

# Robert Rauschenberg

## *Night Shades and Phantoms*

22 October – 5 December 2020  
Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac  
Paris Marais

*‘What [Rauschenberg] invented above all was [...] a pictorial surface that let the world in again.’ — Leo Steinberg, 1972*

*‘The surfaces swirl reflectively, their silvery, dreamy quality like so much brushy subconscious spillage. This is painting weather, Rauschenberg weather—instinctive, open, and pretty free.’ — David Salle, 2020*

Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac Paris is pleased to present an exhibition of Robert Rauschenberg’s *Night Shades* and *Phantoms* from 1991, two series of metal paintings composed of silk-screened photo-

graphic images and gestural strokes on aluminium supports. Made during his decade-long experiments with metal, these paintings are characterised by their grayscale palette, which ranges from the *Night Shades*’ painterly chiaroscuro to the *Phantoms*’ mirrored surfaces and ethereal translucency. Rauschenberg creates dream-like imagery which appears and disappears as a result of light, shadows and reflections across the artworks’ surfaces. The works respond to their surroundings, playing with the viewer’s perception and bringing the world into the paintings, recalling Rauschenberg’s famous maxim: *‘Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in the gap between the two.)’* Organised in collaboration with the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, the exhibition will also present a selection of photographs by the artist used as source images for the paintings on view.

One of the most influential artists of the twentieth century, Rauschenberg revolutionised the picture plane by bringing together painting, photography and sculpture in a highly inventive way. From the mid-1980s onwards, following his sojourn in Chile, he swapped canvas for sheets of first copper, then brass, bronze and in the case of the *Night Shades* and *Phantoms*, brushed and mirrored aluminium. Rauschenberg's use of metal can be traced back to his earlier sculptural assemblages made with industrial waste and scrap metal, as in his *Elemental Sculptures* (1953/59), as well as in his *Combines* (1954–64) and his later *Gluts* (1986–89/1991–94). In the *Night Shades* and *Phantoms*, Rauschenberg used metal as a pictorial device that references the reality of an industrialised world while also serving as a reflective surface that captures images, impressions and memories.

For the *Night Shades*, Rauschenberg silkscreened images onto mirrored or brushed aluminium, applying a tarnish called Aluma Black with gestural strokes. At times the images are obscured by the tarnish, leaving expressive spills of black; at others, Rauschenberg mixed varnish with pigments which resist the tarnish and further enhance the works' painterly qualities. For the *Phantoms*, Rauschenberg experimented with a different type of metal – mirrored, anodised aluminium – which repelled the tarnish, producing spectral images that appear or disappear according to one's viewpoint. Therefore, the *Phantoms* developed from the *Night Shades* as an almost ghostly double. Their title alludes to their phantasmagoric effect, while the term *Night Shades* refers to a poisonous plant that bears dark berries; as a compound word it also suggests twilight or a curtain falling.

The images used in the silkscreening process are Rauschenberg's own photographs, taken during his various trips across the United States and abroad between 1979 and 1991, including his travels for the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI) project (1984–91), which aimed to achieve mutual understanding between different cultures across the globe through creative exchanges.



## About the artist

Over the course of his sixty-year career, American artist Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) was inspired by wide-ranging experiences, collaborations, and a spirit of experimentation with new materials and techniques. Although he demurred affiliation with any specific movement, he has been identified as a forerunner of practically every post-war artistic development since Abstract Expressionism.

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 future wife Susan Weil. There he studied under painter and Bauhaus educator Josef Albers and met composer John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham, who became long-standing friends and artistic collaborators. The trio participated in *Theatre Piece #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 memorably described the *White Paintings* as 'air-ports for the lights, shadows and particles' that 'caught whatever fell on them', citing them 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 taxidermy goat to street signs and bed quilts, these works obliterated the boundary between painting and sculpture, introducing a new relationship between viewer and artwork. In 1962 Rauschenberg 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 engineer Billy Klüver, which aimed to pair artists and engineers for collaborative projects. Together with Klüver, Rauschenberg created works like *Oracle* (1962–65), which incorporated wireless transistor radio technology, and the responsive light installation *Soundings* (1968).

In 1970, Rauschenberg established his permanent home in Captiva Island, Florida, where he created several series of works focused on materiality, including the *Cardboards* (1971–72), wall sculptures created from discarded boxes, and the silken *Jammers* (1975–76). His experimentation with printing techniques also continued across a range of media, including the fabric solvent-transfer *Hoarfrosts* (1974–76), multimedia *Spreads* (1975–83) and his metal works from the 1980s–90s, including the *Shiners*, *Urban Bourbons*, *Borealis*, *Night Shades* and *Phantoms*.

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 program, 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.

