

Who's on First: Warhol, Rauschenberg, Silkscreen, and Baseball in 1962

It is a rare occurrence when two artists, at nearly the same time, co-opt a commercial printing process and in so doing challenge our expectations of manual virtuosity and originality in painting. While arguably less momentous than Picasso's and Braque's simultaneous incorporation of newsprint collage in their analytical cubist paintings in 1912, Robert Rauschenberg's and Andy Warhol's adoption of the photo-silkscreen printing technique in 1962 opened up conceptual realms that are being explored to this day. Unlike Picasso and Braque, however, who worked, as Braque put it "like two mountain climbers roped together," and whose strikingly similar and often unsigned grisaille paintings from 1910 to 1912 left critics struggling to tell one from the other, Warhol and Rauschenberg were only casual acquaintances in 1962, and while they were quite aware of each other's work, their approaches to silkscreening were both conceptually and stylistically different, and remained so.

Although there has been occasional debate as to which of the two artists was the first to make photo-based silkscreen paintings, a number of sources concur that Rauschenberg went to Warhol's Upper East Side townhouse on September 18, 1962, at the suggestion of Henry Geldzahler, specifically to see Warhol's silkscreen paintings and obtain information on where he'd had the screens made. The other attendees at this visit were art dealer Ileana Sonnabend and her husband Michael, Swedish artist Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd, and writer (and, later, Warhol biographer) David Bourdon.¹ Little has been reported about conversations during this encounter beyond Rauschenberg's suggestion that Warhol leave a border between his silkscreened images and the edges of the canvas, a recommendation Warhol, flattered as he was to have the more established artist's opinion, did not take. Rauschenberg didn't waste any time: a receipt for nine silkscreens from Aetna Silk Screen Products I obtained from the Rauschenberg Foundation archive is dated October 2, 1962, a mere two weeks after his visit with Warhol.²

Warhol had actually begun making silkscreen paintings around six months before this meeting with Rauschenberg. Biographers Tony Scherman and David Dalton retrieved a commercial receipt dated March 29, 1962, from the Warhol archive, for an acetate used to make Warhol's first silkscreens. In their 2009 book *Pop: The Genius of Andy Warhol*, they write that Warhol "screenprinted almost four dozen pictures of one- and two-dollar bills, from bite-sized six-by-ten images... to the massive serial composition *200 One Dollar Bills*." Warhol had drawn the image of a dollar bill on this acetate, which printer Floriano Vecchi, of Tiber Press, whom Warhol had known as a commercial artist since the mid-1950s, photo-chemically transferred to a silkscreen.³

Ileana Sonnabend must have liked what she saw in Warhol's studio; the artist consigned six paintings to her gallery in Paris on October 7, 1962, including the silkscreens *Marilyn in Black and White*, *Twenty Marylins* and *Four Marylins*.⁴ Also, not long after the September visit, Warhol asked Rauschenberg for family photographs, which he used to create at least three silkscreened portraits, including *Young Rauschenberg #1* (1962), *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1963), and *Texan* (1963).

On November 6, 1962, at the opening of his first one-person exhibition in New York at Eleanor Ward's Stable Gallery, Warhol premiered several of his earliest photo-silkscreen paintings. A review by critic Michael Fried published in the December 20 issue of *Art International* mentions paintings of Marilyn Monroe, Troy Donahue, and Elvis Presley, all silkscreen paintings, as well as canvases that were hand-painted or made using rubber stamps.⁵ Architect Philip Johnson purchased *Gold Marilyn Monroe* from this exhibition and donated it that December to The Museum of Modern Art. Rauschenberg's earliest silkscreen paintings—*Sundog*, *Crocus*, and *Quarry*, among others—were consigned to Leo Castelli Gallery by the end of 1962, further establishing that the artist was fully into his silkscreen production by no later than fall-winter 1962. His first exhibition of silkscreen paintings opened in Paris on February 20, 1963, at Galerie Ileana Sonnabend.

Despite Warhol's distinction as the first artist to create and exhibit silkscreen paintings, it is impossible to overlook the enormous impact Rauschenberg's art had already made on Warhol and the other Pop artists since his emergence as the *enfant terrible* of the art world in the mid-1950s. His Combine paintings, their broad brushstrokes laying claim to actual objects like pillows, clocks, tires, neckties, street-signs, and not-so-common ones like taxidermied goats and chickens, flew in the face of the reigning Abstract Expressionists' eschewal of external reference, let alone popular culture. Had Rauschenberg not broken through the solemnity of Action Painting and embraced the vital, noisy facts of urban mid-century life, paintings of Campbell's Soup cans or car crashes could never have happened.

Both Warhol and Rauschenberg had worked with photographic processes and image transferring methods long before their use of the silkscreen. Rauschenberg incorporated media photos, comics, and magazine pages into his Combine paintings from around 1954, but his embrace of printmaking methods both traditional and unconventional began with a book of woodcuts in 1949, followed by exposed blueprint photograms of figures in 1950, and the 22-foot-long *Automobile Tire Print* in 1953, whose single impression was made by an inked tire on John Cage's Model A Ford. He did his first solvent-transfer drawings in 1958, in which newspaper or magazine photographs were transferred to paper with lighter fluid, turpentine or other solvents, and began using lithography in 1962.

Warhol began taking and developing his own photographs at the age of nine. As a student at Carnegie Institute of Technology in 1948, he devised a blotted line technique that became one of his hallmarks: he would draw an image in pencil on water-resistant paper, trace over it in ink, and press it onto another sheet of paper, resulting in a print with an elegant broken line that could be repeated on other sheets of paper by re-inking the pencil drawing. A year later, as a commercial artist in Manhattan, he did tracings from photographs borrowed from the New York Public Library's collection, and from the 1950s onward he used an opaque projector to trace printed materials onto canvas or paper. Warhol also made limited-edition books in the mid-1950s using commercial offset printing, and, immediately preceding his use of screen printing, he used stamps carved from art gum erasers to make the serial paintings of postage stamps and S&H Green Stamps.

In my tape-recorded interview with Warhol in August 1981, I inquired about the history of his printmaking techniques:

BB: From the start, you've been dealing with prints in one way or another. I once saw one of your books that had that blotted paper thing...and then you used rubber stamps for a while.

AW: Rubber stamps.

BB: And then I guess you went to silkscreens.

AW: I know, that was just an accident. I don't know how that happened.

BB: How did you just decide to use....

AW: Well, I guess I just remembered that we used to do it in high school or something like that. And then, I think the first, ah, one I did was a silkscreen, but just a drawing, one, it was the Money. And then I realized, somebody said, 'oh, you could do a photographic image,' and then I—that's how it started I guess.

BB: It's a lot easier too [not having to draw the image].

AW: And the Baseball picture, I think that was the first one I did.⁶

Warhol's recollection that his first silkscreen, "the Money" was "just a drawing" jibes with Scherman and Dalton's previously cited description of the series of one- and two-dollar bill paintings whose production began with the artist's drawing of a dollar bill on a sheet of acetate. His statement that "the Baseball picture" was his first silkscreen made from a *photograph* has generally been accepted as fact, although there has also been speculation that his serial portraits of Natalie Wood and Warren Beatty, made from Hollywood headshots, may have preceded it. Warhol's comment that his first use of silkscreen "was just an accident," however, is at odds with the fact that he had been visiting Vecchi at Tiber Press for years, selling him drawings used to print commercial greeting cards. One of many points of curiosity about *Baseball* is that it may be the only early painting whose image Warhol never repeated in another work. In fact, he didn't return to sports-themed paintings at all until his portraits of Muhammad Ali, Dorothy Hamill, and others in 1978.

Baseball (1962), a nearly eight-foot-tall painting acquired from the Stable Gallery by the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art in 1963, consists of a single image of a player at bat in Yankees pinstripes, with a catcher behind him, repeated nearly 40 times across seven rows.⁷ The batter was commonly believed to be Roger Maris—a left-handed hitter like the figure portrayed—who beat Babe Ruth's single-season homerun record in fall 1961 with his 61st homer, but after studying a reproduction of the newspaper photo Vecchi used to produce the silkscreen, I would argue that it far more resembles Maris's left-handed Yankees teammate, Johnny Blanchard. The degradation of the painting's image, to the point of obliteration on the lower right-hand row, mirrors the newspaper printing process, in which an image is filtered through a half-dot screen, and printed onto a disposable product which gets crinkled and smudged in the course of reading.

Baseball disrupts our expectation that when viewing a series of consecutive images, a progression in space denotes a progression in time. Looking at a painting resembling a huge chopped-up contact sheet, the viewer at first believes that the batter will at some point swing. Warhol's irregular striking of the silkscreened image—often overlapping, sometimes out of vertical alignment, heavily inked in some places, too lightly in others—teases us to imagine

motion where there is none, and therefore a passage of time where there is none. This temporal effect reaches hallucinatory proportions in the diptych *Orange Car Crash Fourteen Times* (1963), whose repeated identical images against a lurid solid background cast the viewer into the type of nightmare in which the dreamer is again and again brought back to a single moment of inescapable trauma. Warhol's statement on media numbness, "When you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it really doesn't have any effect,"⁸ does not apply in my opinion to his paintings. A visceral dislocation of time occurs also in the films the artist would produce a year after *Baseball*, in which the absence of camera movement over minutes, or even hours, causes us to become hyperaware of the inconsistent movement of the film itself, especially the flickering array of light between spliced reels.

Rauschenberg had used quite a few newspaper and magazine images of athletes in the Combines, including runners in *Rebus* (1955), acrobats in *Small Rebus* (1956), and, interestingly enough, a ballplayer for the Phillies in *Talisman* (1958). Still, the fact that he included a repeated image of New York Yankee batters in several of his earliest silkscreen paintings, within a month or so of visiting Warhol, might be, as Rauschenberg scholar Roni Feinstein suggests, a sly nod to Warhol.⁹

Brace (1962) is a 60-inch-square oil and silkscreen painting with a loosely cruciform composition and a mostly monochrome palette. A silkscreened image featuring a trio of players—with Roger Maris (identified by the number 9) in the batter's box and teammate Mickey Mantle warming up in the on-deck circle—occupies a roughly delineated square at the center of the composition.¹⁰ Mantle can also be seen twice to the left, though more faintly, with one image stacked over the other, and Maris is double-struck just to the right. Two silkscreened images of clouds, likely from the artist's own photographs, appear on the bottom and right of the painting, mimicked by thin layers of paint strokes and cloudburst-like drips. Hovering auspiciously over Maris's head is a curious circular shape—silkscreened onto the primed canvas like the other photographic images and then surrounded like a sun by atmospheric washes of oil—a fitting tribute to the recently anointed home run king.

The same Maris/Mantle photograph appears among other images in four related 1962 paintings by the artist, *Shortstop*, *Quarry*, *Overcast I*, and *Overcast II*. All are based on accruals of rectangular images modulated by broadly brushed paint strokes, a structure reminiscent of the grid-like array of collaged printed materials with gestural brushstrokes in Combine paintings such as *Curfew* (1958), or *Summerstorm* (1959). Rauschenberg appears to have been more interested in exploring a more effective way to incorporate and resize found images than in reinventing the geometry upon which his more expressionist forays are held in place. Unlike Warhol, whose flattened serial or single images eradicated both relational pictorial space and relational imagery, Rauschenberg's photo-silkscreened images are parts of a complex whole, in which one photo either augments or collides with another, igniting synaptic connection.

The multiple meanings of the one-word title, "brace," are consistent with Rauschenberg's widespread use of association and allegory, whether through titling (as in *Rebus*), the interaction of visual elements, or both. Just as the protruding stuffed eagle in the Combine

Canyon—in the company of the erotic dangling bifurcated pillow and a baby photograph of the artist's son, Christopher—is said to allude to the abduction of Ganymede by Zeus, the archetypal foundations of imagery are never more than a pace away in the artist's work. The painterly areas surrounding and partially obscuring the silkscreened photographs bracket or "brace" these images. That brace is also a hunting term, referring to a pair of killed game birds, is certainly applicable to the artist's depiction of two sluggers with clubs, bracing themselves for the pitch. Even a reference to Hercules, who has been depicted by several Renaissance and Baroque artists holding his club two-handed like a baseball bat, is possible considering Rauschenberg's frequent use of mythological images. Then again, the Yankees won the World Series that October, so it could simply be that Rauschenberg was celebrating. Nevertheless, the heroic aspect of *Brace* is heightened in *Shortstop* and *Overcast I*, in which images of a NASA ground crew tending to a rocket appear right next to the one of Maris and Mantle, thus suggesting the ascendancy of a new genre of American athlete-hero—the spaceman.

The translucency of silkscreened images, as opposed to the opacity of photos and printed materials affixed to the surfaces of the Combines, gave Rauschenberg free rein to develop more sophisticated interplays between hand-painted areas and reproduced images, and between reproduced images and other images, thereby multiplying the associations, visual puns, and ambiguities in earlier works through images now rendered as ghostly signs. A particularly striking example is the line drawing of a prism silkscreened over a nearly paint-obiterated Maris in the upper center of *Shortstop*. At first view, the number 9 on Maris's jersey reads as a dimension for one of the sides of the prism, which amplifies the spatial ambiguity of the geometrical form—is it upturned or downturned?

From fall 1962 through spring 1964, Rauschenberg made seventy-nine silkscreen paintings, reusing fifty screens that he destroyed in the summer of 1964. After that decisive gesture, he returned to the technique only sporadically, pursuing instead a variety of other types of photo-transfer, including vegetable dye transfer and tarnishes on metal. Warhol, used the silkscreen throughout his entire career, for both his paintings and print editions. If his silkscreen paintings have been judged more innovative than Rauschenberg's, it is largely because he reduced formal structure to a bare minimum, boldly demonstrating that a single photographic image, or series of identical images, printed onto canvas through a commercial process, could constitute a painting. Warhol codified the medium, turning off-register images, clotted ink accidents, garish color schemes, and the aforementioned temporal dislocation into a potent and mesmerizing style.

On the other hand, immersed as we are in a world of digital apparition, Rauschenberg's silkscreen paintings—with their impacted spectral fragments of art history, industrial machinery, space flight, roadways, street signs, and weather gauges—uncannily prefigure the depth-defying pileup of picture and text windows on our screens, and in a synesthetic sense the multilayered appropriations of contemporary sound sampling. With this in mind, I think it is safe to say that the Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris of silkscreen painting are still slugging it out.

¹ Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson, eds., *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1997), 561; David Bourdon, *Warhol* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 131–132; and Andy Warhol & Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol '60s* (New York/London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 22–23.

² I am grateful to Helen Hsu, Assistant Curator at the Rauschenberg Foundation, for emailing me copies of Rauschenberg's earliest invoices from Aetna Silk Screen Products, and to Erin Byrne, Archivist at the Andy Warhol Museum Archives, for emailing me copies of Warhol's invoices from Access Process Supply Co. and Aetna.

³ Tony Scherman and David Dalton, *Pop: The Genius of Andy Warhol* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 106.

⁴ http://www.warholstars.org/Andy_Warhol_1960-1962.html (SEPTEMBER 18, 1962: ILEANA SONNABEND VISITS ANDY WARHOL).

⁵ Michael Fried, "New York Letter," excerpt published in Steven Henry Madoff, ed., *Pop Art: A Critical History*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 267.

⁶ This excerpt was newly transcribed, unedited, in February 2017 from the tape recording. The original publication is: Barry Blinderman, "Modern 'Myths': An Interview with Andy Warhol," *Arts* 56 (October 1981), 145.

⁷ My thanks to Jaime Rovenstine, Department Assistant, Modern & Contemporary Art, at The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, for emailing me confirmation that *Baseball* was acquired directly from Stable Gallery, and for informing me that the painting is actually silkscreen on primed canvas, not silkscreen and oil on canvas, as it is commonly listed.

⁸ Warhol quoted in: G.R. Swenson, "'What is Pop Art?," *Art News* (November 1963), 61.

⁹ Roni Feinstein, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Silkscreen Paintings, 1962-64* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1990), 91.

¹⁰ Thanks to John Wille, lifelong Yankees fan, for identifying Mantle.