

R A U S C H E N B E R G ' S B E D



R I C K B A R O T

It measures a little over six feet high and two feet across; it was made in 1955. It is now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and, when hung on the wall, it is hung there vertically, like a crucifix. I say “made” rather than “painted” because its paint is the least of its materials. The bottom three-quarters of the canvas is covered by an actual quilt, patterned with blue, green, red, and pink stripes, now quite faded. The top part of the painting has an actual pillow affixed to the canvas, grayed from what must have been its first white, now the color of mashed potatoes. The quilt is stretched over the canvas tightly as in a good hospital tuck; the topmost part of the quilt has been turned down, as though readied for someone about to sleep. This is, then, a real bed, with the materiality of everyday rooms and needs brought to the canvas, a rendering almost tender and familiar. The caption on the wall beside the painting ironically underscores the painting’s seeming usualness, describing the painting as “oil and pencil on pillow, quilt, and sheet on wood supports.”

But then there is the paint of the painting, which is brutally laid on the pillow-and-quilt array in the manner that a murder or a great violence would turn a bedroom into a crime scene. Across

the bed, pell-mell swaths of paint have been distributed: red, black, maroon, blue, orange, green, ocher, yellow, white, light blue, olive. The paint is a child's fancy, or a nightmare's aftermath. The chaos of the thing is in fact its design, chaos *as* chaos. Loops and squiggles and dashes of pencil marks maniacally riddle the pillow. The vivid paints have congealed in thick impastos on the painting. We could interpret the mess of paint as representative of blood – but it is both more subtle and more powerful than that. There are too many colors for the gore to be mere blood, and there is too much vivacity in the colors to speak merely of disaster. What is most remarkable about the painting, of course, is that the pillow and quilt are there at all – the matter-of-fact stuff of life impastoed on the surface of art. The painting is as much sculpture, and has sculpture's claim to a three-dimensional concreteness, as it is what we conventionally call painting, and painting's claim to a planar, illusion-creating space. The painting wants to be – and is – both. A seminal instance of the “combine” paintings Robert Rauschenberg made from the mid-fifties through the mid-sixties, *Bed* has a mystery that registers all the deeper for the simplicity of the phenomenon we are looking at. Is the painting a playful folly? Is it an accusation? Is it a political comment? Is it a story? Is it a joke? Whether the slashes of paint should be read as impudent gestures against the domestic sublime of the Eisenhower years, or a pitying suggestion of a specific household's travail, the explosive paintwork is movingly ambiguous. The bright affront of it, and its sad anomie, seem pointedly American. We are looking at where we live, but with the place given the prominence of archetype:

How a bed once dressed with a kindly quilt becomes
unsleepable site of anarchy What body holes expressed
their exaltation loathing exhaustion
what horse of night has pawed those sheets
what talk under the blanket raveled
what clitoris lain very still in her own subversion
what traveler homeward reached for familiar bedding
and felt stiff tatters under his fingers
How a bed is horizontal yet this is vertical
inarticulate liquids spent from a spectral pillow

In this view of the painting – the first stanza of Adrienne Rich’s marvelous poem “Rauschenberg’s Bed” – the bed becomes a palimpsest of human consciousness and activity, sordid and full of pathos by turns. The characteristics we usually associate with a bed – the rest, comfort, and warmth emblemized by the “kindly quilt” – have been revised to account for the darker side of things. Where there were sleep, sex, and dream, there is now a “site of anarchy.” All possible stories converge on Rich’s bed: the body in love, in pain, the body in its depleted state. Insomnia or lust, the “horse of night” pawing the sleeper and the bed awake, are here. The couple talking, whether sweetly or in unraveling anger, are here. There is also the woman, synecdochically represented by the “clitoris lain very still,” quietly expecting whatever fresh violation is coming, subverted as much by her own fear as by her oppressor. Also there is the tired traveler who comes home expecting comfort only to find that home tattered and inadequate. Even the positioning of the bed does not provide solace: “How a bed is horizontal yet this is vertical,” Rich says, highlighting the impossibility of the bed as a place to lie on. Perhaps to acknowledge the garish paints splattered on the painting, or to denote the more human stains of urine, saliva, semen, and blood, Rich points to the “inarticulate liquids spent from a spectral pillow.” The bed, the poem suggests, is mute, and cannot articulate what it has witnessed, though by its very being it is evidence of those events. The bed is like an arriving messenger in a Greek tragedy, breathless with story but unable to speak because he is holding his own cut tongue in his hands. And the pillow – it is “spectral,” like a head full of dreams; or “spectral” in that it is barely there, a ghost of sleep.

In the early fifties, Adrienne Rich and Robert Rauschenberg were leading dramatically different lives. Rich was in her early twenties, had just graduated from Radcliffe, and was living in Cambridge, married to a young economist teaching at Harvard. Rich was also a writer of precocious note: in 1951, when she was twenty-one, her first book of poems, *A Change of World*, was published, having been chosen by W. H. Auden to receive the Yale Younger Poets award. In 1955, the year of Rauschenberg’s *Bed*, Rich bore her first son and published her second volume of poetry, *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems*. Like the other women artists

of her generation, Rich had a remarkably fervent ambition to become a writer – an ambition problematized by the wife-and-mother role that was expected of her. This was a role that Rich, in the fifties, fulfilled, even as her unease deepened: “I knew that marriage and motherhood, experiences which were supposed to be truly womanly,” she recounts in an essay, “often left me feeling unfit, disempowered, adrift.” But by almost all measures, Rich’s life had the contours of happy success: she was a privileged young woman who had had an upper-middle-class upbringing in Baltimore and was now set on the path of having her own family, a family that would inherit and embody the values that Rich herself had received.

Rauschenberg had grown up with other values. He was raised in Port Arthur, a hot and hardscrabble town on the Texas coast. While Rich read through the canon of English poetry in her youth, Rauschenberg suffered from dyslexia and had an unambitious, if gregarious, early life. His family life centered on religion and church, and at one point the adolescent Rauschenberg even considered becoming a minister. His was an upbringing that had no engagement with art. When Rauschenberg lived in New York in the mid-fifties, he had taken a circuitous route to get there and to the artist’s life he was living so vividly. There was the stint in the army that had made him realize his artistic bent, studying with Josef Albers at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, trips to Europe and Africa, and early gallery showings that earned him *enfant terrible* status. In his accounts of Rauschenberg’s works and biography, Calvin Tompkins has a passage about the making of *Bed* that perfectly captures what it must have been like to be young and a painter in New York, poor and dashing and insouciant: “He simply woke up one May morning with the desire to paint but nothing to paint on and no money to buy canvas. His eye fell on the quilt at the foot of the bed. The quilt had come up from Black Mountain with him, and he had slept under it for several winters. The weather was getting warm, though, and next winter seemed a long way off. He made a stretcher for the quilt, just as though it were canvas, and started to paint. Something was wrong, though; the quilt pattern was too self-assertive. Rauschenberg added his pillow.”

The image of Rauschenberg in his New York studio, the image

of Rich as a young mother in Cambridge – these have a dissonance that is stark and poignant. Seen from the near end of celebrated careers, Rauschenberg and Rich in 1955 now seem like figures caught in the placidity of amber, caught in a moment of impending flux in their lives. Rauschenberg will turn out to be our painter of earnest pranksterism, while Rich will turn out to be our poet of social agon. But in 1955 they were artists of metamorphosing visions. Their subsequent stories are, in many ways, metaphoric narratives for what has come to pass in America's cultural life in the past fifty years. Rauschenberg's odes to the images and items of everyday perceptions and historical events, re-envisioned in ever-inventive technical ploys; Rich's transformation from a writer of deft lyrics to a writer of expressively open forms dealing with her identities as a feminist, a lesbian, and a social activist – their stories are particular idiosyncrasies in a half-century of wild change.

I loved Adrienne Rich's work before I knew what it meant to love poetry. Like all undergraduate poets, I had only the smallest intimation of the humbling craft that was needed to write good poems, but I had a young writer's taste for the glory of it all: the vast changes in the artist's life that meant vast changes in theme and form, the lovely quarrels with the world and with one's self, the biography melodramatically played out for all to see. For others I knew, it was the road trip in *On the Road*, the drunkenly bifurcated personalities in *The Dream Songs*, the sly but devastating polemic in *A Room of One's Own*, or the endless fucking in *A Sport and a Pastime* that crystallized the image of what it was to be alive as a young artist. For me as a young poet – and a closeted gay poet, at that – Rich's story was that crystallization. Before reading Robert Frost taught me music and tone, before Elizabeth Bishop taught me visual acuity, Rich's work taught me the rousingly heightened personality that was needed to write poems. In the class on women's poetry that introduced me to Rich's work, hers had the most urgent effect on me. Emily Dickinson's poems were too hermetic, H.D.'s were too fussy with allusion, Bishop's poems seemed, at the time, too precious with detail, and Gwendolyn Brooks's work seemed too fraught with sociological value. But I loved the plainspoken intonations of Rich's poems, and the figure

she made in my mind: a woman who had to revise herself several times over, more free with each revision, free to declare parts of herself that were inchoate or hidden, unfathomable until explored. The Romantics had had the same sweeping effect, but here was someone who was writing about the contemporary textures of a world that I could see for myself, all around. In "When We Dead Awaken," Rich intones, "listen to me:/the faithfulness I can imagine would be a weed/flowering in tar, a blue energy piercing/the massed atoms of a bedrock disbelief," and looking out my dorm window I could see the winter asphalt of a parking lot in my New England college, an implacable bedrock. In "Like This Together," Rich writes, "Wind rocks the car./We sit parked by the river,/silence between our teeth," and I knew she was writing the situation of my life, the languid boys I spent all my time with, walking with them along the choppy Connecticut River, and the absolutely nothing that I said to them.

Rich is one of our great love poets, her poems mapping the ways in which longing becomes a site where internal and external strifes most intensely converge. Even as an undergraduate I understood the public conversations regarding power and gender that Rich's poems participated in, but it was the intimacy of her life that I sought in the poems, the coordinates of a "felicitous space" – to use Gaston Bachelard's phrase – in which the private thrived, even as the public din competed with it. Nonetheless, much of Rich's work is still often read for its politically energized content, and Rich herself has always been adamant about the political charge that informs her writing. In the poems she began writing in the sixties, Rich's personal and political selves have a dialectical tension posited on the feminist position that the personal *is* political. The now-notorious introduction Auden wrote for Rich's first book suggests the demure world Rich lived within in the fifties: "The poems a reader will encounter in this book are neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and do not tell fibs." At the time art and formalism were, for Rich, divorced from her daily work as a mother and wife. Poetry seemed to her a "universal – a gender-neutral – realm." Rich's early poems embody the ways in which one can cope with frustration and pain by imposing the will upon emotion and experience. "Storm Warnings," a poem published in

her first book, has an urn-like symmetry that is typical of the early work. The poem has sestet stanzas comprised of pentameter and tetrameter lines; the grammar and diction are clear, the tone is observant and calm. “Storm Warnings” could be read as a manifestation of the helplessness brought on by the escalating Cold War; it might also reflect a more personal anxiety: Rich’s half-aware sense that her identity hinges upon elements she cannot control. The poem’s final stanza points to the speaker’s delicate existence: she closes the curtains to the stormy view outside, lights the candles, and says, “This is our sole defense against the season; / These are the things we have learned to do / Who live in troubled regions.” In the late fifties, however, Rich began to see herself in light of the structures that surrounded her. Politics, and its asymmetrical distribution of power in society, was the “essence of my condition,” she realized. The gap between the neatness of her art and the turmoil in her intellectual and emotional life was becoming untenable. It is this gap – in difficulty and in searching uncertainty, with lyrical brilliance and polemical shrillness, with keen sympathy and sometimes self-righteousness – that is negotiated in Rich’s later work.

“I think of *Bed* as one of the friendliest pictures I’ve ever painted,” Robert Rauschenberg has said. “My fear has always been that someone would want to crawl into it.” Rauschenberg is kidding, but seriously. His work has always navigated between simple play and lavish thought, formal panache and vacuous meaning, a panoramic sensibility and a soulful, world-worn intimacy. Rich’s characterization of her poems as being mined “from dreams, snatches of conversation, street music, headlines, history, love, collective action” serves, equally well, to describe the range of atmosphere and imagery that one takes from Rauschenberg’s work. Rauschenberg is wont to describe himself as a happy painter, but in the most ambitious of his paintings there is a strain of profound darkness that is as charged as Rich’s poems. When Rauschenberg served his apprenticeship as a painter in the late forties and fifties, his generation of artists was working in the formidable shadow of the previous generation’s abstract expressionists. Painters like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning exerted a hegemony of thought and practice that emphasized a kind of anxious heroism, a heroism

Rauschenberg refused. "There was a whole language that I could never make function for myself," Rauschenberg said; "it revolved around words like 'tortured,' 'struggle,' 'pain.'" He adds, distancing himself even further from the era's self-conscious suffering, as represented by the Beats: "I used to think of that line in Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl,' about 'the sad cup of coffee.' I've had cold coffee and hot coffee, good coffee and lousy coffee. But I've never had a sad cup of coffee."

The light-footed poems of Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and James Schuyler are closer to the grain of Rauschenberg: in his, and their, juxtapositions of witty knowingness and emotional suggestion the world takes on an intense lightness and an intense gravity. This was a lightness and gravity, moreover, that was the product of a long cultural moment. Given Marcel Duchamp's breaking down of the barrier between art and the "ready-made," the moody lyricism of Joseph Cornell's boxes, the held silences of John Cage's music, the intimacies of Kurt Schwitters's collages, the virtuoso brushwork of de Kooning, the iconic imagery of the paintings of his friend Jasper Johns, Rauschenberg's combines of the fifties and sixties arrived as a new fidelity, a new tactility, toward art's continual conundrums. Abstraction and representation, mood and narrative, materiality and subjectivity, order and chaos – Rauschenberg revitalized these forces in the combines' untidy activity. Duty and lightness: in *Odalisk*, standing above a jerry-built pedestal composed of a wooden box on casters, a pillow, a post, a box plastered with photographs and reproductions and other paper ephemera, is a Leghorn rooster. Dark and light: in *Curfew* four Coke bottles are embedded in a painting dominated by gray, black, charcoal, and dark-green colors, with a brick-shaped area of white paint in the middle of the canvas. Haste and tranquillity: in *Reservoir*, among other things on the canvas are two working clocks displaying different times, and, on the right half of the canvas, an area of ravishing sky-blue is fading, gradually smudging to white. Funny and sad: in the famous *Monogram* a long-haired angora goat stands on a heavily collaged platform; the goat's muzzle is daubed with various paints, as though it had been eating paint, and around its body is a tire.

Jeff Koons's overblown ceramic sculptures, Damien Hirst's anti-septic lucite boxes – these are the steroid-infused realizations of

the combines Rauschenberg made decades ago. For Rauschenberg the combines seemed to partake in a closeness more aligned with the loving everyday gaze than with the imperatives of art. During the Great Depression, Rauschenberg's mother, Dora, was known for her thrifty sewing, her ability to arrange patterns so well that no fabric was ever wasted. "That's where," Rauschenberg said, "I learned collage." In the combines, one can see the canny arrangements of resource and economy that that Port Arthur childhood showed to Rauschenberg. Looking at the combines during a recent retrospective of them, I kept wanting to touch the pieces. They were so strange, and yet so homely. They were downright junky, but they also seemed to be codes, to borrow Edward Snow's phrasing regarding the things in a Jan Vermeer painting, for the "ontological categories embedded in the object-world." I was often reminded of Pablo Neruda's directive: "It is worth one's while, at certain hours of the day or night, to scrutinize useful objects in repose: wheels that have rolled across long, dusty distances with their enormous loads of crops or ore, charcoal sacks, barrels, baskets, the hafts and handles of carpenters' tools. The contact these objects have had with man and earth may serve as a valuable lesson to a tortured lyric poet. Worn surfaces, the wear inflicted by human hands, the sometimes tragic, always pathetic, emanations from these objects give reality a magnetism that should not be scorned." The combines had a magnetism that seemed drawn from a collective memory of specific ordinariness, and from a sense of encompassing aesthetic integrity. More plainly, notching down to the level of modesty what others are likely to see as grand gesture, Rauschenberg has said of the combines, "I think a picture is more like the real world when it's made out of the real world."

For the past forty years, Adrienne Rich's body of work has repeatedly re-inscribed the work of redress that is poetry's great task. Rich has given particular language to certain aspects of our communal fate, the schisms and relations, the angers and elations that have confronted us. "In painting as in writing," Hélène Cixous wrote, "there is no other 'beauty' than fidelity to what is. Painting renders — but what it renders is justice." The "what is," usually more troubling than salutary, has fueled Rich's poetics since the late fifties; so has "justice," and the acts of witness, description, and

change which support that justice. It has been said that much of Rich's work suffers from a programmatic didacticism, that the least successful poems, in their heavy rhetoric, are nothing more than sentimental political tracts. This is only as it should be, Rich would argue. The poems of sensation and the poems of outcry, after all, spring from the same being. The transformed conscience we see in her work, where the personal and the political are braided into an ethic of artistry and citizenship, provides a model that is often exemplary. Her poems are prompts for our own possible transformations. In her early poem "The Trees," for example, she envisions the unmooring that would release the locked energies in our own psyches:

The trees inside are moving out into the forest,
 the forest that was empty all these days
 where no bird could sit
 no insect hide
 no sun bury its feet in shadow
 the forest that was empty all these nights
 will be full of trees by morning.

The freed motion anticipated in "The Trees" becomes active scrutiny of self and history in "Diving into the Wreck," written almost ten years later: "I came to explore the wreck. / The words are purposes. / The words are maps. / I came to see the damage that was done / and the treasures that prevail." This purposeful inquiry prevails in Rich's work from the seventies and eighties, wherein the balance between the self's making and the world's "unmaking" is continually tested and measured. One section of "Twenty-one Love Poems," the masterwork of her middle period, ends with the line, "And they still control the world, and you are not in my arms," thus equating the speaker's longing with her political despair. In the assertion, both clauses hold equal weight. Desire, in terms of the "unsanctioned" lesbian relationships she was in, became one of the most urgent themes in her work. Anger, too, became a prominent tonality, given her understanding that anger "can be a kind of genius." And again and again, Rich searched for the just terms of her own growth. Seeing a spider, she associated herself with those forces which, "with no extraordinary power, / reconstitute the world." She likened herself to the dry

bulb in the cellar: “I used myself, let nothing use me.” Images of rebirth appeared in incantatory profusion: “There are such spring-like nights here / when a blade of grass pushes up through the soil.”

Rich’s humane attention has only gained in wildness and in lyric color in her late poems. The image of the fox, which has appeared in poems spanning the breadth of her career, appears again in her recent poem “Fox.” The creature is elusive but imaginatively present, hot to the speaker’s mind but also distant, always elsewhere:

I needed fox Badly I needed
 a vixen for the long time none had come near me
 I needed recognition from a triangulated face burnt-yellow
 eyes
 fronting the long body the fierce and sacrificial tail
 I needed history of fox briars of legend it was said she had
 run through
 I was in want of fox

And in “Shattered Head,” the theme of mortality runs through the poem like a chill, bringing a new darkness into Rich’s usual view of nature. If her previous poems had seen landscape as a zone of renewal, in “Shattered Head” the speaker discovers an unidentified animal’s crushed head and meditates, vertiginously, on the “revenge” and “incineration” of death. For the speaker, walking “uphill / through hoar-mist,” the discovery of the head is a shock; the image is shocking: “porridge of skull-splinters, brain tissue / mouth and throat membrane, cranial fluid.” Like the uncharacteristic terror Walt Whitman displays in “This Compost” – where he catalogues the debris of dead bodies and decaying matter beneath the verdant ground – the terror registered by Rich’s speaker is unlike any other moment in her poems. But, as in Whitman’s poem, where the death that lurks underground is seen as ultimately underwriting the vitality above it, Rich’s speaker arrives at an acceptance of what she has seen: “You can walk by such a place, the earth is / made of them / where the stretched tissue of a field or woods / is humid / with beloved matter.” There is finally, in Rich, a tenderness – one that, even as her poems argue against what is insufficient in our dealings with one another, appeals to

what consoles. It is this frank and generous consolation that is fulfilled in "Rauschenberg's Bed":

Sometimes this bed has eyes, sometimes breasts
 sometimes eking forth from its laden springs
 pity compassion pity again for all they have worn and borne
 Sometimes it howls for penis sometimes vagina sometimes
 for the
 nether hole the everywhere

How the children sleep and wake
 the children sleep awake upstairs

How on a single night the driver of roads comes back
 into the sweat-cold bed of the dreamer

leans toward what's there for warmth
 human limbs human crust

And so they meet. Rauschenberg and his painting. Rich and her poem about Rauschenberg's painting. Rich and her younger self. This younger Rich had inklings of a different prerogative, but it would be several years before it could be apprehended and acted upon. The younger Rauschenberg was already acting upon that recognition, generating in *Bed* and in his other combines an exaltation of brash new means. Rich's poem, then, in nodding to the boldness that was already available to the young Rauschenberg, is also a kind of belated nod to her own earlier self – a self that, in 1955, knew little of the voice, emboldened and affirmative, that had yet to speak.