

Press release

Robert Rauschenberg

Japanese Clayworks

6 June—29 July 2023
Opening Tuesday 6 June 2023, 6—8pm

Thaddaeus Ropac
Paris Marais
7, rue Debelleye, 75003 Paris



Robert Rauschenberg, *Rice Blessings (Japanese Claywork)*, 1985
Transfer and glaze on high-fired ceramic. 180.2 x 199.8 cm (71 x 78 ⁵/₈ in)

Rarely seen works from a formative series to be exhibited at Thaddaeus Ropac Paris Marais in collaboration with the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

Thaddaeus Ropac Paris Marais presents a selection of key works on ceramic by Robert Rauschenberg from the 1980s. Spanning works from the artist's *Japanese Clayworks* series (1982/1985), as well as a further group of ceramics made in 1989 as a continuation of this earlier series, the exhibition highlights a formative period in the artist's career.

Over the course of 15 years, Rauschenberg made several trips to Japan, where he collaborated with the Otsuka Ohmi Ceramics Company (O OCC) in Shigaraki to create ceramic artworks using a newly developed technique that combined ancient Japanese pottery traditions with modern innovations. He worked with local chemists to produce glazes that allowed him to silkscreen his own photographs onto transfer sheets, which were then removed from their backing, affixed to the surface of ceramic panels, and fired in the kiln. *Japanese Clayworks* is the first series of works that Rauschenberg made at the O OCC.

The *Japanese Clayworks* on view in the exhibition incorporate silkscreened photographs, both black-and-white and colour, taken by Rauschenberg throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s across North and South America and Asia. Reprising important motifs from across his practice, such as wheels and modes of transportation, garden decorations that recall Classical sculpture, and landscapes that are alternately idyllic and strewn with industrial or urban debris, the artist's specific arrangements of these diverse images give the works a potency that goes beyond that of the individual images themselves, encouraging viewers to attempt to decipher them, while ultimately refusing any single interpretative meaning.

By 1985, when these *Japanese Clayworks* were made, Rauschenberg was already silkscreening his black-and-white photographs onto a variety of supports, including canvas drop cloths in his *Salvage* series (1983–85) and metal. His *Japanese Clayworks*, however, mark the first instance in which Rauschenberg incorporated his colour photographs into some artworks. The vibrant images are mingled with found patterns from mass-produced Japanese ceramics, and overlaid with the artist's own gestural brushstrokes. These expressive strokes offset the glassy ceramic surface of the works, reintroducing a painterly quality to blur boundaries between artistic categories.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Testimony (Japanese Claywork)*, 1985
Transfer and glaze on high-fired ceramic. 180 x 200 cm (70 ⁷/₈ x 78 ³/₄ in)



Robert Rauschenberg in his studio

The *Japanese Clayworks* in the exhibition are accompanied by a further group of ceramic works, made in 1989, when Rauschenberg once again collaborated with the OCCC. In his Captiva, Florida studio, he created the compositions that would form their ground, using his solvent transfer technique and adding strokes of acrylic and sometimes paper collage. He then created the transfer sheets for each work individually, before sending the components to the OCCC, where his imagery was transferred onto its fine but robust ceramic supports.

On the transfer sheet for each work, the artist added touches of bold brushwork in primary colours. These gestures, which are unique to each work, contribute to the dialogue between the mechanically reproduced image and the artist's hand which is central to Rauschenberg's practice. On each transfer sheet, the artist also signed his name in his characteristic capital letters, as well as in kanji, a form of Japanese writing adapted from Chinese characters. Through signing in both languages, Rauschenberg claimed authorship while also paying respect to the cultural context in which the works were made and by which they were 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

Travel, always accompanied by exploration of local materials and collaboration with local artisans, was a fundamental part of Rauschenberg's artistic practice. Through his work, he searched for how he, as an artist, 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 collaboration with the OOC provided a model for the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI): a project realised in ten countries, including Japan, through which, beginning in 1984, the artist worked to encourage international dialogue through artistic collaboration.

Another of Rauschenberg's works on ceramic is part of the exhibition *L'Argent dans l'art*, on view at the Monnaie de Paris until 24 September 2023. Made at the OOC during the same period in which the artist was making the *Japanese Clayworks* presented at Thaddaeus Ropac Paris Marais, this 1983 work belongs to his series of *Japanese Recreational Clayworks*, which was inspired by the reproductions of historical Western artworks on ceramic panels that the OOC specialised in manufacturing. In the work on view at the Monnaie de Paris, Rauschenberg combined well-known 19th-century oil paintings by Edgar Degas and Jean-François Millet, before adding his own painterly interventions in order to invite new interpretations of the original artworks.

Japanese Clayworks at Thaddaeus Ropac Paris Marais is presented in cooperation with the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. Thaddaeus Ropac gallery has been a partner of 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*. For further information on the mission and programmes of the Foundation, visit www.rauschenbergfoundation.org and follow them on Instagram at @rauschenbergfoundation.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Garden-Wise III #2*, 1989
Transfer and glaze on high-fired ceramic
60 x 40 cm (23 ⁵/₈ x 15 ³/₄ in)

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.

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