



Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. I try to act in the gap between the two.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

Robert Rauschenberg

American, 1925–2008

***Whistle Stop (Spread)*, 1977**

Combine painting, mixed media on five panels

Overall approximately 84 x 180 x 8 inches

Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

Museum Purchase and commission, The Benjamin J. Tillar Memorial Trust

Robert Rauschenberg's *Whistle Stop (Spread)*, 1977 was commissioned by the Modern (then known as the Fort Worth Art Museum) and speaks to the artist's roots in Texas. Born in Port Arthur, Texas in 1925, Rauschenberg decided to utilize the commission as an opportunity to make a work dedicated to his father and hometown. A "whistle stop" is a small-town railroad station where the trains only stop if the light is flashing and here, in the Modern's work, references the small town where he grew up. By including an actual flashing red light, the artist adds a level of animation to the piece through very nontraditional means. Rauschenberg said he wanted to work in the gap between art and life; by including a real light instead of painting one, he collapses the distinction between everyday objects and fine art, or in this case, his personal life and the art he produces.

The inclusion of this flashing light and other nontraditional elements, such as real swinging doors and reproductions of photographs, newsprint, comics, diagrams, and maps, relate *Whistle Stop* to Rauschenberg's combines—his three-dimensional assemblages comprised of found objects, which he began making in the mid-1950s. In reaction to the dominance of Abstract Expressionism, with its emphasis on inner thoughts and emotions, and personal gestures recorded through abstract interactions with paint on canvas, Rauschenberg wanted to use immediately recognizable, everyday objects. He also credits the then-new technology of television as highly influential in his compositions, saying "I was bombarded with television sets and magazines, by the excess of the world. I thought honest work should incorporate all of those elements, which were and are a reality." Some of the various associations generated by the disparate objects seem to relate to small-town life, such as the image of a shotgun house similar to the one he grew up in, or to his father's personal interests like hunting and raising dogs, but many are completely open-ended and create different associations for individual viewers. Rauschenberg may have had personal reasons for including each of the images, but his works also inspire viewers to create their own interpretations based on their own experiences and memories.