

Behind the Scenes

Rauschenberg Revealed: Online and in Depth



SFMOMA conservators conduct materials testing related to *Untitled [glossy black painting]* (ca. 1951); photo: James Gouldthorpe, 2010

SFMOMA's collection of Robert Rauschenberg's work is among the foremost in the world, ranging from his signature "combines" and paintings to sculptures, photographs, prints, and drawings. Now the museum is preparing to complement this extraordinary collection with the largest and most comprehensive resource about Rauschenberg's work ever made available on the web. Part of the Getty Foundation's Online Scholarly Catalogue Initiative, the Rauschenberg Research Project will result in SFMOMA's first in-depth online scholarly publication. The project includes essays, bibliographies, exhibition histories, and conservation research, as well as an abundance of images and multimedia features. We recently spoke with SFMOMA Associate Curator of Collections and Research Sarah Roberts about the project, which is scheduled to go live in the summer of 2013.

How does this online catalogue differ from a typical printed catalogue?

The goal of the online catalogue is not only to have essays that talk about these artworks but also to show the work behind the scenes that went into gaining the knowledge that allowed the essay to be written. For example, a curator from Tate Modern who will be writing essays for the catalogue came to San Francisco for two days of research and discussion. We chose to have a videographer capture the conversation because we can make that available online. Obviously that couldn't go into a book.

Will the research continue to be updated after it's posted online?

The beauty of the online catalogue is that it's open-ended. Unlike a traditional catalogue where the book goes on the shelf and almost immediately something in it is obsolete because new research continues, with an online catalogue we can revise and update whenever we want to.

How has the SFMOMA Conservation Department contributed to this research?

With *Untitled [glossy black painting]* (ca. 1951), for example, we're interested in its very complicated surface: a mixture of crumpled paper and layers of different kinds of black paint. Our conservators have done a series of mock-ups using different kinds of paint, painting techniques, and paper. They have literally tried to recreate what you see in the original work. They've tried brushing the paint onto the paper, then crumpling it, then adhering it to the surface; they've tried dipping it—different orders of operations and several types of paint to see the different play of surfaces. The process has helped us understand how he created the surface, which has opened up avenues for curatorial research. And, for the conservators, these mock-ups help them better understand how to take care of the painting.

What do you think visitors will find most compelling about this project?

What's been a real surprise and delight for me has been that even for iconic works like *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) and *Collection* (1954–55) there are all sorts of things we don't know. They haven't been subjected to this kind of in-depth research before. We've already redated *Collection*—it was 1954 and we've redated it 1954–55 based on some photographs we found that show it was reworked after 1954. *Erased de Kooning Drawing* has also revealed some secrets that I think people will find quite compelling when we publish them online.

What do you find most exciting about this project personally?

The opportunity to really go in depth on a single artist and a small group of works literally for years. That kind of time yields very rich information and insights. I've had the chance to talk to many people who have known the artist and worked with him, and to look at a huge number of his works around the country. It has been an extraordinary, rewarding way to work.

See more behind-the-scenes photos and learn more about the Rauschenberg Research Project at facebook.com/sfmoma/photos.