and, I guess, editor, they don't approach the news as it is fresh, so everything gets to be an essay on something that was fresh. So it almost gets to be like 'the news in cosmetics' as opposed to 'the news' - which was its original intention."

Q. Do you normally not use your own images? The Tropic cover you did for the Miami Herald was all your own images wasn't it?

A. "Right. So there's no rule about that. I use my own images and 'found' images. The 'Rookery' series out in Los Angeles, was all my own images. "I started using my own photographs and blueprint images - in those days we called them shadowgrams - direct object surface prints using sunlamps and things back in 1952."

"I was taking pictures of my son, my family and friends, and even when I was working in silkscreen there were specific photographs that I felt said more about where I was or where New York was than anything else I saw around. So, to get more control over the extremes - like the clotheslines and watertowers in New York, which are two of the most telling images - you know that you are in New York when you see those because they don't have those anywhere else I've ever been in an important, urban situation!"

"The other case was if I wanted an image so simple that no one else found it interesting, like a glass of water or a ball of string or a detail of a crack in the floor, then I would take my own images."
"The reasons that I like the published images is that I can cover more ground. I obviously am not terribly interested in going to Africa and Australia in the same day and after all, this IS the Twentieth Century and our communications make it possible for me to stay on Captiva and work and still have the resources I would have if I went there myself. I don't feel possessive about the information because everything gets transformed in the process."
"I should be really spoiled - and I hope I am - because I studied photography at Black Mountain and started right off with Calahan and Siskind. For somebody just starting out that was pretty heavy duty! They were teaching there, living there, eating there... and for learning photographic history we had Beaumont Newhall. Penn dropped by, Steichen was no stranger, it was a very rare beginning."

Q. You started out then doing both photography and painting but then you chose to do less photography.

A. "Well, both were full-time activities and one of them had to fall back. I had a few terrifying ideas about photography projects and so I decided there was less I knew about painting so I should follow the painting."

Q. "What sort of photography projects?"

A. "Well, I was going to photograph the United States inch by inch. I would just start where I was and start taking pictures! I was perfectly serious and I think the fact that I was perfectly serious frightened me as much as the idea. It was a very sobering idea and I never started on it. I knew that if you start something you had to finish it. I sometimes wonder though where I would be now - would be all the way through Asheville yet? Probably in jail for trespassing!"

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Q. I find it interesting that the very first piece you ever sold to a museum was a photograph - and that Steichen bought it. How did that happen?

A. "Well, I just made an appointment. I was in New York and occasionally a group of us would get together...for some strange reason I was about the only person in the group who both had a car and knew how to drive it. There were other variations! But it was on one of those trips that I took my photographs in to show them to Steichen - and he liked them. And it wasn't till about 15 or 20 years later that they (the museum) bought a painting."

Q. Was it frightening to go in and see Steichen?

A. "No, I wasn't smart enough to be scared! I didn't understand any of the repercussions or anything of that. I mean, I had done my best and if he wanted to see them there they were. I certainly was honored to be able to show them to him. I was very happy that he bought them because I needed the money. He bought two photographs and I walked out with \$30!

"I didn't learn about the obvious seriousness of a lot of things until much later, and I'm very glad for it. As I learned about the hierarchy of fear I became proportionately inhibited."

Q. Do you generally prefer shooting photographs in black white rather than in color?

A. "Yes, because I can't print color. I've never learned how to print color. I don't know if it's as problematic as it seems but even in paintings I most often prefer black and white - unless the color is the object itself. Lately I've been working as though the color is the object."

Q. Would you consider taking photographs in color if you knew the printing process?

A. "I guess so, unless it's just too cumbersome. I like to keep everything as simple as it can be. People have asked why I like wind surfing and I say, 'Even though it's difficult the IDEA is very simple' - it's you, the wind and the board - as opposed to, 'Why don't you have a boat?' If my car breaks down - well, unfortunately I missed all that interest in mechanics, or maybe I just never had a mechanical inclination - but my idea about what to do when the car breaks down is to buy another one. But I do admire the head that can fix a boat. So that's the same thing."

"It may be that color photography is a lot more natural and simpler than I think, but until I KNOW that, it doesn't interest me to do it. Plus, there's a lot more of the world that's good for natural black and white than there is for color. Color photographs are a particular, selected moment, whereas the transformation of something in color turning into black and white gives one a lot more room to invent in."

"But, all of this may just be coming out of my ignorance about color. It's MY uncertainty."

Q. It's not that you see in black and white then?

A. "No, but I can see in light and dark, even though I'm looking in color."

Q. When you look at an image can you visualize it in black and white?

A. "Yes, because the way I'm looking at it is 'light and dark.'"

Q. When you're taking pictures are you recording them as singular images or do you have something else always in mind?

A. "I take them as singular images."

Q. You never worry about what you're going to do with a picture while you're taking it?

A. "No. When I started taking a lot of photographs in Fort Myers the excuse for doing that was that I was 'collaborating' with Patricia Brown in New York and was making a stage set for her. The piece is called 'Glacial Decoy' and there are over 200 shots blown up to projections 10 feet by five and a half feet and they fill the stage. There's a series of these four simultaneous computerized moving images and they're all from Fort Myers."

"So, I started looking very hard at Fort Myers because of that assignment, but, my search within Fort Myers was always to find as broad a palette of images as I could. If I keep a check on anything it's the fact that I'm not reducing the visual to a controlled packet."

Q. So you don't just go out and say, "I'm just going to shoot palm trees today?"

A. "No, then you lose the miracle. It's so exciting taking photographs. You can be driving to Bailey's or something and all of a sudden you look and say, 'My God, look at that!' And of course there's usually nobody with you to say, 'Oh yea, that's terrific' - but if YOU know, that's important. And a lot of things don't look so terrific except through your idea looking through the camera. And then they (your ideas) have to be confronted when they come out in the darkroom, and if they don't look terrific when they come out in the darkroom then maybe they weren't so terrific!"

"But there are a lot of things that are maybe in the same world that we all walk through but there's no 'same' way of looking at them. That can't be clearer than in the darkroom."

"There was a photography teacher that went to Black Mountain College - I wasn't there then - but the story I heard was that his exercise was to set up a camera in a fixed location - and he allowed NO adjustments. In class, the first day, he let each person take a photograph with the fixed camera. Then his second lesson was to show them how different all their photographs were! The way I heard the story was that they could make NO adjustments - which is a lot more romantic than allowing slight adjustments! But either way the moral is there: the place was more or less the same, even if it wasn't exactly the same, the light had changed, even though it was more or less the same, and all those things make enormous differences."

Q. Do you normally carry your camera with you?

A. "I choose to and choose not to. It's always a deliberate choice. I really prefer to just leave everything else and go out and 'take pictures.' And then I know that that's what I'm doing. That doesn't mean that I mind stopping off and running a few errands for people, but more or less what I'm doing is just taking pictures. That's my vacation!"

Q. Your vacation? You mean it's not work?

A. "No, I'd be embarrassed to call it work because I get such a 'high' from doing it."

Q. I noticed that you don't have many pictures of people in your show for The Photographers' Gallery. There's just one - of a fellow painting a sign.

A. "Well, he was just holding on to the paint brush. There was no way of getting the paintbrush without him!"

"Really, I don't know why that is. I think it's a shyness about not wanting to invade anybody else's privacy. There are enough other things to look at."

Q. Have you ever had someone on the street say, "Hey, take my picture?"

A. "Oh, yea."

Q. Did you do it?

A. "No. Do you? Everybody says that. Even a long time ago when I was just working with one camera I had to very consciously 'take portraits' - or not. I mean, if there was somebody I really wanted to photograph then the whole situation would never be candid - they would know exactly what I was doing, when I was doing it and they wouldn't be doing anything else. That was it."

Q. Do you ever see people who make you say to yourself, "I want to shoot that person," but then you don't do it?

A. "Not really. More often I see trees or lightbulbs that I feel that way about, rather than people."

Q. Then people aren't a subject that you're interested in?

A. "I don't know. It's whatever breaks the light out and it has to do with - I really don't know. I had that figured out once. It's complicated. It's not about asking for permission - the enemy for me is the candid part. But yet everything is moving so - I don't know. I guess I'm just too shy to take people."

Q. Sometimes I feel barriers there too, but when I really want to shoot someone I either ask them or, if I want it bad enough, I just do it.

A. "If it were something that you really needed maybe you wouldn't feel that way. So there must be a reason for not preferring to take pictures of people. Because you could ask permission from a tree just as easily."

Q. Trees don't give you dirty looks!

A. "But they don't make you nervous or impatient either! Or ask for a copy!"

"But that's all part of shyness. You don't feel confident but you want to give the situation everything you've got."

Q. Are you going to be worrying about limiting the amount of prints you make?

A. "Not for the (Photographers' Gallery) show. I don't think there will be that problem there."

Q. Have you thought about limiting prints? Deciding to print just 100 of something and then destroying the negative?

A. "I don't know. I guess I just haven't been into business - but that's a possibility. I would prefer to just mark the negatives so you could see that the edition was gone, or something - like you would cancel a stone. But anyway, I would certainly make sure that everyone was protected."

Q. Are you taking more pictures now than you normally do?

A. "One of the reasons that I'm taking more pictures than I have in the last few years is because I've just gotten my darkroom set up. This is the only darkroom that I have, here, and I'm not a 'drugstore photographer.' I'm too



greedy. I really love the time in the darkroom, I like the whole process, I like to follow completely through from the time you see something and decide to take the photograph - sometimes I get so excited taking the photograph that I can't hold the camera still enough - that excitement gives me such a 'high' and it continues right on through to the finished print. I can't do that with the abortion of sending film out into unknown hands and then just getting the results. Every time the same person prints a photograph over the photograph is different.

"It's so strange because I had this same conversation last night with Terry (Van Brunt), and we were talking about editions and I said, 'I don't know how I feel about that,' but one of the things I do know is that not all of my prints are going to be the same. Because, from time to time, you have a different response to the same image. So each photograph is an original. There's not an ideal contrast to a photograph that makes you say 'This is it.'

"I was reading about Ansel Adam's 'Moonrise' and it seems that now the critics are looking at all the variations and saying, 'In such and such a year he had a feeling that the sky should be darker. Another period the emphasis was on this or something else.' I think I probably would have distrusted myself if I had read the article before I decided that. But I know I find it nearly impossible to copy myself in the darkroom. That's not just because you're not paying attention or you don't know how to do exactly the same thing - you can take notes carefully enough to measure anything. So photography stays alive even though it's the same image and each photograph is an original as long as it's being treated as if it is."

Q. I like slides because you just shoot them and send them off.

A. "You asked me before about shooting color; it's not that I don't like color or even that I prefer black and white to color, it's just that so far I can't control it. I can't make a good color picture. I can see a good color picture but I can't make it.

"The time in the darkroom is like no other time in any kind of environment that I know of where I don't know whether I've been there for 20 minutes or six or eight hours. I guess it's part of the necessary insulation that you have to have in order to have control working with sensitized materials. Nearly everything else that I do I have an 'outside world' sense of time. When I'm painting I have the feeling, 'OK I've been working for six hours or 12.' In theater you definitely know because everything is minute by minute. The show must go on but the show must stop too, so there's a capsule of time involved there. Somehow the darkroom is just a magic place. I felt that way from the very beginning, since back at Black Mountain College. I would all of a sudden stop working, jarred by reality, and say, 'Oh, my God I missed supper!' And I would go on and I'd miss breakfast. Or the opposite was true - supper wasn't for three hours.

"I don't know if I like the idea of calling it magic but time in the darkroom seems to belong to material, not to the human being. It's not a social time or a functional human time. All the details you have to give the time to - the chemicals, the lights you're working with is the being."

Q. How do you feel about being photographed yourself?

A. "I hate it. It makes me self-conscious."

Q. You worry about how you're going to look?

A. "I don't know, I guess that's part of it. I find it hard to carry on a conversation naturally, but then it's no worse than being interviewed. I mean, it's hard to talk naturally when you're being interviewed too. There are all kinds of crazy things that get stuck in your throat that you'd love to share with somebody."

Q. Do you have a problem with photographers following you around?

A. "Sometimes."

Q. Any hard-core paparazzi who follow you down the streets?

A. "Yes. I guess professionally it's supposed to be a compliment but I don't really need that kind of business."

Q. Cartier-Bresson, the famous photojournalist, has taken pictures of you. What was that like?

A. "He was beautiful. I guess he has a great sensibility. He himself is an extremely shy person and he says he doesn't consider himself a photographer - he only takes photographs because it gives him an excuse to look at everything. He has the same camera that he started off with and he's the only photographer I ever met who said - and I've heard it before - 'You won't even know I'm there' - and I sometimes did forget that he was there taking pictures! He became such a good friend. He came for an afternoon and stayed for five days, and I never asked him to go anywhere with me as a photographer, I simply asked him to go with me because we were having such a nice time that neither



one of us wanted to leave!"

Q. How was he different?

A. "I have no idea. If it was a technique I certainly would like to know it. There was just so much care involved, and quietness in his movements.

"When he did leave, he stuck a note under my door saying that he just had to go to Viet Nam. He felt he would make movies in Viet Nam and was going to go over on a troop ship with new recruits and come back with the wounded. He was going to make either one or two documentaries about it.

"I only hear from hearsay but I think he made three or four trips back and forth. And he wasn't a terribly young man at that moment I knew him. And the idea of going right over to this incredible war! And another time when there was a student resistance in Paris he left in the middle of the night to go to that too, because there was lots of shooting and stuff going on and he didn't mind that. He didn't like the idea of that going on, that people were getting hurt.

"For somebody too shy to be seen he certainly did like the hot places!"

Q. When we first talked about you having a show at the Photographers' Gallery you surprised me when you said, "I'll risk it."

A. "I'm not terribly sure about any of the things I do, so it is a risk. Somehow I think there's possibly more risk in showing on Sanibel than there is in showing in New York, Paris, or Los Angeles.

"In any kind of highly populated capital situation you're guaranteed and-or comforted by being able to count on there being enough culturally interested or sophisticated people to let the work exist popularly.

"My show at Edison College was one of the most fulfilling experiences I've had in exhibiting. I got more personal response by showing there than in any of the larger exhibitions I've had. Maybe it was just more meaningful. I like someone shouting across Bailey's parking lot, 'Hey, Rauschenberg, that was a great show.' I felt like I had done something for somebody and shown some work to someone that they couldn't have seen anywhere else."

Q. You don't get that feeling in New York or anywhere else?

A. "You do, but it's more complex. You get an international reaction and sometimes it takes years before it reaches you - and sometimes it never reaches you - but you've caused a change. I don't know, I don't think I've ever had an exhibition where, depending on my own personal,

psychological state of mind and sense of fatigue, I haven't said, 'Oh, my God, suppose nobody shows up?!"

"The quality of the work is in the hands of the artist, that's already been done, but the competition with events and activities and attitudes and the outside social world is completely out of one's hands. I do think that showing locally is, somehow, more dangerous than showing to an abstract public. What I'm hoping is that, and it doesn't make me feel anymore confident or less afraid, but I'm hoping that because I do have a reputation already and I'm showing at The Photographers' Gallery that maybe I can focus some outside attention on the activities which will benefit all the other photographers in the Gallery. So, that's kind of scary too. If I don't succeed then I've lost again.

"What's going on there is a beautiful thing and I think The Photographers' Gallery can function as a catalyst culturally for the whole area. Most of the people I've met that exhibit there are extremely gifted, successful, serious artists who have simply chosen, in most cases, to live in this area because they love it."

Q. Is it threatening because this is your first show of photographs?

A. "No, I had one in Paris just two weeks ago. It was a surprise event. A gallery I helped open 17 years ago in Paris (operated by Ileana Sonnabend), where I had been the first exhibition, was being sold. I found out about the opening two days before we had it and I didn't know it was being sold till after the opening. She had published a portfolio of my early photographs from the Fifties and she wanted my exhibit to be the last show she had too. We had the photographs there already. But this exhibit at the Gallery will be the first show of photographs I've had in the United States. The other was historical work but this will be new history and local.

Q. How did you get involved with the Photographers' Gallery? You've been supportive of it and were their first lifetime member.

A. "Well, I watched the Gallery start. I wasn't so supportive of it in the very beginning because I thought I would just wait and see whether there were enough people, who were actually going to be the anatomy of the Gallery, who would maintain their interest and their energy and share their energy to make it work. Because, a good idea is easy but to persevere is hard. A lot of enthusiasm only lasts from three to six hours but that doesn't mean the idea isn't good. At the point where I saw that there were enough people who

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needed this situation and who would support it and work in it then I became an all out sponsor."

Q. Did you attend many of the shows?

A. "Yes. I tried not to go to openings because I just wanted to look at the works. I shouldn't say that an opening is no time to look at the works! You know we're having a band and we're having a tent and it's going to be a party if nothing else!

"I don't doubt there'll be some people who come in from 'outside.' It's my reputation and I have to suffer it greatly. It's not always an advantage to be someone who's well known. There are all kinds of responsibilities that can interfere with, like, whether you can go fishing or not or just 'hang out.' So, if I have to assume the negative responsibilities of being some kind of a celebrity I would like to be able to use it at home here where it makes some difference to somebody else's life. If because I'm showing at the Gallery some people come in from Miami or Atlanta or Los Angeles or just write in for requests - well, that's good. I mean it's good for everyone."

I don't want to use the local facilities for my own financial gain. I'm giving the photographs to people who will make a contribution to the people who are working with the Gallery, which will support more exhibitions, maybe enlarge the facility - that's a lousy little darkroom they have. I mean I don't see any reason why they can't have a really fine darkroom that all the members and people having exhibitions could use - like a 'guest darkroom.'"

Q. You've been very supportive of the Gallery and all the arts when other famous artists haven't. Why?

A. "I think that's the only thing to do. I have CHANGE, the emergency fund for artists foundation and we now have free hospitalization for artists. Unfortunately we're only in two

locations, in Los Angeles and in New York. But the New York area is particularly important because that's where there's almost no such thing as a 'New York artist' and you're really helping the rest of the nation because most of the artists come from someplace else and go to New York.

"I'm also involved in changing the legislation for artists' rights - the contribution laws, which are so unfair and the inheritance laws."

Q. You surely must have had other demands to show outside of Sanibel and Edison Community College lately.

A. "Of course. Two weeks ago I had a retrospective in Berlin. From there I went on to the Pop Art Show in Venice then to Paris for the show of early photographs then to New York to show most of this year's work - done here - at Leo Castelli's Gallery. This is Friday, Saturday someone is coming to pick up an exhibition that goes to Los Angeles and I just had a telephone call about the Around The World Show and how they want me to end up in Los Angeles for the opening of their new museum there. I'm not looking for shows! In fact, I hope it's possible, I want to get into some experimental casting projects because of my new assistant - I have to find out what he knows about that because I know very little. I'm looking forward to that collaboration and I'd like to take just a whole year and just work and if anybody wants to have a show they make the show. I don't know if I can do that or not because everytime I have a show I want it to be as good as it possibly can be, which usually means I have to work on the exhibition myself. Maybe I will just have to say, 'No exhibitions in 1981 at all.'

"I don't know if that's a good idea it just seems, theoretically, like a good idea for me to have a large piece of work time without the exhibition structure.

"The reason I moved to Captiva was to be able to have longer working days. If Captiva changes too much I don't know where there's another place as beautiful, so I wouldn't

know where to go."

Q. You have always been sort of a collecting point for other artists. I thought perhaps you were having some of these exhibits to support artistic activities.

A. "No, I don't think so. When I first came down here people wanted to know how they could get into my 'commune' and it never was that! Everybody here supports themselves, have their own lives and the people who work for me are experts at what they do. So it's not a 'Hippy' idea."



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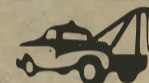
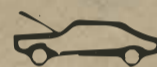


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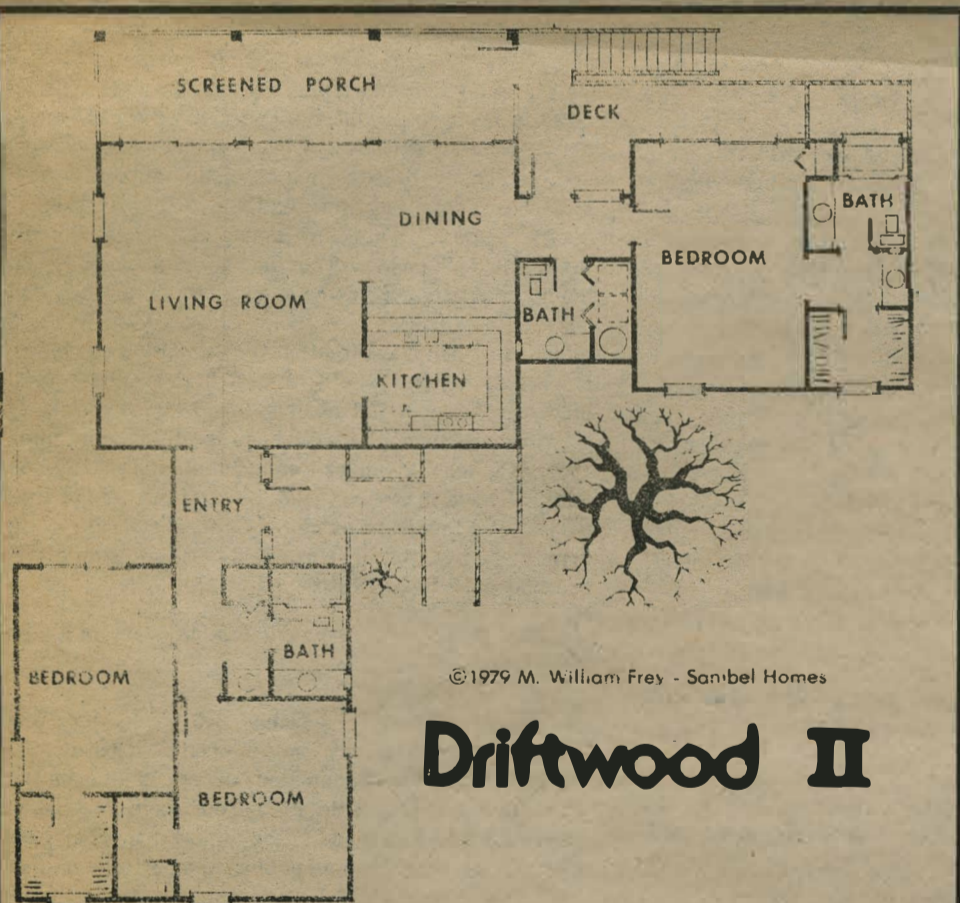
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**photo
 sanibel**

1571 Periwinkle Way at intersection
 with Dixie Beach Boulevard
 Phone 472-1086