

# GLADSTONE

Rebecca Schiffman, "Robert Rauschenberg: *Arcanums*," *The Brooklyn Rail*, October 9, 2024



**ArtSeen**

## Robert Rauschenberg: *Arcanums*

By Rebecca Schiffman



Installation view, *Robert Rauschenberg: Arcanums* at Gladstone Gallery, 2024. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery.

What makes Robert Rauschenberg so special (and so worthy of frequent revisitation) is that each new move he made was a foil to the last. He continuously built, adding and forming new chains of reactions that were not only groundbreaking during his time but are still relevant and timely today. On Rauschenberg's ability to prove that anything, including junk on the street, could be art, John Cage said, "Beauty is now underfoot wherever we take the trouble to look," while the painter Jack Tworkov commended Rauschenberg for being able, "to see beyond what others have decided should be the limits of art." These ideas can be seen throughout his career: in the

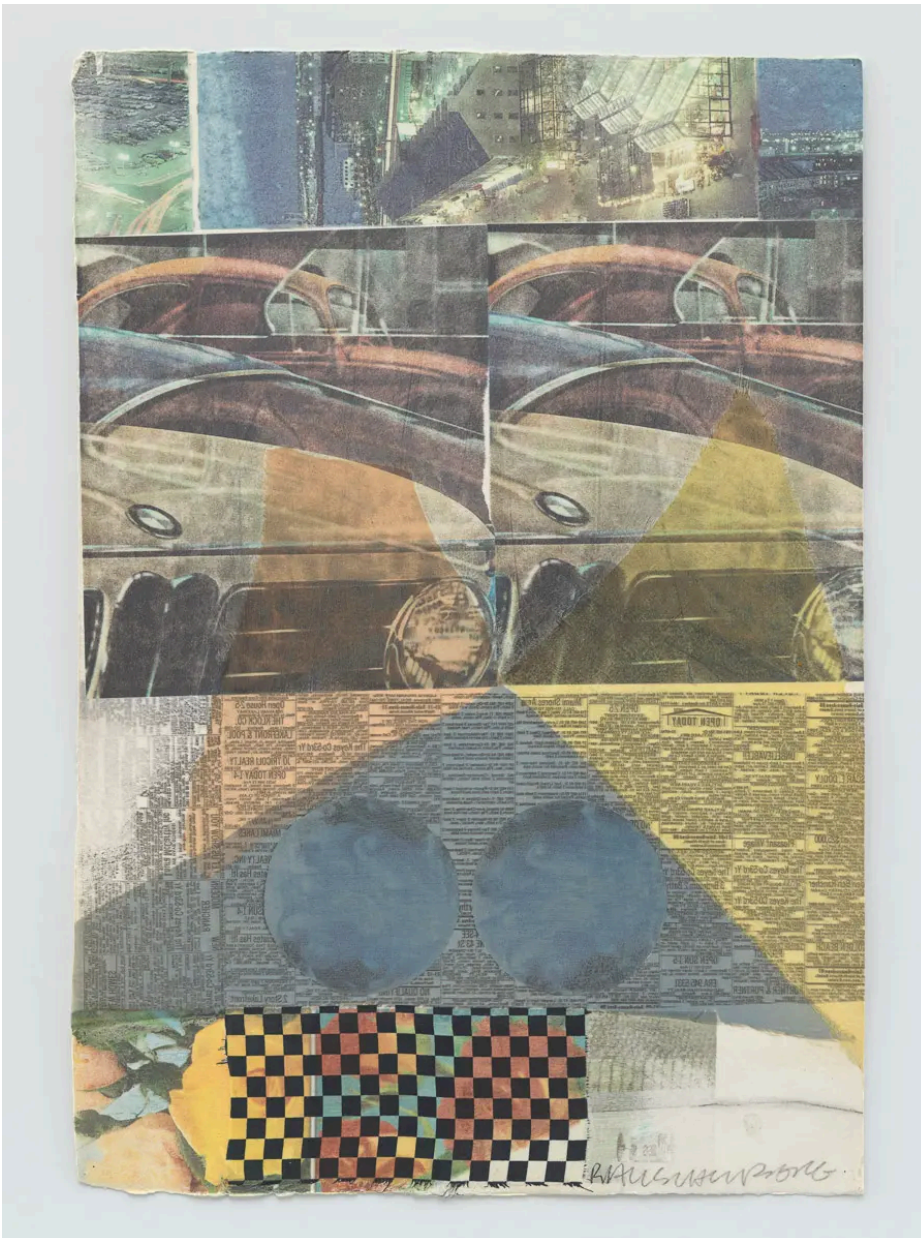
1950s, Rauschenberg pioneered his Combines, works that fused painting and sculpture through the use of found objects to challenge the boundaries between art and life. In the sixties, he expanded this observation, overlaying painterly prints with clippings from magazines and newspapers, sampling the media-saturated environment to offer a fragmented view of the world. By the 1970s, Rauschenberg took these ideas further in his “Arcanum” series, which focuses on the mysteries of the physical and spiritual worlds. The full suite of thirteen drawings is on view now at Gladstone’s uptown gallery.

The title of the series, “Arcanum,” is derived from the Latin *arcanus* for “secret” or “hidden place,” and signals Rauschenberg’s intention to create something beyond the sum of its varied parts, as if the works offer clues to something larger. The word carries the weight of ancient pursuits: in the Renaissance, arcanum became a symbol of both physical and spiritual exploration, the journey to deeper truths and elusive knowledge. Alchemists were commonly said to be pursuing the arcana of nature, seeking out elixirs to change metals into gold, prolong life, and cure diseases (think: the philosopher’s stone). His choice, too, to call the works “arcanums” rather than the more linguistically correct “arcana” reflects his playful and experimental relationship with language, much like his approach to art—bending the rules to suit his own creative vision.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Arcanum VI*, 1979. Solvent transfer, fabric, and watercolor on paper, 22 7/8 x 15 5/8 inches. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery.

Rauschenberg, born into a deeply religious family, aspired to be a preacher in his youth. Though he eventually gave up that dream (because the Fundamentalist church his family belonged to forbade dancing), his fascination with and belief in spirituality never left him. In the “Arcanum” series, this manifests through layered imagery that intertwines religious iconography with natural and everyday phenomena. Images of Jesus Christ, church altars, and Fibonacci-like spirals are juxtaposed with scenes from pop culture and nature—cars, basketball players, calculators, rivers, bowls of berries—blurring the lines between the sacred and the mundane. As Jennifer Higbie notes in the catalogue for the exhibition, artists could be seen as modern-day alchemists, transforming traditional materials into entirely new forms. She references Rauschenberg himself, who once answered an interview question on the importance of the metaphysical, transcendental content of art by saying, “I don’t think you can separate them. The object of art is to not separate these things. You don’t make an icon for either of them. You just indulge in the process of putting them together.” The “Arcanum” series seems like a direct visual manifestation of this philosophy: if art is about putting disparate elements—ethereal and material, sacred and mundane—together, then these works embody that process. Through their layered imagery, the series seamlessly intertwines the metaphysical with the everyday, creating a space where both can coexist without hierarchy, inviting each individual viewer to engage in the mystery of how they relate in their own terms. In this way, the act of looking, the trial of translation, is never complete—a trademark of sorts, for Rauschenberg.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Arcanum XI*, 1979. Solvent transfer, fabric, watercolor, and graphite on paper. 22 1/2 x 15 3/8 inches. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery.

Even the physical artistic process for this series borders on the supernatural. Rauschenberg, always quick to adopt new methods, used solvent transfer on strips of fabric (his use of fabric can be seen as a direct inspiration from the vibrant colors he saw when visiting a textile center on a trip to India in 1975), creating fragmented, ghostly images from everyday photographs from magazines and newspapers. He then obscured these with grids, fabric meshes, and layers of pencil and watercolor. Valuing the unpredictability of the solvent transfer process, Rauschenberg relished the technical distance it provided, allowing for spontaneous personal interventions. This unpredictability, much like the alchemical process of turning base materials into gold, was central to his process. He embraced the idea that unexpected reactions in the materials could lead to new discoveries, transforming ordinary objects into something mysterious, and capable of having more than one layer of meaning.

But above all, these works reward viewers who take time for careful looking. Quiet study reveals unexpected juxtapositions: a cowboy on a horse is layered over a Yankees player, whose striped leg peeks out from behind; in another work, antique wallpaper is hastily pasted beside a pair of telephone poles engulfed in fire, while a frilly white pillow above is marked by a red square. None of these combinations seems to make sense—why are these images together? Yet, why wouldn't they be? Rauschenberg once said, "Artists drag other parts of society into a confrontation with the unknown." Perhaps this is the unknown—or perhaps it's simply what we already see every day, reassembled to force us to look again.