

Sand Into Stone: Untitled (*Early Egyptian*) and the Personal Myths of Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly

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fig. 1

Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Early Egyptian)*, 1974
Cardboard, sand, fabric, rope, wood branch, and acrylic paint
60 ⁷/₈ × 55 ³/₈ × 16 ³/₄ inches (154.5 × 140.5 × 42.7 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

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The world invented and described by Dante is completely imaginary, but the realism of his language makes it still vivid, almost as if it were truer than our own. The world invented by Rauschenberg really is ours (seen, transferred, reproduced and transmitted to others), although the radicalism of his language makes it seem imaginary, enigmatic and almost remote.

Mirta d'Argenzio¹

At the floor, where nonchalant pragmatism meets pietistic respect for nature, Rauschenberg's sculptural bodies can be found.

Marjorie Welish²

Untitled (*Early Egyptian*), from 1974, belongs to Robert Rauschenberg's 1973–74 eponymous series, a group of fifteen sculptures nearly all assembled from cardboard boxes and a variety of found objects. This series marks the last phase of a five-year period that began with Rauschenberg's 1970 relocation to Captiva, Florida, during which time the artist explored the material and pictorial properties of cardboard. Untitled (*Early Egyptian*) is unusual for its narrative quality, a feature that is rarely found in Rauschenberg's extensive and protean oeuvre. The title, proportions, installation, and trompe-l'oeil technique contribute to an expressive, even theatrical effect. The sculpture was first exhibited in May 1974 at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York alongside a series of works on paper by Cy Twombly. The pairing of the two artists at this juncture was significant, for as this essay argues, the fabrication, iconography, and narrative properties of Untitled (*Early Egyptian*) illustrate a decades-long, yet critically overlooked, creative dialogue between Rauschenberg and Twombly.

Rauschenberg constructed Untitled (*Early Egyptian*) by step-stacking three cardboard boxes and enveloping them in a thick, uniform layer of sand (fig. 1). A tall and smooth tree branch leans to the right at a roughly forty-five-degree angle, secured to the sand-covered structure by a taut rope. One end of the rope is tied near the top of the branch, while the other threads

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through the side of the uppermost box and emerges from the top in a simple thumb knot. The same knot clinches a piece of faded pink mesh fabric that drapes over the left side of the sculpture, nearly touching the ground. The sculpture rests on the ground a few inches away from the wall, and a closer look at the verso reveals that Rauschenberg left the back side of all three boxes bare of sand and instead painted them in pure primary colors: the bottom in blue, the middle in yellow, and the top in red. A gentle glow emanates from behind the sculpture and onto the wall as a result, its intensity changing according to the angle of observation and to ambient light.

In late 1970, Rauschenberg left New York City, where he had lived and worked since 1949, and permanently relocated his primary home and studio to the remote island of Captiva. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a number of other artists including Ellsworth Kelly, Agnes Martin, Donald Judd, Brice Marden, and others sought to escape arduous—if artistically fruitful—living conditions in New York, finding respite in homes and studio spaces outside of the city including upstate New York, New Mexico, Texas, and abroad in Greece, among other locations.³ Despite the material improvements that newfound critical success may have afforded him, Rauschenberg struggled emotionally in New York, and longed for a simpler, more serene life.⁴ In a 1987 interview with art historian and critic Barbara Rose, he explained, “I was beginning to feel that so many of my friends, and you are one of them, were having so many problems with happiness that perhaps I was responsible for some sort of evil spirit.”⁵ In a state of deep depression, Rauschenberg consulted an astrologer for guidance, later recalling, “The advice was to not ever go to the mountains—I have told you how I hate rocks because they are traps—and to head for the sun and sea.”⁶ And so he did.



fig. 2

Robert Rauschenberg, *Estate*, 1963. Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas, 95 ¾ × 69 ¾ inches (243.2 × 177.2 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Over the course of several exploratory trips in the late 1960s, Rauschenberg discovered the island of Captiva, off of the Gulf Coast of Florida, which he felt possessed “a magic that was unexplainable in its power.”⁷ Through his 1970 relocation to the island, the artist left behind a saturated urban landscape, intensely collaborative performance projects, technological experiments, and politically driven works. Two of Rauschenberg’s most seminal series, the Combines (1954–64) and the silkscreen paintings (1962–64), layered painterly gestures alongside heterogeneous found materials and photographs, laden with urban, popular culture, art historical, and vernacular references (fig. 2). From his secluded seaside studio in Captiva, Rauschenberg created artworks with radically different materials and color palettes, reflecting the topography of his new surroundings. He

worked with sand, driftwood, fabric, bicycle wheels—a recurring motif in his oeuvre since the 1950s, and a likely reference to Marcel Duchamp's readymade⁸—and other found objects. Most notably, Rauschenberg exploited the properties of cardboard, a readily available material that he transformed into sculptural and printed artworks; he even created trompe-l'oeil ceramics that resembled cardboard boxes. In the brochure for his 1971 *Cardbirds* editions, published by the Los Angeles-based print workshop Gemini G.E.L., the artist wrote, "A desire built up in me to work in a material of waste and softness. Something yielding with its only message a collection of lines imprinted like a friendly joke. A silent discussion of their history exposed by their new shapes. Labored commonly with happiness. Boxes."⁹ In this poetic reflection, Rauschenberg revealed his interest in the material's cultural and economic significance. Concepts of waste (consumerism), history (transit, migration), and labor (economy, social class) were embedded in the medium.¹⁰ Rauschenberg was also keenly aware of the material's artistic lineage and unavoidable associations with collage and assemblage techniques employed by Cubist and Dada artists such as Pablo Picasso, Duchamp, and Kurt Schwitters.¹¹ He observed, "The cardboard was really stubborn and attempted to make me a cubist, and I wouldn't let it happen."¹²

Though Rauschenberg recognized the historical and ideological implications of the medium, he deflected overt political readings of his works in cardboard, instead consistently referring to the material's accessibility, availability, and affordability.¹³ Moreover, Rauschenberg had always scavenged art materials from his surroundings, often for the most pragmatic reasons. For the first decade of his career he lived in near poverty, without art supplies, a permanent working studio, or at times even running water.¹⁴ Asked about his reason for deciding to make his Combines three-dimensional, Rauschenberg once answered, simply: "Poverty."¹⁵ Decidedly utilitarian concerns were therefore central to his sustained exploration of cardboard. Additionally, beyond the convenience of this material's ubiquitous presence in Florida, its universal quality attracted the artist, who later recalled:

When I lived in New York I was used to the richness and treasures you could find in the streets. When I moved to Florida obviously there was not that kind of material. I thought, okay, I'm going to live [in] many other places and can't be dependent on the surplus and refuse of an urban society. So, what material, no matter where I was in the world, would be available? Cardboard boxes! It was sort of a practical, rational decision. I still haven't been anyplace where there weren't cardboard boxes ... even up the Amazon.¹⁶

In the *Cardboards* (1971–72), his first series to use the material as a primary subject, Rauschenberg cut, splayed, and patched together cardboard boxes and scraps of various shapes, sizes, and provenance into large-scale, wall-mounted assemblages. The artist's gift for composition enabled the rough, weathered material to coalesce into surprisingly eloquent formations, as in the large work *Lake Placid / Glori-Fried / Yarns from New England (Cardboard)* from 1971 (fig. 3). In this series, the unaltered, unadorned cardboard surfaces reveal the history of their contents and travels, as do the individual works' titles, which are excerpted from the names of the packed products: *Nabisco Shredded Wheat (Cardboard)*, *Gun Tackers / Skin Pack / Brushes / I.T.T. / Glass (Cardboard)*, and *Plain Salt (Cardboard)*, among others. As art historian

fig. 3

Robert Rauschenberg, *Lake Placid / Glori-Fried / Yarns from New England (Cardboard)*, 1971. Cardboard, rope, and wood pole, 114 ¾ × 161 × 8 inches (291.5 × 408.9 × 20.3 cm) width variable. Glenstone, Potomac.

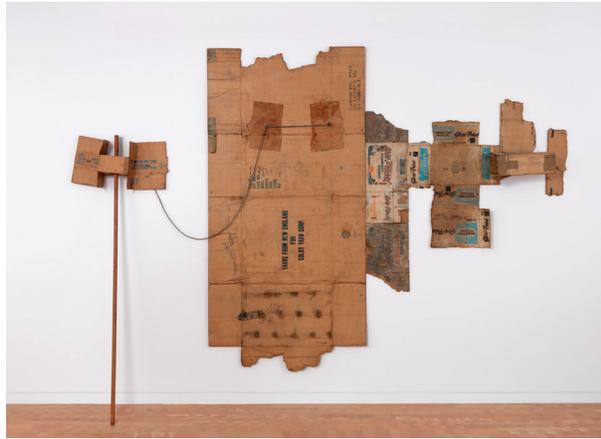


fig. 4

Robert Rauschenberg, *Gift for Apollo*, 1959. Combine: oil, pant fragments, necktie, wood, fabric, newspaper, printed paper, and printed reproductions on wood with metal bucket, metal chain, door knob, L brackets, metal washer, nail, and rubber wheels with metal spokes, 49 × 42 ¼ × 20 inches (124.5 × 107.3 × 50.8 cm); depth variable. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. The Panza Collection.



Yve-Alain Bois noted, the *Cardboard* series was significant in that it “marked the return of Rauschenberg to the handling of matter—as opposed to his almost exclusive involvement, for a whole decade, with the dematerialized images produced by photography and various other technologies.”¹⁷

This “handling of matter” continued in Rauschenberg’s *Venetian* series (1972–73). In these works, the artist assembled a range of household and natural objects, this time to evoke the “still very vivid impression of elegance, of grandeur, of fragility and decay” he had experienced during a trip to Venice with his dealer Ileana Sonnabend and her husband Michael Sonnabend in the spring of 1972.¹⁸ Chairs, tires, branches, metal scraps, a clawfoot bathtub, and other disparate materials come together in peculiar, poetic formations, at times recalling the incongruous associations in Rauschenberg’s Combine works, as in *Gift for Apollo* from 1959 (fig. 4). Many of the *Venetians* are vertically anchored, bridging the wall and the floor with rope, twine, tire strips, and other hanging elements.

The subsequent *Early Egyptians*, by contrast, have a grounded, architectural quality. Most of the fifteen sculptures that comprise the series are constructed out of whole cardboard boxes covered in sand.¹⁹ These rest directly on the ground, several inches away from the wall and their backs, painted in bright colors, cast luminous halos behind them. In this series, cardboard takes on a structural role, supporting the application of other, more painterly materials such as sand and gauze. Rather than exploring the inherent properties and history of the material, as he did in the *Cardboard* series, here Rauschenberg covered, shrouded, and transformed it.

The *Early Egyptian* series—with “early” likely a synonym for “ancient” or “Old Kingdom”—was inspired by the artist’s interest in Egypt, sparked in part by his meeting Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan. Sadruddin invited the artist to visit his country, but the Yom Kippur War broke out in October 1973, putting an end to that plan. Rauschenberg finally traveled there in 1981.²⁰ The *Early Egyptians* therefore do not relate to his personal experience of a place, unlike the *Venetians*. Instead, it appears this series was influenced in large part by a book Rauschenberg owned on the Egyptian pyramids, a gift from Senator Jacob Javits’s wife, Marion Javits.²¹

fig. 5

Robert Rauschenberg,
 Untitled (*Early Egyptian*), 1974.
 Cardboard, sand, acrylic paint,
 55 ¼ × 105 ¾ × 39 ¼ (140.3
 × 268.5 × 99.7 cm). Robert
 Rauschenberg Foundation.



fig. 6

Great Sphinx of Giza, Egypt,
 ca. 2575–2465 BC. Limestone,
 66 × 62 × 240 feet (20.1 × 18.9
 × 73.2 meters).



When he created a group of *Early Egyptians* for his September 1973 exhibition at the Galerie Sonnabend in Paris, Rauschenberg pronounced, “Each one of us has their own idea about ancient Egypt, at the level of personal myth.”²² Indeed, the *Early Egyptian* series is the artist’s idiosyncratic interpretation of the history, architecture, and mythology of an ancient civilization.

The box assemblages that characterize the series read as the building blocks, sculptural reliefs, or other ornamental elements of a great Egyptian monument. Taken together, the works of this series resemble a long-abandoned construction site; precariously balanced “stones” and a haphazard arrangement of a steel rod, rusty bucket, coiled ropes and hoses seem to carry the traces of distant human activity. Their weighty appearance contrasts with the underlying pliability of their material. As the curator João Fernandes writes, “The paradox of the monument—marked by both its ambition of eternity and the ephemeral nature of the circumstances of power which enable or disable its survival—becomes clear in these works made of a perishable material.”²³

In another Untitled (*Early Egyptian*) from 1974, four large rectangular boxes stand vertically in a row, propped up by smaller boxes and covered in sand, their painted backs casting an orange glow on the wall behind them (fig. 5). The sculpture’s composition brings to mind one of the most iconic Egyptian monuments, the Great Sphinx of Giza, with the four fingers of each limestone paw stretched regally in front of its recumbent body (ca. 2575–2465 BC; fig. 6). During a spring 1974 trip to Paris, the artist was also struck by a sculpture in the Egyptian Antiquities wing of the Louvre museum, *Four Baboons Adoring the Rising Sun*, which features a similar four-part vertical structure (Egyptian, ca. 1279–1213 BC; fig. 7).²⁴ In addition to evoking ancient Egyptian architectural motifs, the work’s serial nature recalls the Minimalist compositions of Donald Judd, though the soft, slumping quality of Rauschenberg’s material, so closely tied to daily life, contrasts starkly with Judd’s sleek, machine-made constructions.²⁵ Critic Edit DeAk wrote of this *Early Egyptian* and others in the May 1974 Leo Castelli exhibition:

Sagging so wittily against the boundaries of Minimal esthetics, they imply that concrete art-issues can be gotten at through cardboard mockups as well as through the real thing. The behinds of these Sphinxes emanate Day-Glo color to produce a coda of

fig. 7

Four Baboons Adoring the Rising Sun, ca. 1279–1213 BC. Granite, 62 × 126 inches (157.5 × 320 cm). Department of Egyptian Antiquities: Religious and funerary beliefs. Musée du Louvre, Paris.



fig. 8

Robert Rauschenberg, Untitled (*Early Egyptian*), 1973. Cardboard, fabric, sand, pillow, acrylic paint, 78 × 28 × 18 ½ inches (198.1 × 71.1 × 47 cm). Glenstone, Potomac.



color-field haze on the wall, leaving all “nonrelational” painting a rear-guard reflection of artistic vanity. [The work] does more to close the chapter of “post-Minimal” art than all the rest of this season’s other attempts put together.²⁶

Beyond their dialogue with Minimalism and Post-Minimalism, what distinguishes the *Early Egyptians* are their lyrical, architectonic, and narrative qualities.

In Untitled (*Early Egyptian*) from 1973, made for the Sonnabend exhibition in September of that year, Rauschenberg shrouded a vertical stack of seven cardboard boxes with gauze, suggesting a towering, angular mummy (fig. 8). A pink polkadot pillow rests on the sculpture’s top box and wilts slightly over its sides, standing in for a pharaoh’s headdress. But the unaltered object, redolent with domestic associations, does not quite transcend its functionality. Instead, it causes a certain cognitive dissonance, so often present in Rauschenberg’s work, particularly in the Combines, where familiar objects—chairs, tires, umbrellas, animals—collide in unfamiliar juxtapositions. In the Combines, rather than unifying the materials, the artist celebrated their heterogeneous history, function, and form.²⁷

On the other hand, in the 1974 Untitled (*Early Egyptian*) considered here, each object is neutral enough to remain abstract, yet evocative. No pink polka dots or encrusted bicycle wheels conjure familiar but decontextualized objects or activities. Instead, the elements play a narrative role. The relative sizes and arrangement of the boxes, as well as the angle of the rope and the branch, create tension and the illusion of an action: the pulling of the stones by an invisible figure, straining from the (imaginary) weight. The forward direction of the branch imparts a sense of determination, mission, or even a voyage, if one sees in it a mast or prow of a ship. Moreover, in contrast to the eerie, neon-green Day-Glo paint applied to a number of other pieces in the series, here the primary colors create a subtle, naturalistic glow around the sculpture, reminiscent of a sunlit sky.

The meticulous process involved in creating *Untitled (Early Egyptian)* also serves to create a narrative whole. At first glance, the work has the overall appearance of concrete or stone, though a slight sagging at the corners of the boxes reveals the soft, pliable material under the coating of dried sand. Elsewhere in the series, Rauschenberg applied sand in a thinner, more painterly manner, with visible brushstrokes, open cardboard seams, and uneven surfaces. Here, instead, the artist and his studio assistants applied multiple layers of sand and glue, creating a thick, uniform exterior, and achieving the most convincing appearance of stone of any work in the series.²⁸ Rauschenberg delighted in the visual uncertainty produced by these surfaces, remarking, "When you think they are boxes, you think 'no, those aren't boxes but stones.' And when you think they are stones, you go back to your first impression: they are boxes! There is a game there, an ambiguity, that I enjoy."²⁹

Trompe l'oeil is not unique to *Untitled (Early Egyptian)*, as Rauschenberg explored the technique at length, and through significant technical effort and innovation, in several other series around that time, including in the *Cardbirds* and the 1972–73 *Tampa Clay Works*.³⁰ In *Untitled (Early Egyptian)*, however, this process is a means to an end, a way to imbue the work with a narrative quality. Art critic Bruce Hainley captured the theatrical nature of the series:

The "Early Egyptians" enchant the pure *povera* effects of earlier cardboard works by arranging their melancholy concerns in testimonial tableaux, transforming rather than appropriating materials to become more sculptural and performative. Moody and flamboyant as the sphinx, they question—soft monuments twilit in the desert of the real, awaiting a response whose consequence will not be random.³¹

Through the source materials, fabrication process, and historic references, discussed above, *Untitled (Early Egyptian)* embodies a dynamic and longstanding artistic dialogue between Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly, one that dates back to the early 1950s and is particularly evident in the artists' sculptural work. While Rauschenberg's interdisciplinary oeuvre has been consistently assessed, Twombly's sculpture was long considered marginal to his oeuvre.³² Beginning with a series of talismanic and totemic works in the 1950s, followed by experiments with cardboard in the 1970s, and continuing with a series inspired by classical mythologies and in particular by ancient Egypt, a connective thread runs through a number of Rauschenberg and Twombly's sculptures over several decades. *Untitled (Early Egyptian)* is the synthesis of these material, pictorial, and allegorical concerns.

Rauschenberg and Twombly met at the Art Students League of New York in 1951, and returned to Black Mountain College together that summer.³³ There, the two artists spent considerable time together "hanging out and doing secret work," as Rauschenberg noted, away from the unrelenting criticism of their professor Josef Albers, whose doctrinaire approach clashed with the artists' exuberant, exploratory vision and process.³⁴ In August 1952, Rauschenberg and Twombly traveled for eight months to Italy, Morocco, and Spain on a scholarship Twombly had received from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.³⁵ They documented their adventures in a series of remarkable black-and-white photographs, taken with a Rolleiflex camera they shared;



fig. 9
Robert Rauschenberg working on the *Feticci Personali* series in Rome, 1953. Photo attributed to Cy Twombly. © Cy Twombly Foundation.



fig. 10
Cy Twombly, *Untitled*. Painted bronze. Conceived in 1953, executed in 1989. Private collection. © Cy Twombly Foundation.



fig. 11
Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Elemental Sculpture)*, 1953. Assemblage: wood box with metal screw eye, twine, and tethered stone, 2 ½ × 4 ¼ × 3 ½ inches (6.4 × 10.8 × 8.9 cm). Private collection.

the snapshots capture their sightseeing activities and convey a striking, if understated, intimacy.³⁶ In Morocco particularly, the two artists found great inspiration in the materials they saw in local marketplaces, objects with ritual and fetishistic associations, including bones, beads, hair, fur, and feathers. In his application for the travel scholarship, Twombly had specifically noted his interest in the traditional roots of modern art, particularly in classical forms, fetishes, and ritual objects.³⁷ During their trip, Rauschenberg created small box arrangements, called *Scatole Personali* (personal boxes; 1952–53), as well as his first sculptures using suspension, the *Feticci Personali* (personal fetishes).³⁸ The latter series possessed a tribal, shamanistic quality resembling a series of props for an imagined ritual performance (fig. 9). In 1953, after returning from Morocco to Italy, Twombly began making totemic sculptures, in which he wrapped arrangements of found wood with twine, and coated the whole object with gesso, as in *Untitled*, from 1953 (fig. 10). Though these were static, and Rauschenberg's *Feticci Personali* were distinctly kinetic, the two employed many of the same materials and techniques and imbued assemblages of everyday materials with symbolic power.³⁹

The two artists' visions of ancient civilizations—their “personal myths”—emerged in a number of works across different media. In the fall of 1953, they shared a joint exhibition at Eleanor Ward's Stable Gallery in New York. Rauschenberg exhibited two *White Paintings* and a selection of black paintings, as well as his *Elemental Sculptures*, a series of small-scale wooden boxes, rocks, and twine, that exhibited “primitivist” qualities, and seemingly alluded to talismans or personal keepsakes. As the artist described, “I thought this rock was precious and I couldn't let go of it, so I had a string around it, and then put it in a box”⁴⁰ (fig. 11).

The notion of precious enclosure appears in Twombly's *Untitled (Funerary Box for a Lime Green Python)*, a sculpture from 1954 (fig. 12). It originally comprised a shallow wooden box, four dried palm fronds, and an open box frame from which wooden

fig. 12

Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled* (Cy Twombly with his artwork, Rauschenberg's Fulton Street studio [III]), 1954. Contact print, 2 1/4 x 2 1/4 inches (5.7 x 5.7 cm). Photograph features Twombly's sculpture *Untitled* (*Funerary Box for a Lime Green Python*), 1954, at right.



fig. 13

Cy Twombly, *Untitled* (*Funerary Box for a Lime Green Python*), 1954. Wood, palm leaf fans, house paint, cloth, wire, 55 x 26 1/4 x 5 inches (140 x 66 x 12.5cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © Cy Twombly Foundation.



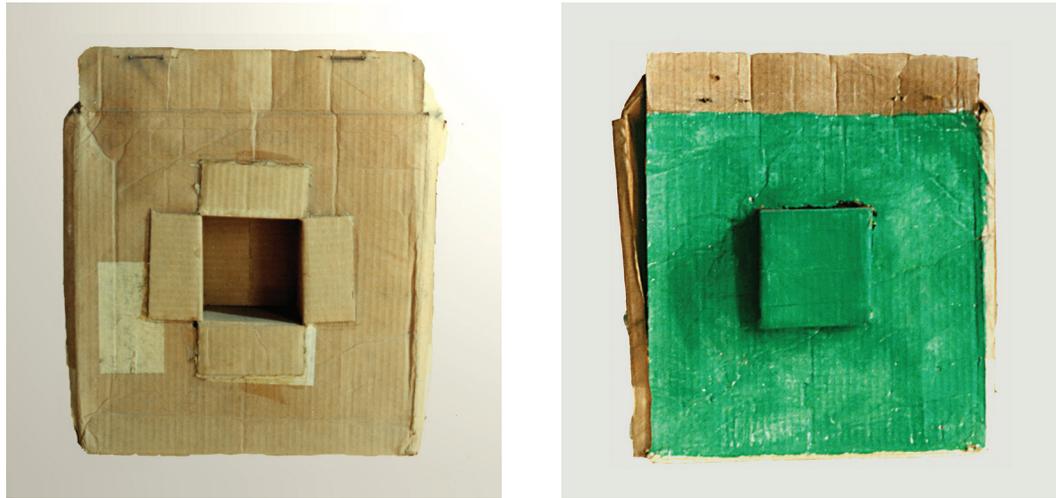
spoons and mirrors were suspended, recalling Rauschenberg's *Feticci Personali*. Twombly later made significant alterations to the piece, stripping away its hanging and ornamental elements, and leaving only the two fronds and the base, all covered in white paint (fig. 13). The date and reason for these changes are unclear, though they are known to have taken place soon after the work's conception.⁴¹ In this pared down state, the sculpture becomes spectral and hieratic, evocative of some ancient Egyptian funerary object and charged with enigma. Everything that we cannot see, we must imagine. The title tantalizes, suggesting the colorless, desiccated box might entomb a bright green python. As to the lack of actual green hue, the art historian Kate Nesin writes:

That colour exists first in the title and then in imaginary, but paradoxically lively, opposition to the shroud of white paint that coats palms and box alike. While the title offers an imaginary field in which to move or think in relation to this sculpture, it also returns us, by way of naming an absent colour, to the fact of white here, the physical fact of this thickly applied cover of paint as well as the scientific fact of white as the combination of all colours, lime green presumably included.⁴²

Nearly two decades later, Rauschenberg rendered this green color visible in the 1972 *Mock Aero Shield*, a cardboard work he created during a visit Twombly made to Captiva, and which he gave to Twombly in exchange for a collage featuring the crocodiles that frequented the jungle in Captiva (fig. 14).⁴³ The small open cardboard box, painted green on the back, was intended to cast a glow on the wall behind it, making *Mock Aero Shield* a possible prototype for the same technique Rauschenberg employed the following year in the *Early Egyptians*.⁴⁴ Through their fluorescent green backs, these works repeatedly materialized the hidden, merely suggested, lime-green color of the python in Twombly's *Funerary Box* sculpture.

fig. 14

Robert Rauschenberg, *Mock Aero Shield*, 1972. Recto pictured left, verso pictured right. Cardboard and acrylic, 17 ¾ × 16 × 2 ¾ inches (45.1 × 40.6 × 7 cm). Private collection.



Beginning in the spring of 1971, Twombly regularly visited Rauschenberg in Captiva, and was one of the first artists to make prints at the newly established print studio there.⁴⁵ Like Rauschenberg, Twombly had always been attracted to coastal regions and islands, and frequently relocated in order to generate new work.⁴⁶ In a series of works on paper titled *Sesostris II (Captiva Island)* from 1974, Twombly scrawled the name of an Egyptian pharaoh, Sesostris II. These drawings were shown alongside Rauschenberg's *Early Egyptian* works in the May 1974 exhibition at Castelli downtown, and were the likely result of discussions between the two artists about ancient Egypt during their time in Captiva.⁴⁷ "Unpredictable, insouciant and haphazard, yet finally exquisitely ordered, Twombly's drawings invite us to a voyage of untethered physical freedom and fantasy unmoored," as author Hayden Herrera noted in her *ARTNews* review of the exhibition.⁴⁸

In addition to inspiring works based on the two artists' shared interest in mythology, Twombly's travels to Captiva may have also had a significant impact on his sculptural practice.⁴⁹ The artist made a number of sculptures between 1946 and 1959, then stopped. A few years after the 1974 Castelli show with Rauschenberg, he made his first sculpture in over fifteen years out of two cardboard rolls and white house paint: *Untitled*, from 1976 (fig. 15).⁵⁰ As Katharina Schmidt, curator of the 2001 *Cy Twombly: Die Skulptur, The Sculpture* exhibition, writes: "The natural brown color of the cardboard tubes is hidden by white paint, which has been allowed to run and drip; the paint ennobles the form, underlining the tubes' original purpose by protecting works of art and yet obscuring it as well, bringing the two individual objects together in a single part structure."⁵¹ This description could apply just as well to *Untitled (Early Egyptian)*. That Twombly's *Untitled*, one of his only sculptures employing cardboard as a primary structural material, was made shortly after his travels to Captiva and a nearly twenty-year hiatus in his sculptural practice, suggests an undeniable influence from Rauschenberg, who at the time was preoccupied almost exclusively with the medium.

fig. 15

Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 1976. Cardboard and house paint, 66 × 8 ½ × 6 ¼ inches (168 × 21.5 × 16 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © Cy Twombly Foundation.

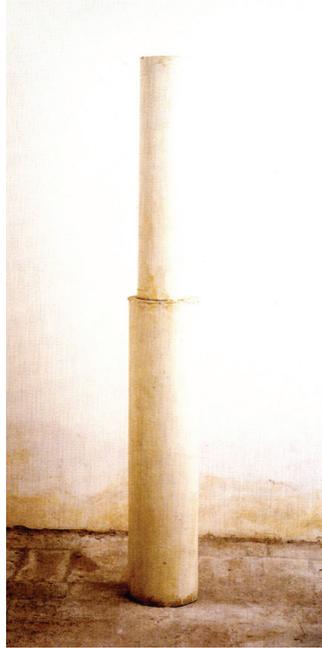


fig. 16

Cy Twombly, *Orpheus (Du Unendliche Spur)*, 1979. Wood, nails, white paint, 104 ¾ × 96 ⅝ × 8 ⅝ inches (265.5 × 244.3 × 22 cm). Glenstone, Potomac. © Cy Twombly Foundation.



fig. 17

Cy Twombly, *Victory*, conceived 1987, cast 2005. Painted bronze, 12 feet 1 inch × 35 inches × 13 ½ inches (368.3 × 88.9 × 34.3 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art; Promised gift of the Cy Twombly Foundation, 2016. © Cy Twombly Foundation.



Over the next two decades, Twombly created a number of sculptures that in proportion and gesture are reminiscent of *Untitled (Early Egyptian)*, including the 1979 *Orpheus (Du Unendliche Spur)* and *Victory*, conceived of in 1987 and cast in 2005 (figs. 16 and 17). Simple formal comparison aside, these works again relate closely to *Untitled (Early Egyptian)* in their construction process: they employ disparate materials, assembled from the everyday, and covered in a unifying, painterly element. The poetic artworks transcend their individual parts, embodying the great voyages, rituals, and myths of ancient civilizations. Twombly's *Winter's Passage: Luxor*, from 1985, is a bronze cast of pieces of found timber fragments, and like *Untitled (Early Egyptian)*, its evocative title and graceful proportions elevate the humble materials that compose it (fig. 18). With its angled mast, the structure recalls a felucca, or traditional Mediterranean wooden sailing boat, particularly common on the Nile. Twombly's title refers to the journey from the ancient Egyptian capital Luxor to the burial grounds, making the block of wood atop the sculpture a possible signifier for a sarcophagus on its final journey.⁵² In his review of the first retrospective of Twombly's sculpture in 2000 at the Kunstmuseum Basel, art historian Harry Cooper observed, " ... when he pins that happily warped board to its base with a slanted stick, our glance rewarms and we float again, drifting downstream with the illusion. Twombly finds the arc and ache of our mimetic desire within the material itself."⁵³ This "arc and ache" are vivid in Rauschenberg's *Untitled (Early Egyptian)* which, as palpably as Twombly's *Winter's Passage: Luxor* describes a solemn voyage, conjures the more brutal imagery of bodies dragging stones to build the pyramids.

fig. 18

Cy Twombly, *Winter's Passage: Luxor*, 1985. Bronze, 21 ¼ × 41 ⅓ × 20 inches (54 × 105 × 51 cm). Tate Galleries, London. Presented by Cy Twombly Foundation 2014. © Cy Twombly Foundation.



In *Untitled (Early Egyptian)* more so than in most of his works, Rauschenberg's assemblage of heterogeneous materials came to express a narrative whole. In her 1974 essay, "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image," critic Rosalind Krauss wrote of Rauschenberg's method of assemblage:

The field of memory itself is changed from something that is internal to something that is external; from something that is private to something that is collective insofar as it arises from the shared communality of culture. This is not culture with a capital C but rather a profusion of facts, some exalted but most banal, each of which leaves its imprint as it burrows into and forms experience.⁵⁴

In *Untitled (Early Egyptian)*, as in Twombly's sculptures, modest items such as twigs, twine, and boxes were bound, shrouded, and coated to fix their organic nature into timeless assemblages, into reliquaries for personal and universal mythologies. Rauschenberg and Twombly created potent signs of classical and modernist sculpture with everyday materials, turning wooden and cardboard boxes into plinths, pedestals, and marble blocks. Cy Twombly once said, "White paint is my marble," while in *Untitled (Early Egyptian)*, sand is Robert Rauschenberg's stone.⁵⁵

ENDNOTES

- 1 João Fernandes and Mirta d'Argenzio, *Robert Rauschenberg: Em Viagem 70-76 / Travelling '70-'76*, exh. cat. (Porto: Fundação de Serralves, 2007), p. 44.
- 2 Marjorie Welish, Julia Brown Turrell, and Pontus Hultén, eds., *Rauschenberg Sculpture*, exh. cat. (Fort Worth: Modern Museum Art Museum, 1995), p. 94.
- 3 Mark Godfrey, "'Source and Reserve of My Energies': Working from Captiva," in *Robert Rauschenberg*, ed. Leah Dickerman and Achim Borchardt-Hume, exh. cat. (New York and London: The Museum of Modern Art and Tate Publishing, 2017), p. 285.

- 4 João Fernandes, "Art Doesn't Come Out of Art': Robert Rauschenberg Travelling," in *Robert Rauschenberg: Em Viagem 70-76 / Travelling '70-'76*, exh. cat. (Porto: Fundação de Serralves, 2007), p. 12; and Mary Lynn Kotz, *Rauschenberg: Art and Life*, rev. ed. (1990; repr., New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004), p. 185.
- 5 Barbara Rose and Robert Rauschenberg, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg by Barbara Rose* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), p. 86.
- 6 Ibid. Rauschenberg had an ongoing interest in astrology. In the catalogue for the 1995 exhibition of his sculpture at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas, the artist answered curator Julia Brown Turrell's question "How do you maintain the tenderness and vulnerability of your work?" with insight into his astrological signs, "I'm a natural schizophrenic. I'm on the Libra balance, on the last day, and Scorpio, so I try to keep my success in Scorpio, which is tough, and keep my art in Libra." Julia Brown Turrell, *Rauschenberg: Sculpture*, p. 58.
- 7 Godfrey, "'Source and Reserve of My Energies': Working from Captiva," p. 285.
- 8 Charles Stuckey, "Minutiae and Rauschenberg's Combine Mode," in *Robert Rauschenberg: Combines*, ed. Robert Rauschenberg, Paul Schimmel, and Thomas E. Crow, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005), p. 203.
- 9 Robert Rauschenberg, *Rauschenberg: Cardbirds* (Los Angeles: Gemini G.E.L., 1971), pp. 2-3.
- 10 In his catalogue essay for the 2007 exhibition *Robert Rauschenberg: Cardboards and Related Pieces*, art historian Yve-Alain Bois proposes a sociopolitical reading of the *Cardboard* series, arguing that they belong to "Rauschenberg's ethos of recycling," and represent a critique of commodity culture. Yve-Alain Bois, "Pause," in *Robert Rauschenberg: Cardboards and Related Pieces*, exh. cat. (Houston: Menil Foundation, 2007), pp. 20-22.
- 11 Brian O'Doherty, "Robert Rauschenberg: The Sixties," in *American Masters: The Voice and the Myth* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 203.
- 12 Turrell, *Rauschenberg: Sculpture*, p. 78.
- 13 Irmeline Lebeer, "Robert Rauschenberg," in *L'Art? C'est une meilleure idée! Entretiens 1972-1984* (Nîmes, France: Jacqueline Chambon, 1997), pp. 128-29.
- 14 Walter Hopps, introduction to *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, exh. cat. (Houston: Menil Collection, Houston Fine Art Press, 1991), p. 10.
- 15 "Robert Rauschenberg and Calvin Tomkins: A Conversation about Art and Life," moderated by Nan Rosenthal, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, February 5, 2006.
- 16 Robert Rauschenberg in conversation with Donald Saff, "A Conversation about Art and ROCI," in *ROCI: Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange*, ed. Jack Cowart, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1991), p. 170.
- 17 Bois, "Pause," p. 21.
- 18 Lebeer, *Entretiens 1972-1984*, p. 124.
- 19 Two *Early Egyptian* works from 1973 do not include any cardboard. One, made for an exhibition at the Parcheggio di Villa Borghese in Rome, is constructed out of bicycle parts, a bucket, and a wooden pole. The other, made for the Galerie Sonnabend in Paris in September 1973, comprises a bucket and hose. On several occasions while Rauschenberg prepared cardboard works for exhibitions abroad, he and his studio assistants painstakingly gathered cardboard boxes from the area, only to find they had been taken back to storage or even discarded by the institution's staff. These two works may be the result of such a misunderstanding, and of a shortage of the material. The Reminiscences of Hisachika Takahashi, 2015. *Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project*. Conducted in collaboration with INCITE/Columbia Center for Oral History Research. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, p. 81.
- 20 Robert S. Mattison, "Pyramid Series," Rauschenberg Research Project, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, July 2013.

- 21 Kotz, *Rauschenberg Art and Life*, p. 194. In a February 23, 2013 interview with art historian Robert S. Mattison, Rauschenberg's former studio assistant Robert Petersen recalled seeing the book on Egyptian pyramids in the studio, but it has not been identified.
- 22 Lebeer, *Entretiens 1972–1984*, p. 124.
- 23 Fernandes, *Travelling '70–'76*, p. 30.
- 24 According to the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation's archives and correspondence, the artist visited Paris in late March/early April 1974 with Antonio Homem, the former Director of the Galerie Sonnabend in Paris and Ileana Sonnabend's adopted son. Homem brought Rauschenberg to the Louvre museum, and recalls him being struck by *Four Baboons Adoring the Rising Sun*. Interview of Antonio Homem for the Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project," interview by Karen Thomas, March 14, 2011, Interviews with Rauschenberg Friends and Associates, RRFA 08, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.
- 25 Godfrey, "'Source and Reserve of My Energies': Working from Captiva," pp. 288–89.
- 26 Edit DeAk, "Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly at Castelli Downtown," *Art in America*, July/August 1974, p. 86.
- 27 Lawrence Alloway, "Rauschenberg's Development," in *Robert Rauschenberg*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1976), p. 5.
- 28 In his oral history, Rauschenberg's former studio assistant Robert Petersen describes the process of making *Early Egyptian* works on the beach in Captiva: "We'd put the box, have gallons of matte medium and brush, I'd brush and Bob too and Dodi Booth helped, we'd paint the top with Liquitex matte medium and then the sand's right there, just start throwing sand on it." *The Reminiscences of Robert Petersen*, 2015. *Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project*. Conducted in collaboration with INCITE/Columbia Center for Oral History Research. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, p. 205.
- 29 Lebeer, *Entretiens 1972–1984*, p. 123.
- 30 Joan Young, "Assembled Works with Cardboard, Paper, and Fabric, 1970–1976," in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, ed. Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson, exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1997), p. 330.
- 31 Bruce Hainley, "'Robert Rauschenberg: Cardboards and Related Pieces'; Menil Collection, Houston," *Artforum*, 46, no. 1 (September 1, 2007), p. 464.
- 32 David Sylvester, *Cy Twombly: Ten Sculptures*, exh. cat. (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 1997), p. 10. In the exhibition catalogue for *Cy Twombly: Die Skulptur, The Sculpture*, curator Katharina Schmidt notes that the first curator to give Twombly's sculpture "a degree of prominence within the artist's work as a whole was Harald Szeemann" through his retrospective in Zurich in 1987. Greater attention to the artist's works in sculpture followed in the 1990s, with a retrospective by Kirk Varnedoe in 1994, and the publication, in 1997, of Nicola Del Roscio's catalogue raisonné, in which 148 sculptures, made beginning in the 1940s, were recorded. Katharina Schmidt, preface and introduction to *Cy Twombly: Die Skulptur, The Sculpture*, exh. cat. (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag; Kunstmuseum Basel and The Menil Collection, 2001), pp. 9–11.
- 33 Walter Hopps, "Black Mountain & New York City, Spring 1949–Spring 1951," in *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, exh. cat. (Houston: Menil Collection, Houston Fine Art Press, 1991), p. 27, 62.
- 34 Rauschenberg quoted in Turrell, *Rauschenberg: Sculpture*, p. 61. See also Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Picador, 2005), p. 28. In spite of Albers's criticism, which the artist described in an undated statement as "so excruciating and so devastating," Rauschenberg considered Albers to be his most important teacher.
- 35 Tom Delavan, "How an Eight-Month Trip Shifted the Course of Art History," *New York Times Magazine*, October 11, 2018.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Schmidt, *Cy Twombly*, p. 31.

- 38 Rauschenberg showed both series at the Galleria d'Arte Contemporanea in Florence, and received a scathing review in a local newspaper in which a prominent art historian excoriated the works, and suggested the artist throw them into the Arno River. Impressed by the author's passion, Rauschenberg did precisely that. None of the *Feticci* are known to be extant, while only a few of the *Scatole* were saved and eventually returned to New York. Hopps, "Europe and North Africa, Fall 1952–Spring 1953," in *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*.
- 39 Ibid., p. 114.
- 40 Turrell, *Rauschenberg: Sculpture*, p. 65.
- 41 Kate Nesin, "Some Notes on Words and Things in Cy Twombly's Sculptural Practice," *Tate Papers*, no. 10 (Autumn 2008).
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Mirta d'Argenzio, "Robert Rauschenberg: Travelling" in *Robert Rauschenberg: Em Viagem 70–76 / Traveling '70–'76*, ed. João Fernandes, exh. cat. (Porto: Fundação De Serralves, 2008), p. 58.
- 44 Information provided to the author by Gina C. Guy, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Collections Manager.
- 45 Mattison, "Pyramid Series."
- 46 Schmidt, *Cy Twombly*, p. 81, and Anne Sherwood Pundyk, "CY TWOMBLY Sculpture," *The Brooklyn Rail*, September 2011.
- 47 Godfrey, "'Source and Reserve of My Energies': Working from Captiva," p. 292.
- 48 Hayden Herrera, "Reviews: Cy Twombly, Robert Rauschenberg," *ARTNews*, October 1974, p. 110.
- 49 Twombly consistently referenced mythology in his titles, including in works across media such as *Olympia*, 1957; *Delian Ode 10*, August 1961; *Orpheus*, 1975; *Six Latin Writers and Poets, Virgilius*, 1976; and *Cycnus*, 1979, among many others (see Kirk Varnedoe, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1995). Rauschenberg drew from mythology most notably in his Dante drawings (1958–60), a series of transfer drawings illustrating the thirty-four cantos of Dante's *Inferno*. During his spring 1974 trip to Israel, Rauschenberg fell in love with and purchased—by exchanging one of his own works—an Egyptian mummy case, which was shipped to the U.S. after two years, and displayed for a number of years in a guest bedroom in the artist's Lafayette home and studio. The Reminiscences of Hisachika Takahashi, p. 82.
- 50 Godfrey, "'Source and Reserve of My Energies': Working from Captiva," p. 292.
- 51 Schmidt, *Cy Twombly*, p. 57.
- 52 Ibid., p. 93.
- 53 Harry Cooper, "Cy Twombly: The Sculpture," *Artforum*, November 2000, p. 147.
- 54 Rosalind Krauss, "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image," *Artforum*, December 1974, p. 52.
- 55 Conversation between the artist and Katharina Schmidt, June 1999 in Gaeta. Schmidt, *Cy Twombly*, p. 49.