

# VANITY FAIR

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TITANS

## Rauschenberg's Epic Vision

From a 35-acre sanctuary on the island of Captiva, Robert Rauschenberg is pushing his vision ever wider, using an army of assistants to create global art and multimedia canvases reaching 790 feet. John Richardson traces the artist's heroic journey from a cramped childhood to an intense liaison with his polar opposite, Jasper Johns, to the test of this month's huge retrospective, filling both the uptown and downtown sections of the Guggenheim Museum.

by John Richardson



Artist Robert Rauschenberg standing in front of his painting of John F. Kennedy, 1967. *Photograph by Burton Berinsky/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images.*

**T**he word that best defines Robert Rauschenberg's achievements as a painter, printmaker, photographer, sculptor, theater designer, performance artist, and technologist is "epic." According to my dictionary, it means "heroic and impressive in quality" and "surpassing the usual or ordinary in scope or size." What better way to describe the only artist of our time who continues to address major themes of worldwide concern without bombast or cant or an aesthetic or political agenda, and who does so by utilizing technology in ever more imaginative and inventive ways? Rauschenberg is a painter of history—the history of now rather than then—and it is in this light that we should approach the mammoth retrospective which is going to fill the uptown and downtown sections of the Guggenheim Museum in New York this month.

For the last 29 years, the artist, who is about to turn 72 but looks as dashing as he did in the 1960s, has lived in seclusion—if a community of eight multifarious assistants can be called seclusion—on Captiva, off the coast of Fort Myers, Florida. Studios full of the latest technological equipment enable him to work on projects that are monumental in concept as well as scale. He has said one of his few unfulfilled dreams is to photograph the world in its entirety, big as life. His only fear is that he might “run out of world.”

Not having seen Rauschenberg in well over a decade, I flew to Fort Myers. Thanks to a hurricane, I arrived at dawn instead of dusk—a blessing. Eddies of mist veiled the bridges leading to the island, and the shallow waters of the Gulf of Mexico were as still as a Venetian lagoon. To right and left were distant smudges that might or might not be islands, faint silhouettes of chugging boats, a beacon flashing on and off, seabirds circling in formation. When we reached the first island, Sanibel, the scene became even more like one of Rauschenberg’s recent Anagrams. There was a blur of neon, rusty road signs, a construction site coming to life, a hoarding with the lights still on. The hoarding reminded me of this artist’s down-to-earth device for brightening the light in a painting: plug an electric bulb into it and switch it on. Soon the lights went off, the sun came up, and I arrived at Rauschenberg’s domain.

**G**iven the extent to which his work exploits the messiness of everyday life, the pristine tidiness of his surroundings—spotless white surfaces in vast, sparsely filled spaces—comes as a surprise. Likewise the large TV sets, which are permanently on in every room. Rauschenberg works, eats, and, for all I know, sleeps by their light. TV is like an additional window, which provides him with an unending supply of imagery from the chaotic world outside. But then, as Rauschenberg has said, “Everything I can organize I do, so I am free to work in chaos, spontaneity, and the not yet done.” Orderliness even characterizes the cooking that he does so well and so neatly. Over dinner he discussed the upcoming retrospective: more than 400 items, which must make it one of the largest one-man shows ever at the Guggenheim. “My only hesitation about the show,” he said, “is that I don’t want to betray my achievement by seeming to need the authority and prestige of the Guggenheim, without which these works would never be seen together.” A retrospective, he went on to say, should encourage people to see the old work in the light of the new rather than the new in the light of the old. The recent pieces that Rauschenberg showed me have an originality and immediacy, besides a wonderful freshness of technique, which will come as a revelation even to those who think they know his work by heart.

I asked Rauschenberg about the prodigious commissions he is rumored to be working on. There are at least three in preparation. For the new concert hall in Seattle, he plans to do a series of monumental decorations. For the revival of the Potsdamer Platz in Berlin—the hub of the city until it was bombed to bits in World War II and then cut in two by the evil Wall—he is doing a sculpture garden to go with the Daimler-Benz building that the innovative Italian architect Renzo Piano has designed. Even more challenging is another collaboration with Renzo Piano: a cathedral in Foggia, about 100 miles east of Naples, to commemorate Padre Pio, the controversial Franciscan priest who died in 1968 and who is revered for having had stigmata and a saintly aura. Today his cult threatens to overtake that of Lourdes. To cater to the massive crowds of pilgrims, the church will have a glass wall about 40 by 150 feet so that people outside can follow the Mass. Rauschenberg says that he is basing his imagery on the Apocalypse and is experimenting with new technological effects. While he is a spiritual man, he is no believer, and he intends to steer clear of overt religious references. “I bet you’ll be a Catholic before you finish the project,” the Franciscan prior in charge told Rauschenberg. “And I suppose you’ll be an artist,” he replied.

**R**auschenberg is too absorbed by the future to bother about the past. However, he owns to being a quarter Dutch, a quarter German, a quarter Swedish, and a quarter Cherokee. At the same time he is, as a friend says, wholly Texan, with “that big-spirited, funny, crazy, fearless quality that Texans have.” He is particularly proud of his Native American blood, and although he never actually knew his Cherokee grandmother, he feels that his closeness to nature and his passion for animals (especially Samoyed dogs) come from her. He was born on October 22, 1925, in Port Arthur, a damp patch of a place a foot or two below sea level on the Gulf of Mexico. He loathed the oil-refinery stink of his hometown. In 1959, when he began his celebrated drawings for Dante’s *Inferno*, it is surely no coincidence that he chose oil derricks to evoke Dis, the capital of Hell.

Rauschenberg grew up in a small shotgun house. His father, a hardworking lineman, was nice enough, but so obsessed with hunting (he raised the best bird dogs in the area) that he had little time for a son who hated guns.

Likewise, his nice-enough mother was totally wrapped up in her husband and her household chores. Rauschenberg seemingly bears no grudges, but the shortage of affection in his childhood might explain why an atmosphere of communal warmth and the company of devoted assistants are so important to him.

Membership in a fundamentalist sect of the Church of Christ also left its mark. Anything remotely pleasurable, from drinking to card playing, was forbidden. Initially, Rauschenberg thought of being a preacher. However, he loved to dance, and dancing was also condemned by his church. This Draconian attitude engendered a deep distrust of the whole fundamentalist ethic. Nevertheless, he continued to attend church well into his 20s. “Giving that up was a major change in my life,” he later said.

A loner in adolescence, Rauschenberg was not much good at sports, not much good at school (except for theatricals), and hopeless at college, where his family sent him to train as a pharmacist. His problem was dyslexia—for a long time undiagnosed. Calvin Tomkins (a biographer to whom anyone writing about the artist is greatly indebted) has described Rauschenberg’s expulsion from the University of Texas: “He refused to dissect a live frog in anatomy class.... Having had any number of frogs as pets, Rauschenberg was not about to cut one up himself. Just before going to see the dean about it, he released his frog in some bushes. The dean suspended him.” Before Rauschenberg could tell his father what he had done, he got his draft notice and joined the navy.

His prowess at drawing portraits endeared Rauschenberg to his fellow sailors. “Somewhere along in there I got hold of a set of oil paints,” he told Tomkins. “I started a portrait of a guy, and because the john was the only place with lights on after taps, I sat in there to finish it. When I ran out of red, I pricked my finger and rubbed it into the skin tone.”

By stating that he had no intention of using a gun, Rauschenberg got himself assigned to the hospital corps, where he worked as a nurse, first in a tuberculosis ward, later at Camp Pendleton, near San Diego, helping to rehabilitate maimed servicemen and caring for men suffering from combat psychoses and brain damage. “I was in the repair business,” Rauschenberg said. “Every day your heart was torn until you couldn’t stand it.”

On furlough, Rauschenberg would hitchhike up and down the California coast. Once, he ended up at the Huntington Library in San Marino, and there, in front of the three most hackneyed portraits of the British canon—Gainsborough’s *Blue Boy*, Lawrence’s *Pinkie*, and Reynolds’s *Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse*—he had an epiphany. This was the first time he realized what it was that a painter actually did. Maybe he too could become a painter. Had he been more sophisticated, he might have sneered at these corny icons. But Rauschenberg has always been blessed with the incomparable advantage of an innocent eye.

When he was mustered out, Rauschenberg returned to Port Arthur, but his home was not there anymore. Without telling him, his family had moved 120 miles away to Lafayette, Louisiana. Rauschenberg felt that there was no point in remaining with them, so in the spring of 1946 he returned to California, where he worked as a shipping clerk at the Ballerina Bathing Suit factory. Pat Pearman, a young woman who designed bathing suits, befriended him. She found him attractive; she also liked his drawings. “Do you know why you are so unhappy?” she asked him. “You’re really an artist.” Pearman encouraged Rauschenberg to attend art school on the G.I. Bill. At her suggestion he applied to the Kansas City Art Institute and was accepted.

**A**round three o’clock one fall morning in 1946, Rauschenberg arrived in Kansas City. There and then, he decided to rid himself of the unpropitious name of Milton, which his family had wished on him. After renaming himself Bob, he felt more like a painter. At the Art Institute he worked hard; he also built film sets, made models, and designed window displays, because he wanted to earn enough money to get himself to Paris to study modern art.

The following October, Rauschenberg made the trip. But the teaching at the Académie Julian in Paris turned out to be so deadly that it hardly mattered that he spoke no French. A sympathetic fellow student from New York, Susan Weil, took him in hand. She knew a great deal more about the practice and history of art than Rauschenberg did. The two of them decided that they were better off working on their own. And so they hung out at the Louvre, wandered the streets, and fell in love.

At the end of the summer, Weil returned to the States to enroll at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Rauschenberg had read about the courses that the legendary Bauhaus alumnus Josef Albers gave there, and decided to accompany her. All that Paris had apparently done for him was liberate him from using paintbrushes. "I was so incredibly excessive," he told Tomkins. "I loved the medium so much I was painting with my hands.... What came out were mostly messes ... really lousy, the ugliest paintings you've ever seen."

In the 23 years of its existence (1933–56), Black Mountain College left its modernist stamp on students of all the arts, including Rauschenberg. Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Buckminster Fuller, Walter Gropius, and many more taught there at various times, but it was above all Albers—such a rigid purist that he gave classes wearing a white lab coat and gloves—who presided over the art teaching.

Rauschenberg's messiness was anathema to this fiendishly demanding teacher. "I don't think he ever realized it was his discipline I came for," he told Tomkins. "I was Albers's dunce.... He'd pick up something of mine and say, 'This is the most stupid thing I have ever seen, I dun't even want to know who did it.'" Painful as this intimidation was, it worked to Rauschenberg's advantage. Besides discipline and theory, Albers taught his students an old Bauhaus exercise: how to scavenge for *objets trouvés*—that is to say junk—and incorporate them into their work. Rauschenberg was fascinated by this procedure, and continues to use it for his junk-based sculptures, generically known as "Glut."

Unpublished tapes made by his friend Brigid Berlin reveal the lengths to which Rauschenberg carried his scavenging. Nobody, he said, wanted the garbageman's job at Black Mountain, so he took it. That way he got to drive the garbage truck. Before going to the dump, he would stop behind a clump of trees and remove anything of interest. The rubbish he did not need for his work helped "furnish" some empty studios where he and his friends hid from Albers's snooping. The teacher liked to check their rooms—"You can tell the way an artist works by the way he lives," he used to say. When he eventually discovered his pristine Bauhaus-style studios had been filled with junk from the trash cans and bales of hay from the fields, "Albers nearly had a heart attack."

In June 1950, after moving to New York to study at the Art Students League, Rauschenberg and Susan Weil got married. A year later he had his first show, after which he and Susan, with their newborn son, Christopher, returned to Black Mountain. The show was a failure in that nothing sold, but a success in that the paintings were sufficiently innovative to shock some of his new friends, the Abstract Expressionists, into including one of them in their breakthrough Ninth Street show. The painting, called *22 The Lily White*, is incised with random numerals in a rough geometrical pattern and embellished with a little red star—"something that makes every painting look better," Rauschenberg says, as it implies a sale.

In the fall of '51 he went even further and painted pictures seemingly of nothing: canvases to which flat white house paint had been applied with a roller. He was attacked for negativism, but, as he later explained, these paintings were supposed to be "hypersensitive": shadows on them would indicate how many people were in the room or what time it was. In the summer of 1952, he followed these up with black paintings. This time there was a bit more *matière*—torn-up bits of newspaper dipped in black paint and glued onto canvas. He next confined himself to the color red, and produced his first masterpieces: works in which a rich impasto of collage is not just the medium but the actual subject. In late 1953, Rauschenberg abandoned paint for dirt: boxes filled with earth. After birdseed spilled into them and sprouted, he switched to "grass paintings," which required watering. As he famously says, he tries to act in the gap between art and life.

These gestures left the Abstract Expressionists, whom he had gotten to know at their hangout the Cedar Tavern in Greenwich Village, feeling as ambivalent about Rauschenberg as he felt about them. But they accepted him for his irrepressible intelligence and humor. De Kooning was especially supportive, so much so that he eventually gave way, albeit grudgingly, to the younger man's request for a drawing which he could erase: an act that has been interpreted with some justice as "symbolic patricide." Rauschenberg proudly put the denuded sheet of paper in a gilt frame labeled *Erased de Kooning Drawing, Robert Rauschenberg, 1953*.

At Black Mountain, Rauschenberg made friends with a stylish and original young artist from Virginia named Cy Twombly. This friendship left him all too little time for Susan and the baby, and she finally filed for divorce. As Rauschenberg has put it, he had come to feel "too married." Also, his sexual orientation was changing. Off he went to Italy with Twombly, equipped only with a camera. When funds ran low, he flew to Morocco and got a well-paying job with a construction company. To amuse himself, Rauschenberg knocked together a number of

subversively crude artifacts—collages and boxes—out of Moroccan trash. He took them back to Italy and exhibited them at galleries in Rome and Florence. A lot of them sold; those that didn't he threw into the river Arno.

Back in New York, Rauschenberg remained involved with Twombly until, a year or so later, he fell for a young man from South Carolina named Jasper Johns. Johns worked in a bookstore, but had aspired to be a painter since the age of five. "I have photos of him then that would break your heart," Rauschenberg told Tomkins many years later. "Jasper was soft, beautiful, lean, and poetic." Though still shy and unfocused, Johns was already formidably cool: taciturn, quick, very much his own man, and not without guile. Rauschenberg talked Johns into leaving his job and joining him in a commercial sideline: helping Tiffany's celebrated display man, Eugene Moore, decorate the store's windows.

Apparently fearful of a commitment to Rauschenberg, Johns embarked on an affair with a young woman named Rachel Rosenthal. The two rented lofts, one above the other, in a condemned building on Pearl Street around the corner from Rauschenberg. When Rosenthal confessed to Johns that she was in love with him, he brought the relationship to an end. Rosenthal eventually followed her family to California, whereupon Rauschenberg took over her loft. His and Johns's partnership lasted for the next six years or so. Meanwhile, another brilliant avant-garde couple, John Cage, the aleatoric composer, and Merce Cunningham, the no less aleatoric dancer and choreographer, had become their closest friends. There was a great deal of cross-fertilization. "We called Bob and Jasper 'the Southern Renaissance,'" Cage once recalled. "Each seemed to pick up where the other left off. The four-way exchanges were quite marvelous. It was the *climate* of being together that would suggest work to be done." Hence the two painters' involvement in modern dance and performance art.

"He and I were each other's first serious critics," Rauschenberg told Tomkins. "But Jasper and I literally traded ideas. He would say, 'I've got a terrific idea for you,' and then I'd have to find one for him." At first Rauschenberg, who was older by five years and far more experienced in the strategies of the New York art world, was the mentor. Johns was quick to adapt his companion's inventions to his own purposes: painting over bits of torn-up newspaper or incorporating three-dimensional elements into two-dimensional works. However, he wanted to be sure that "I was I and not someone else." And so, in the fall of 1954, he destroyed all his previous work as being too derivative. As the result of a dream, Johns started afresh with subjects—targets and flags—so simplistic that no modern artist had addressed them. He came up with an ingenious new style, rendered in an ancient but seldom used medium: wax encaustic. In representing nothing more or less than themselves, the Targets and Flags came as a revelation. MoMA would soon acquire three of them.

**R**auschenberg had more of a *succès de scandale* when he exhibited his Combines: paintings that included extraneous objects, or freestanding sculptures assembled out of paint-slathered junk. The most notorious of these Combines is *Bed*: a real quilt, pillow, and sheet sticky with random dribbles of paint. One critic thought it looked like the aftermath of a murder. However, Rauschenberg thought *Bed* one of the friendliest pictures he had ever painted. He said his only fear was that "someone would want to crawl into it," and thus crawl into his life. *Bed* is surely about the seminal role of paint in a painter's life—the glorious mess it makes of dreams, sex, love. These Combines give a new dimension to the phrase "a loaded brush." It's as if Rauschenberg has a brush so vast that he can load it with whatever he wants and slosh it all on in one great homogenizing avalanche of paint. Even the stuffed bald eagle in *Canyon* has an amazingly natural, preordained air. A bit predatory, perhaps, but that is because *Canyon* is about Zeus turning himself into an eagle so that he can carry off the beautiful boy Ganymede to be his cupbearer—hence the inclusion of a baby photograph of the artist's son, Christopher. (To this day, Christopher, a successful photographer based in Portland, Oregon, remains very close to his father.) The most familiar of the Combines is *Monogram*, which includes a stuffed Angora goat with a tire around its middle. "A stuffed goat is special in the way that a stuffed goat is special," Rauschenberg has said. "I wanted to see if I could integrate an object as exotic as that." He shampooed it and daubed its damaged face with paint, but it did not work as sculpture, so he added the tire, making what Albers would have called a contrast in surfaces. It took him almost five years to come up with the "pasture" of collage on which it browses—an addition that makes the goat look surrealistically at home.

By 1961, Rauschenberg and Johns were drifting sourly apart. They were "exquisitely awful to each other," a friend reported. The bitterness can be detected in some of Johns's works but not in Rauschenberg's. That year Johns bought a beach house on a remote island called Edisto, to the south of Charleston, South Carolina. Going there

changed his life, he said. For a recluse it was a perfect place: only four families for most of the year, and 40 miles to the nearest movie house. A year or so later, Rauschenberg likewise found himself a remote island: the bean-shaped sandspit called Captiva. Before the causeway, there was only one telephone to the mainland and one policeman for about 50 families. Visitors came by ferry from Fort Myers. In 1968 he bought a house there.

‘Words like ‘tortured,’ ‘struggle,’ and ‘pain’—I could never see those qualities in paint,” Rauschenberg has said, but this has not stopped him from being an activist. When, in 1965, *Life* magazine commissioned him to visualize a modern *Inferno*, he did not hesitate to vent his rage at the Vietnam War and a whole range of horrors, including racial violence, neo-Nazism, political assassinations, and ecological disaster. From being an activist he became a philanthropist. Now that his work was fetching ever higher prices, he started giving away large sums of money. (The record price for one of his paintings—*Rebus*—is \$7.3 million; the going price for recent works on paper is anywhere from \$100,000 to \$250,000.) In 1970 he co-founded Change, Inc., a nonprofit organization that has helped thousands of sick and indigent artists of all persuasions.

Another of Rauschenberg’s pet causes in the late 1960s was an organization called E.A.T.: Experiments in Art and Technology. His partner in this venture was Billy Klüver, an imaginative engineer with a passion for the avant-garde. They shared a conviction that technological innovation would shape the art of the future. With backing from the likes of IBM, the movement grew out of a spectacular start: nine evenings of Theater and Engineering at the Armory on Lexington Avenue at 25th Street in New York, with some 10 artists, 30 engineers, and 500 volunteers taking part. Frank Stella played tennis using a racket equipped with a tiny transmitter that amplified the noises and turned floodlights on and off. A piece called *Spring Training* involved 30 rented turtles, one of which remained behind with Rauschenberg; the turtles crawled about the stage with flashlights strapped to their backs. But after Rauschenberg’s *Mud Muse*—a huge vat of industrial-drilling mud which bubbled and burped in response to auditory signals—set off a frenzy of mud throwing and smearing at the opening of an E.A.T. show in Los Angeles, support evaporated. E.A.T. deserves to be revived.

These activities coincided with what Rauschenberg calls his “dude” period. He kept his shoulder-length hair elaborately coiffed, wore jackets decorated with porcupine quills, and raised hell as only a Texas Cherokee knows how. The downtown New York premises he had recently acquired—a former Catholic orphanage complete with a functioning chapel (trust Rauschenberg to have the place deconsecrated by a priest rather than desecrated by hangers-on)—often served as an annex to Max’s Kansas City. Rauschenberg’s kitchen was the scene of a party that seemed to last for much of the 1960s. There were some memorably wild moments, but Jack Daniels was the stimulant of choice, and there was little or none of the psychedelic inanity that made evenings at Warhol’s Factory so demoralizing. In my experience, people seldom discussed art at the Factory, whereas in Rauschenberg’s kitchen people seldom talked about anything else.

By 1968 the artist needed to go away and rest. After consulting a soothsayer, he decided to settle more or less permanently on Captiva—the perfect antidote to New York excess. There was nothing to do except fish or swim or go shelling on beaches that are a conchologist’s dream. Rauschenberg could unwind and loaf and cook and curb his drinking. Not that he would ever really quit—that notion, he once said, would make him “so depressed, I’d have to go out and get drunk.” Eventually, worried friends persuaded him to do a stint at the Betty Ford Clinic, and his health has improved. However, he still likes to have a drink within reach. Liquor may affect his behavior but never his work. A film made in 1962 by a CBS television crew records him painting *Barge* for 12 hours at a stretch, on nothing but vodka and adrenaline. This is all the more impressive in that *Barge* is a colossal painting (32 feet long), as well as one of the artist’s most profound and complex evocations of the modern world.

In 1971, Rauschenberg bought a second property on Captiva. This he turned into a print shop complete with a press, named Little Janis in memory of his friend Janis Joplin, who had suffered, like him, from growing up in Port Arthur. Two years later, he bought the house next door to his first and, with the help of friends, transformed it into a painting studio. Over the years Rauschenberg has continued to fight off developers by adding to his holdings, which now amount to more than 35 acres, some of it left in its natural state, which he showed me with proprietary pride. “The whole island used to be like this: a jungle of palms and palmettos. This is almost all that’s left.”

The property currently comprises 10 buildings: houses for guests and assistants as well as a handsome new residence and a studio complex, with facilities for welding, framing, storage, and packing; laboratory-like areas for computers and photography; and a new print studio the size of a theater. This massive building, which has been constructed to withstand the fiercest hurricanes, gives onto a broad flight of steps banked with roses and datura. The steps lead down to a swimming pool, where the artist allows a family of otters to frolic.

On stilts at the end of a pier is a small three-room cabin. This is the Fish House, a sanctuary to which the artist retires, he has said, “when I have to be absolutely alone, and surrounded by peaceful thoughts.” Its emphatic verticals and horizontals, its amphibious character, and its backdrop of sea and sky and pelicans give this structure the look of something out of one of Rauschenberg’s recent works. With the Fish House to meditate in, it is no wonder that Rauschenberg has learned to harness his vision to the empyrean. “There is no reason,” he has said, “not to consider the world as one gigantic painting.”

**A** measure of Rauschenberg’s grasp of vastness is an ongoing multimedia, multi-panel painting (including sound effects) which he calls his *¼ Mile Piece* (1981–present): an autobiographical panorama which illustrates the artist’s life and times and which Charles Stuckey (author of the excellent Guggenheim catalogue) sees as “an exhibition in itself.” As of now it has reached a length of 790 feet. Only someone possessed of iron control and nerve and an army of assistants would dare to undertake a work of this magnitude.

In 1980, Rauschenberg started on the most ambitious art project of his career, perhaps of this century. He called the project ROCI (pronounced Rocky), after his pet turtle. His goal was nothing less than “introducing the world to itself.” Of the 22 countries invited to participate, 11 accepted: the U.S.A., Malaysia, Germany, the U.S.S.R., Cuba, Japan, China, Tibet, Venezuela, Chile, and Mexico. Rauschenberg took a group of his assistants to each of these countries so that they could interact with local artists, artisans, poets, and people in the street in order to create a series of artworks. To raise money for ROCI, he sold some of the best things in his collection. In China he had to contend with a hostile bureaucracy before being permitted to work in Jingxian at the world’s oldest paper mill. “We felt like Marco Polo,” he said. Wherever they worked, Rauschenberg’s charm and persistence overcame all obstacles. And when the ROCI panels were finally shown at the National Gallery in Washington in 1991, they made the world seem smaller and friendlier, and very Rauschenbergian.

Until recently Rauschenberg relied on photosensitive silkscreens as a means of introducing photographs and magazine illustrations into large-scale works. However, silkscreens are cumbersome and limited in their range of color. He has now developed a much more sophisticated technique. This has its origins in the glorified decal process he devised when he wanted his Dante drawings to be “as complex as collages.” He would moisten an illustration torn from a magazine with a solvent such as lighter fluid, place it facedown on a sheet of paper, and rub the back with an empty ballpoint pen until the ghost of an image came through like a transfer. Rauschenberg’s new transfer process, a technological marvel, is as versatile and mimetic and as much of a gift to an artist as its musical equivalent, the synthesizer, is to a composer.

The artist likes to point out that his palette is not limited to paints; it consists of an infinite repertory of photographs, most of them taken by him. He and his assistant Lauren Getford feed these photographs into a computer in order to calibrate (correct, intensify, or totally change) the colors. Printouts are then made, using water-based vegetable dyes. These photo-transfers enable Rauschenberg to re-create an image with far more freedom and control than his unwieldy silkscreens did. Hence the flash and filigree, the vividness and immediacy of his latest work. Used on plaster, this transfer technique allows the artist to make frescoes without the technical difficulties that the traditional process entails. A show of Rauschenberg’s recent frescoes at the PaceWildenstein gallery will coincide with the Guggenheim retrospective.

**T**he fact that Rauschenberg’s retrospective comes on the heels of Jasper Johns’s at MoMA has encouraged people to see the two artists as rivals for some sort of conceptual trophy. A waste of time: they are not running in the same race. Since splitting up 36 years ago, they have put as much distance as possible between them. Rauschenberg’s work has become ever more epic, Johns’s ever more hermetic. Rauschenberg splashes himself across the skies; Johns paints himself into corners. True, the content of some of Rauschenberg’s lesser works does not always measure up to their scale, and, for all their technical skill, Johns’s puzzle-pictures sometimes smack of contrivance.

But what great innovators Rauschenberg and Johns have proved to be. Besides changing the rules of the game, they have enabled us to take a part in it, instead of being mere spectators. In so doing, they have let us in on new strategies and ploys, new sensations and solutions. To that extent, *vive la différence*.

**John Richardson** is an art historian.