

Robert Rauschenberg
Japanese Clayworks



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Robert Rauschenberg

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Salzburg Villa Kast
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Opening: Friday 8 April 7pm

Mirabellplatz 2, 5020 Salzburg
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The first comprehensive exhibition of Robert Rauschenberg's clayworks series since the 1980s

**Rarely seen works from two formative series to be exhibited at
Thaddaeus Ropac Salzburg in collaboration with the
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.**

This exhibition of key works from Robert Rauschenberg's **Japanese Clayworks** (1982/1985) and **Japanese Recreational Clayworks** (1982–83/1985) highlights two formative series that represented a major innovation in his practice from 1982 onwards. Created in a period of the artist's career that has yet to be fully explored, some of these works are being shown publicly for the first time outside Japan, where they were created. A selection from these series was exhibited at Leo Castelli's gallery in New York in 1982–83.

The **Japanese Clayworks** feature sculptural elements reminiscent of Rauschenberg's Combines (1954–64) and *Spreads* (1975–83), photographic imagery of ancient and modern Japan and painterly brushstrokes. By combining aspects of both painting and sculpture, he blurred the boundaries between these artistic categories.

While Rauschenberg was waiting for these works to be fired in the kiln at the Otsuka Ohmi Ceramics Company (OCCC), he came across the various reproductions of historical masterpieces from Western art, which the company specialised in manufacturing. These images inspired him to create his **Japanese Recreational Clayworks**, composed of prefabricated ceramic panels to which he added imagery of contemporary Japan from his own photographs along with gestural brushwork. The exhibition will include an entire room dedicated to his works featuring recreations of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1503–1519), an image also famously adopted by Rauschenberg's close friend and inspiration Marcel Duchamp for his *L.H.O.O.Q.* series (begun in 1919).

In a 15 year time period, Rauschenberg made several trips to Japan where he created these ceramic artworks using a newly developed technique that combined ancient Japanese pottery traditions with modern innovations. With close collaboration with the OCCC Rauschenberg was able to transfer silkscreened imagery onto thin yet robust ceramic supports.

Travel to foreign countries, where he explored the use of local materials and worked with local artisans, was a fundamental part of Rauschenberg's artistic practice. He embraced international cultures through his contact with people and ideas from around the world and continually challenged the potential of materials and definitions of medium and originality.

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Rauschenberg's exploration of groundbreaking intersections between art, craftsmanship and technology engaged with many of the critical questions he addressed across his artistic practice. He explored ways in which, as an artist, he could respond to pressing political, environmental and social challenges, contribute to peace and cross-cultural understanding and produce universally meaningful images in an increasingly global world. His experiences of working in Japan further laid the foundation for the development of the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI), which was subsequently realised in ten countries around the world between 1984 and 1991, including Japan.



1. Robert Rauschenberg, *Rice Blessings (Japanese Claywork)*, 1985.

Japanese Clayworks is the first series Rauschenberg created with the OOCC, during an extended stay in the town of Shigaraki. There, he worked with local chemists to produce glazes that allowed him to silkscreen photographs onto transfer sheets that were then fused with the ceramic. The works mark the first instance in which Rauschenberg incorporated his colour photographs into artworks and these vibrant images are mingled with found patterns from mass-produced Japanese ceramics. The works feature the artist's characteristic signature in capital letters, which is complemented by a transliteration of his surname in *kanji*, a form of Japanese writing adapted from Chinese characters. By including both languages, Rauschenberg claimed authorship while also paying respect to the cultural context in which the series was made and by which it was inspired.

I think collaboration is a prescription or device that keeps one from getting hung up on a strong single intention that blinds. [...] Every individual that you add to a project will result in ten times as many possibilities. — Robert Rauschenberg, 1987



2. Robert Rauschenberg, *Pneumonia Lisa (Japanese Recreational Claywork)*, 1982.

Characteristically a focus of innovation in his practice, the flat picture-plane of the *Japanese Recreational Clayworks* is subject to conceptual considerations. While the texture of the original oil paintings is completely eradicated by the glassy ceramic surface of the recreations, Rauschenberg reintroduces a painterly quality to the works through his own playful strokes of colour.

Appropriating works by other artists as source imagery or even collage elements was characteristic of Rauschenberg's practice from the early 1950s. The works in the exhibition reflect on ideas of appropriation through the ongoing dialogue between the artist's hand and the mechanically reproduced image, continuing an exploration of the interplay between unique and multiple and echoing Duchamp's concept of the readymade.

A great lover of art, Rauschenberg credited a painting – *The Blue Boy* (1770) by Thomas Gainsborough – with inspiring him to become an artist. Incorporating these icons of Western art into his own works and juxtaposing them with everyday images allowed him to guide the viewer's imagination, continuing beyond the narratives in the original works and inviting the development of new perspectives. His specific arrangements of these diverse images are invariably at least as potent and significant than the individual images themselves. They encourage viewers to attempt to decipher them, while ultimately refusing any single interpretative meaning.

Rauschenberg's fruitful collaboration with OCCC concluded with the creation of his large iconic *Mirthday Man (Ceramic) II* (1998). Selected by Rauschenberg for ceramic recreation after his retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 1997, the work prominently features X-rays of the artist's body alongside images from his own colour photographs and a depiction of Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (c. 1485). The imagery in this work, which marks the artist's 72nd birthday, can be seen as a self-portrait incorporating many leitmotifs that held personal meaning for him.



3. Robert Rauschenberg, *Mirthday Man (Ceramic) II*. 1998.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with an essay by Kristen Clevenson, Curatorial Assistant at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, and an introduction by Christopher Rauschenberg, President of the Board of Directors.

Thaddaeus Ropac gallery has represented the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation since April 2015 and the partnership has resulted in a series of exhibitions, focusing on some of the artist's most innovative and under-recognised series of the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, including his *Night Shades*, *Phantoms*, *Borealis*, *Salvage* paintings and *Spreads*.

This exhibition is presented in cooperation with the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. Two other gallery exhibitions coincide with *Japanese Clayworks* at Thaddaeus Ropac Salzburg: *Robert Rauschenberg: Venetians and Early Egyptians, 1972–1974* at Gladstone Gallery, New York (4 May – 18 June 2022) and *Robert Rauschenberg: Exceptional Works, 1971–1999* at Mnuchin Gallery, New York (3 May – 11 June, 2022). For further information on the mission and programs of the Foundation, visit www.rauschenbergfoundation.org and follow them on Instagram at @rauschenbergfoundation.

About the Artist

Over the course of his 60-year career, Robert Rauschenberg's work was inspired by wide-ranging experiences, lifelong collaborations and a spirit of experimentation with new materials and techniques. Although he demurred identification with any specific movement, he has been identified as a forerunner of practically every post-war artistic development since Abstract Expressionism. His early Combines established an ongoing dialogue between painting and sculpture, between the handmade and the readymade and between the artist's hand and the mechanically reproduced image. He revolutionised the picture plane through the inclusion of everyday objects, which he termed "gifts from the street", redefining and expanding the boundaries of what could be considered an artwork.

Rauschenberg attended the Kansas City Art Institute and later the Académie Julian in Paris, but the young artist's most profound formative experience was at the experimental Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where he enrolled in 1948 alongside fellow artist and his future wife Susan Weil. There he studied under painter and Bauhaus teacher Josef Albers and met composer John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham, who became long-standing friends and artistic collaborators. The trio participated in *Theater Piece No. 1* (1952), a multimedia performance – now recognised as the first Happening – that incorporated poetry, music, dance and film, as well as Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* (1951) suspended from the ceiling. Cage cited these as an inspiration for his composition *4'33"* (1952), which creates a framework that prompts a heightened awareness of ambient sound.

By the end of 1953, Rauschenberg had begun integrating a litany of found materials and objects into his *Red Paintings* (1953–54), which evolved into his seminal Combines. Incorporating everything from a stuffed goat to street signs and a bed quilt, these works obliterated the boundary between painting and sculpture, introducing a new relationship between viewer and artwork. In 1962 he began making paintings that combined gestural brushwork with silkscreened imagery drawn from newspapers, magazines and his own photographs. Following his first retrospective, organised by the Jewish Museum, New York in 1963, Rauschenberg was awarded the International Grand Prize in Painting at the Venice Biennale in 1964.

Rauschenberg's work throughout the subsequent decades embodied his lifelong commitment to collaboration with performers, artisans and engineers worldwide. As well as designing lighting, sets and costumes for avant-garde productions by Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown and Paul Taylor, among others, Rauschenberg also choreographed his own performances, beginning with *Pelican* in 1963. He co-founded Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) – with engineers Billy Klüver and Fred Waldhauer and artist Robert Whitman – which paired artists and engineers for collaborative projects. Together with Klüver, Rauschenberg created works like *Oracle* (1962–65), which incorporated transistor radio technology, and the responsive light installation *Soundings* (1968).

In 1970, Rauschenberg established his permanent home in Captiva, Florida, where he created several series of works focused on materiality, including the *Cardboards* (1971–72), wall reliefs created from discarded boxes, and the *Jammers* (1975–76), made from sewn fabric. His experimentation with printing techniques also continued across a range of media, including the solvent-transfer *Hoarfrosts* (1974–76), multimedia *Spreads* (1975–83) and his metal works from the 1980s and 1990s, including the *Shiners* (1986–93), *Urban Bourbons* (1988–96) and *Borealis* (1988–92). In addition to his own artmaking practice, Rauschenberg became a spokesperson for artists and the creative community at large. In September 1970, he founded Change, Inc., a non-profit organisation that helped artists with emergency expenses and from 1984–91, he personally funded the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI) project. For this extensive touring programme, Rauschenberg travelled to ten countries – Mexico, Chile, Venezuela, China, Tibet, Japan, Cuba, the USSR, Germany and Malaysia – with the aim of sparking cross-cultural dialogue and understanding through the creative process.



4. Robert Rauschenberg, *Testimony (Japanese Claywork)*, 1985.

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Credits

Title Image: Robert Rauschenberg, *All Abordello Doze 2 (Japanese Recreational Claywork)*, 1982. Transfer on high-fired Japanese art ceramic, 134,9 x 133,4 cm (detail). **1. Robert Rauschenberg**, *Rice Blessings (Japanese Claywork)*, 1985. Transfer and glaze on high-fired ceramic, 180.2 x 199.8 cm. **2. Robert Rauschenberg**, *Pneumonia Lisa (Japanese Recreational Claywork)*, 1982. Transfer and glaze on high-fired Japanese art ceramic, 81.8 x 220 cm. **3. Robert Rauschenberg**, *Mirthday Man (Ceramic) II*. 1998. Transfer and glaze on high-fired ceramic, 313.1 x 455.5 cm. **4. Robert Rauschenberg**, *Testimony (Japanese Claywork)*, 1985. Transfer and glaze on high-fired ceramic, 180 x 200 cm. **All Images** © The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / ARS, New York 2022. Courtesy The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London · Paris · Salzburg · Seoul.

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