Robert Rauschenberg’s Combines, created between 1954 and 1964, were revolutionary in the history of art. Leo Steinberg called them a “shift from nature to culture,” and his characterization is still the most successful critical description. Others have discussed the works as collages, grids, “definitive incongruity,” and “relaxed symmetry.” But critics have not fully addressed the degree to which these works freed painting, sculpture, and design from their genre classifications, the degree to which Rauschenberg integrated into his work what some consider postmodern notions: references to earlier art, found and invented three-dimensional objects, and signs of language. It seems agreed that he firmly rejected the art notions of his day: Abstract Expressionism, the pre-eminence of two-dimensional pictures over other art forms, and the plastic sequences of formalism. Above all, Rauschenberg created a new vision of American culture—one rife with social and political conflict, changing gender and identity roles, and self-deprecating humor. Instead of taking the macho road followed by many of his generation, Rauschenberg took a magnifying glass approach, loading his work with odd, fascinating bits of Americana that seemed, to some, incongruous. Art impresario and friend Marvin Ross Friedman observed, “Robert Rauschenberg clearly articulated a new and concise language all his own. He speaks in a vernacular that is original and at the same time universal. He’s heroic yet uses materials of humble origin. His was a new kind of vision.”

Rauschenberg, raised with the given name Milton in the Texas Bible belt, has said that the name “Combine” refers both to farming and to the “shortening of the word combinations.” This phrase implies shortcuts and easy juxtapositions across media. Rauschenberg’s work variously combined color swatches in fabric, paint, and other materials; images from Western art and from popular culture, including an FBI poster whose wanted man resembled the artist; and found materials, from stuffed animals to light bulbs, mirrors, fans, wood furniture, wire, boxes, and tires. The use of sculptural elements and found objects changed the focus by combining art elements that literally interacted.
under Joseph Albers at Black Mountain College, helped to inform his aesthetic while freeing his imagination to experiment with notions of culture, clutter, and even chaos in the rebellion against post-World War II order. America's Ozne-Harriet values in the '50s were not the artist's, but he was torn between showing the hypocrisies of American culture and not overly exposing his own orientation. The images in the Combines seem to show materiality, strongly defined masculine and feminine gender roles, religion, sexuality, and sports, which often vie with each other for the viewer's attention. This mix of cultural messages also had special meanings for a masculine-appearing handsome guy with a wife and son, who was personally changing his own sexual orientation and values.

In brief, gender issues and American notions of masculine and feminine behavior underlie many of the Combine constructions. Rauschenberg variously used a stuffed goat with a spare tire stuck around its middle, a pheasant missing its tail (with a false tail inside the picture plane), an eagle flying out of the canvas, and a pair of white shoes mated to a stuffed hen as images that could imply longing, personal loss, and either symbolic castration and/or a new kind of sexual orientation. He denies that these were explicit portraits or autobiographical elements. Paul Schimmel points out that the sides of Rauschenberg's Combines, focus on his obsession with a stuffed angora goat in the window of a second-hand store in Greenwach Village. The goat was “so dirty and so elegant.” I saw it every day going to work with (choreographer) Merce Cunningham. One day I went in, and I said, “I want to buy that.” The guy said, “I don’t know if I want to sell that. I think it’s my good luck piece.” I said, “If you were going to sell it, how much would it be?” The price quoted was $35. I only had $15, and I said, “Would you take this for a down payment?” He did, and I did. Years went by, and I went back there to repay him, and the store didn’t exist anymore. I guess it was his good luck piece. Without a goat, you can’t go anywhere.” Rauschenberg described the goat as “a resisting object,” one that he knew “would be awkwardly placed. I thought, it needs a garden, and I can paint that, and that’s how it got started.” But Rauschenberg’s discussion omitted the tire that hangs around the goat’s middle. “The tire is a staple in Bob’s image repertoire and is the “resistant object,” he was torn between showing the hypocritical intrigue of making the combines, and perceptions to each work.

Rauschenberg’s comments on Monogram, one of the most recognizable Combines, focus on his obsession with a stuffed angora goat in the window of a second-hand store in Greenwach Village. The goat was “so dirty and so elegant.” I saw it every day going to work with (choreographer) Merce Cunningham. One day I went in, and I said, “I want to buy that.” The guy said, “I don’t know if I want to sell that. I think it’s my good luck piece.” I said, “If you were going to sell it, how much would it be?” The price quoted was $35. I only had $15, and I said, “Would you take this for a down payment?” He did, and I did. Years went by, and I went back there to repay him, and the store didn’t exist anymore. I guess it was his good luck piece. Without a goat, you can’t go anywhere.” Rauschenberg described the goat as “a resisting object,” one that he knew “would be awkwardly placed. I thought, it needs a garden, and I can paint that, and that’s how it got started.” But Rauschenberg’s discussion omitted the tire that hangs around the goat’s middle. “The tire is a staple in Bob’s image repertoire and is the “resistant object,” he was torn between showing the hypocritical intrigue of making the combines, and perceptions to each work.
Regarding the creation of Bed (1955), another crucial work in this pastel series, Rauschenberg stated, "I ran out of stuff to paint. Any time I've worked flat long enough, I always want to move away from the wall. That's happened over and over again. Sometimes I go to collage, sometimes to metal and sculpture. To me, change is refreshing. Working with new material brings in a whole set of problems and responsibilities that weren't confrontated before." Space does not permit a full consideration of every phase of Rauschenberg's career, but each period involved change, the use of new materials, and the erasure—he once erased a de Kooning drawing—of that era's barriers and boundaries between artistic disciplines. The silkscreen period led to ongoing explorations of image and transformation from one thing or medium to another, and this, in turn, led to processes facilitated by emerging computer technologies. In 1966, Rauschenberg founded E.A.T. (Experiments in Art & Technology) with artist Robert Whitman and engineers Billy Klüver and Fred Waldhauer. The first results of their investigations were presented at New York City's 69th Regiment Armory and featured 40 engineers and 10 artists. This forward-looking project offered technical services to artists, spread to other countries, and nurtured collaborations and interdisciplinary events joining artists and scientists/technicians. In 1980, E.A.T. distributed its own archive of over 300 documents to major libraries in seven countries.

E.A.T. was also one of the first steps in Rauschenberg's ongoing generosity toward emerging artists, friends, neighbors, and fellow human beings. Ron Bishop recounts that Rauschenberg moved to Captiva Island, Florida, over 30 years ago and "has become a longtime friend of this community in many ways, helping charitable organizations such as the Trauma Center. He also donates original art annually to the Abuse Counseling and Treatment Center, which is supported by all of the artists in the community, and he has helped bring in people like Lily Tomlin, Lauren Hutton, and Sharon Stone as celebrity auctioneers for the center's annual fundraiser. He and Darryl Potter have done the same with a lot of organizations in the area." Bishop continued, "Edison College has had 12 shows with him—one is pending in February 2007—and almost every show we do with Bob is a world premiere. The 1 1/2 Mile or 2 Farlong piece was shown here first, in '82, '83, and '86. Our 2005 show with Bob was a remarkable sculpture, A Quake in Paradise (Labyrinth) 1994, containing images from all parts of the planet. There were 29 panels configured in Ls, Ts, and Xs, allowing viewers to walk through and be part of the piece. It varies in installation from location to location. It was shown in Switzerland, outdoors in the snow in Ferrara, Italy, and also went to Nice, France, and to Denmark. It may land in an American collection."

A Quake in Paradise (Labyrinth) carries forward some of the earlier Combs on a larger scale. It was created using acrylic and graphite on 29 panels of bonded aluminum, anodized mirrored aluminum and polycarbonate (Lexan) with aluminum framing. The tall panels, transparent, reflective, opaque, and tinted, form a maze designed both to engage viewers and to stop them inside new visual terrains. Silkscreen, hand-applied paint and graphite, computer-generated transfer, and other processes juxtapose diverse images.
other; the circles, contrasting with square forms, often connot positive values including change, mobility, unity, and progress. Rauschenberg likewise variously uses color—in swatches, in combinations of two or three hues, and in combinations that make a particular statement yet refirm old color field notions to say that composings with color is not limited to one approach or school.

According to Bishop, ROCI (pronounced Rock) is a more direct continuation of the Combinas than Quake. “Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange,” was a traveling exhibition that culminated in 1991 at the National Gallery in Washington, DC: “It was one of the largest undertakings ever by an artist himself or one of his staff. The image can be printed in any size with a water-based ink onto a vellum-like material that is transfer with liquid to the back of your old bubble gum tattoos that you could arrange its hair.” Bishop added. “His materials are ubiquitous. He is not making pieces about something. There is no narrative in Bob’s work. That frees us to bring our experiences to each piece. His transfer process starts in the computer. He scans an image taken by himself or one of his staff. The image can be printed in any size with a water-based ink onto a vellum-like material that is transferred with pressure onto the surface of another material with a water-based medium on it. The process is a little like old bubble gum tattoos that you could transfer with liquid to the back of your hand. Bob’s new work makes me think of Matisses later work. Everything is down to the essentials, the purest of the elements that get the image across.”

Rauschenberg himself emphasizes the viewer's freedom to interpret the cacophony of the Combinas and his other works. Asked by an audience member at the Met discussion how his prolific use of pre-existing images should be read—as images, as content, or as just another compositional element, he replied, “In actuality, exactly what they are. and where they are in relationship to other things. Bring in as much complexity as you can face.”

Arne Glimcher has closely followed Rauschenberg's work since they met in the '60s when the artist was showing at Leo Castelli. Glimcher invited Rauschenberg to join his gallery, now Pace Wildenstein, around 1984 and considers their long association “one of the thrills of my career.” He says that he does not favor any single work or period. “I’m interested in the force that is Robert Rauschenberg—this dynamic wind that blows through his entire career.” He agreed that Rauschenberg did for art in America what Picaso was doing in Europe. “Picasso was an artist who made sculpture as well as paintings as well as prints as well as drawings. Rauschenberg is clearly the most important and the most influential artist of the second half of the 20th Century. You not only have painting turning into sculpture, you then have photography turning into performance turning into installation. All of those sensibilities, even videos, that were gravid in those early paintings became the watershed for the second half of the 20th Century. He blurs the line between sculpture and painting, and he blues the line between what a drawing is and isn’t when he erases de Kooning’s drawing in Erased de Kooning drawing 1953. Rauschenberg works, as he says, ‘in the gap between art and life.’ Art is no longer a magic window or anything like that. It is a part of life. Whereas the Abstract Expressionists were working toward something sublime, another kind of transcendent aesthetic, as were Agnes Martin, Ad Reinhardt, and Newman. Rauschenberg is actually creating the sublime out of the detritus of society. When he selects things that already exist in society—broken objects, pipes, air conditioning systems, crates and barrels, things made of metal—and he re-assigns them a new identity by his juxtapositions, he makes a sculptural act. He creates something like Oracle, a complex sculpture, out of pieces of found objects. It’s a new sculptural idiom.”

Jan Garden Castro is a writer in New York and a frequent contributor to Sculpture.