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Robert Rauschenberg

By Walter Hopps

It could be argued that abstraction was the greatest innovation of twentieth-century art. But as much as I admire the pure, nonobjective works of Piet Mondrian and the towering achievements of Barnett Newman, there is nothing I cherish more than the way in which Robert Rauschenberg has brought images of the world back into advanced art. Photography is no doubt the most important visual technology of our time, and from mid-century on it is Rauschenberg, in my opinion, who has most brilliantly brought the camera to the service of painting. His panoplies of photographic images are as complex as the material of our everyday visual experience and, for me, most poignantly define our world and our place within it.

Between 1986 and 1995, Rauschenberg produced a number of series, or families, of paintings on metal: the "Shiners," 1986–93; the "Urban Bourbons," 1988–95; the "Borealis," 1989–92; the "Galvanic Suite," 1988–91; the "Night Shades," 1991; the "Phantoms," 1991; and the "Off Kilter Keys," 1993. *Among the most beautiful of these are the "Night Shades." In that series, photographic images have been transferred onto the soft gray of an aluminum surface and overlaid with passages of gestural painting. The "Night Shades" do not have the extreme reflectiveness of the "Shiners," which are practically like mirrors. Instead, they both absorb and reflect light in a peculiarly beautiful way. Of all of the "Night Shades," Holiday Ruse is, to me, the most lush and complex. It's a gorgeous painting. The tarnishes make for incredibly varied and subtle shadings—from light gray through dense black—that seem to shift as one moves around the room. As the viewer looks at *Holiday Ruse* from different vantage points, the images appear and disappear and a curious, changeable light comes off the painting, like moonlight. It's a wonderful painting to walk by.*

Structurally, *Holiday Ruse* is one of Rauschenberg's great linear works. That is, it is conspicuously longer than it is high and reads in a measured, sequenced way. In this sense, it is related to *This Is the First Half of a Print Designed to Exist in Passing Time*, ca. 1949, Rauschenberg's first important mature work, as well as to the *Automobile Tire Print*, 1953, and the grandest of all of the artist's linear works, the ongoing series of studies and reflections that make up *The 1/4 Mile or 2 Furlong Piece*, 1981–. As you walk the roughly 440-yard length of this painting, you find both abstract elements and complicated arrays of images that you have to traverse and look at and remember, as if you were walking through a landscape. *Holiday Ruse* is divided into five separate units butted together, with each unit divided into three from top to bottom. I see this painting as having a kind of 3/5 rhythm. The formal rhythm is horizontal: As the eye moves from left to right the divisions are quite clear. The informal rhythm is vertical. But the lyrical painting in this work spills across all the divisions. Various uniting and obscuring the photographic imagery is a kind of street life of painterly activity—abstract passages done with brushes and rags that evoke the gestural art of the generation immediately preceding Rauschenberg's own. Throughout the work there is a wonderful duality between the painterly passages, which have the flow and irregularity of nature, and images of commercial and domestic architecture. With the expressionistic overpainting, these vignettes—a railroad crossing, the corner of a building, a porch banister—can look vast, even cosmic. There is no greater sense of space in Jasper Johns's galaxies than in *Holiday Ruse*.

Reading *Holiday Ruse* from left to right one encounters three important pairs of images. In the lower left-hand corner of the painting is a duck and, above it, an image of Pegasus, the flying horse, taken from an old corporate logo. At the very top of the third panel is the face of a Byzantine saint; below it one finds a statue of a Greco-Roman goddess. The center of the fourth panel bears an image of a worker carrying a load of boxes on his shoulders, while the lower portion of the final panel depicts a shepherd on the road. This set of pairs, I believe, absolutely encompasses the world of beings for Rauschenberg. On the left are the animals. In art from medieval times forward, animals appear as innocent witnesses to human affairs.

In the center of the work Rauschenberg acknowledges the world of spiritual experience. On the right-hand side are two men, both workers—the kind of person the artist favors most. All of the images in *Holiday Ruse* are taken from Rauschenberg's own photographs. I asked him where that Byzantine saint came from, and he said, "It's painted on a building in New York. I took a picture of it." I said, "Who is it, do you think?" He said, "I think of him as Moses."

From a variety of perspectives, Robert Rauschenberg is arguably the finest living artist at work in America, and *Holiday Ruse* reflects much of what has concerned him for the last forty-odd years: It combines beautiful painting and meaningful images in a rhythmic structure. It recalls for me one of the greatest paintings in Western art (also a grand horizontal painting): Velázquez's *Las Meninas*. There is much more to *Las Meninas* than just the Infanta, the miraculously vivid little princess centered in the composition. Other figures lurk in the shadows, while still others appear only as reflections in a mirror. Like *Las Meninas*, *Holiday Ruse* is conceived as a set of mysterious, shadowy zones that read from left to right.

Holiday Ruse has a dreamlike quality rather than the stark figure/ground relationship one finds in the big silk-screened works like *Barge*, 1962–63. *Barge* is a heroic painting, a panoramic painting, like a great landscape. But I like the humanity of *Holiday Ruse*. And it is beautifully painted. Somehow, it's warmer, more emotional—a different sort of painting. When I told Rauschenberg how rich it was for me he smiled and said, "It even has music!" I said, "I didn't hear anything." And he said, "Look again."