

Skyway: A Living History
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The assassination of President Kennedy — which occurred just a mile away from where *Skyway* hangs at the DMA today — left a nation broken. Created the year following Kennedy's assassination, *Skyway* embodies both Robert Rauschenberg's visceral internal dialogue as well as his challenge to the viewer to re-evaluate their perception of the world.

Screen printed media images of construction, space exploration, and American national symbols dominate *Skyway's* expanse. Rauschenberg uses these "simple images"¹ to serve as visual cues for the viewer: he once remarked about this period that "I was bombarded with TV sets and magazines, by the excess of the world. I thought an honest work should incorporate all of those elements, which were and are reality."² Rauschenberg truly believed that his work should "neutralize the calamities that were going on in the outside world"³ and thus *Skyway* works to mitigate the impact of the calamity to which he pays regards — Kennedy's assassination — through the viewer's familiarity with the images.

The form of collage itself, introduced through the Cubist movement's use of geometric shapes and abstract forms, reflects displacement, abstraction, and a rejection of order.⁴ Rauschenberg's use of collage illustrates the warring political and social forces of the 1960s that rejected all normalcy: urban sprawl, the space race, America's domination in global affairs, the Civil Rights Movement, and the aftermath of Kennedy's assassination.

Interestingly, *Skyway* marks the beginning of a new artistic direction for Rauschenberg. In fact, "After Kennedy's death in particular, Rauschenberg became more involved in the civil rights movement and made fundraising posters for CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) in 1965."⁵ As with *Skyway*, many of Rauschenberg's later works for the CORE feature many images of Kennedy — who pushed for and proposed influential civil rights legislation. Rauschenberg's reaction to Kennedy's assassination reflects his desire to take up the fight for justice through his art.

Yet, *Skyway* is not just a reflection of Rauschenberg's internal dialogue, it is an appeal to the viewer to engage in a similar dialogue.

An appropriation of a Flemish Baroque piece — Peter Paul Rubens' *Venus at her Toilet* — makes a repeat appearance in the lower half of the canvas. Rubens' Venus is looking at a mirror image of herself, which Rauschenberg replicates through his appropriation of the piece.⁶ Rauschenberg is essentially creating a mirror for the viewer: to look inward, but also into the context of *Skyway*, in order to form her own reaction whether it be regarding political, social, or economic issues.

Interestingly, while *Skyway* may portray history, the swaths of white space on the canvas imply that it is a work in progress.⁷ With the recent release of the Kennedy files, *Skyway's* relevance and role as a piece of living history is irrefutable. However, it is Rauschenberg's internal dialogue and plea to the viewer to re-examine our society that holds the most relevance: aren't our stories emblazoned with "*work in progress*"?

¹ "Robert Rauschenberg Biography, Art, and Analysis of Works," The Art Story: Modern Art Movements, Artists, Ideas and Topics," <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-rauschenberg-robert-artworks.htm> (accessed November 02, 2017).

² Branden W. Joseph, ed., *Robert Rauschenberg (October Files)* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), 125.

³ "Robert Rauschenberg Biography, Art, and Analysis of Works," The Art Story: Modern Art Movements, Artists, Ideas and Topics," <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-rauschenberg-robert-artworks.htm> (accessed November 02, 2017).

⁴ Stuart Grais, "Collage," <http://facweb.cs.depaul.edu/sgrais/collage.htm> (accessed December 9, 2017).

⁵ Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 193.

⁶ Rebekah S. Scoggins, "A Renegotiation of the Role of the Artist in the 1950s Era of Mechanical Reproduction: The Early Careers of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg" (master's thesis, Georgia State University, 2012), 75-79 http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/art_design_theses/104 (accessed November 02, 2017).

⁷ Alexandria Valera, "The Politics and Aesthetics of American Art during the Cold War: Commissions for Philip Johnson's New York State Pavilion at the 1964-1965 World's Fair" (CUNY Academic Works, 2015), 43. https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1039&context=hc_sas_etds (accessed November 02, 2017).