

## **The Menil Collection Announces *Robert Rauschenberg: Fabric Works of the 1970s***

*Opening in September 2025, the exhibition is organized for the one hundredth birthday of the Texas-born artist in collaboration with the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation*



Robert Rauschenberg, *Sant'Agnes (Venetian)*, 1973.

HOUSTON—June 2, 2025— The Menil Collection will open *Robert Rauschenberg: Fabric Works of the 1970s* this September. The presentation features major loans from museum collections and the artist's foundation and will be the first museum survey of Rauschenberg's innovative use of cloth in this era. Organized for the artist's centennial in collaboration with the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, ***Robert Rauschenberg: Fabric Works of the 1970s* will be on view at the Menil September 19, 2025–March 1, 2026.**

Born in Port Arthur, Texas, a small coastal town ninety miles east of Houston, Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) is an influential figure in the history of modern and contemporary art. Renowned for his ability to break down categories between art and life, he expanded the very definition of art. After a brief time at University of Texas at Austin and serving in the Navy, he came of age in the New York art world of the late 1950s. By 1964, he was lauded in the press as the most important American artist since Jackson Pollock.

In the 1970s, the artist turned to the expressive potential of textiles, from diaphanous silk and delicate lace to roughly hewn cheesecloth and stained drop cloths, in multiple series that

celebrate the formal properties of fabric and present an unexpected array of artistic gestures. The artist draped, folded, suspended, and propped the soft medium into dynamic and layered physical arrangements.

In this decade, Rauschenberg had also begun spending more time away from New York at his home on Captiva Island off the Gulf Coast of Florida. Here, he began exploring more extensively how woven materials hold printed images, move in the air, respond to gravity, and capture color and light. Building on the innovations of minimalism, Rauschenberg adopted flexible, open, and sail-like structures distinguished by vivid hues within a reduced vocabulary of form.

Rebecca Rabinow, Director, The Menil Collection, said, “Robert Rauschenberg was a close friend of the Menil. He first met the museum’s founders John and Dominique de Menil in the early 1960s. He attended the inauguration of the museum in 1987 and subsequently was the subject of several major exhibitions organized by the Menil’s curators. We are proud to continue this lineage and work with the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation to mark the centennial of the artist’s birth, directing attention to an intriguing yet understudied facet of Rauschenberg’s oeuvre.”

Michelle White, Senior Curator, The Menil Collection, said, “This exhibition looks at Rauschenberg’s fascinating use of woven materials in the 1970s, which reflect his career-long interest in not only the intersection of art and life, for which the artist has become so well known, but his acumen with fabric stemming from his early interest in fashion design and deep understanding of how woven material can so beautifully relate to the body. As such, the artist’s utilization of fabric at this time, along with his engagement with the language of minimalism, provides a new way to consider the artist’s work at mid-career, one that anticipates so many contemporary concerns in the decades to follow.”

Courtney J. Martin, Executive Director, the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, said, “We are honored to partner with the Menil Collection on this landmark exhibition during Rauschenberg’s Centennial year. This is more than a celebration—it is an invitation to rediscover Rauschenberg through a new lens, as Centennial exhibitions across the globe illuminate the depth and diversity of his transdisciplinary vision. At the Menil, that spirit comes alive in the first museum survey of his radical work with fabric—a body of art that reveals his deep engagement with materiality, movement, and light. We are especially proud to present this vital aspect of his work in Texas—a place that remained an enduring touchstone throughout his life and career.”

*Fabric Works of the 1970s* features significant series Rauschenberg created during this era, using techniques and materials that speak to notions of ephemerality, sensuality, and ambiguity. The exhibition begins with the *Venetians, 1972–73*, a sculptural series made with found objects and inspired by the elegance and fragility of the namesake Italian city. For example, *Sant’Agnese, 1973*, consists of semi-transparent mosquito netting draped between two worn chairs and held in place by shoelaces, tactile materials designed to protect and support the body.

Soon after, Rauschenberg began using printmaking techniques to transfer images from newspapers and magazines onto layers of unstretched pieces of thin cloth in the Hoarfrosts, 1974–76. He suspended the light-catching silks and sheers into layered compositions. Their shimmering quality reminded Rauschenberg of the feather-like structure of frozen water vapor that forms on vegetation.

The powerful Jammers, 1975–76, evoke breeze-blown sails. Defined by unadorned swaths of often brightly hued cloth and silks supported by propped lightweight sticks, they owe as much to Rauschenberg's 1975 residency in Ahmedabad, India, a city famous for its textile industry, as they do to his love of windsurfing along the Gulf Coast.

The show concludes with two collaborations from the late 1970s that showcase Rauschenberg's long career in set and costume design for avant-garde choreography. The artist created *Tantric Geography*, a set with dramatic and colorful billowing curtains created for the piece *Travelogue*, 1977, in partnership with longtime collaborators, musician John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham. Also on display is documentation of the televised dance performance of *Brazos River*, 1976, featuring sets and costumes created by Rauschenberg. This hypnotic and fabric-filled broadcast of a dance by Viola Farber sets the stage for the dynamic place fabric played for the arts in this pivotal decade.

### **Robert Rauschenberg and The Menil Collection**

John and Dominique de Menil developed a long-standing friendship with Robert Rauschenberg and a lasting interest in his career. After acquiring their first piece by the artist in 1961, the de Menils continued their support through major acquisitions. Today, there are eighty-seven works of art by Rauschenberg and a significant collection of archival materials in the Menil's holdings. The de Menil family's relationship with Rauschenberg deepened when Walter Hopps, a long-time champion of the artist, became the Menil's founding director in 1981. At the time, Hopps had just curated Rauschenberg's traveling retrospective and he would go on to program a series of exhibitions at the museum: *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s* (September 28, 1991–January 5, 1992); *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective* (February 13–May 17, 1998), in cooperation with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston; and *Robert Rauschenberg: Cardboards and Related Pieces* (February 23–May 13, 2007). Susan Davidson, former Menil curator and co-curator of the artist's retrospective, said, "Of all the personal involvements with artists that were part of the multi-faceted lives of John and Dominique de Menil, there could not be more evidence of a shared vision than in the melding of the art of Robert Rauschenberg and the Menil Collection."

### **Exhibition Catalogue**

The exhibition catalogue includes scholarly texts situating Rauschenberg's fabric works within the history of late-modernism and postminimalism. It considers the works' relationship to contemporary artistic practices and emerging discourses on gender and craft and through extensive archival documentation, provides insight into his early aspirations in fashion as well as the artist's collaborative work with choreographers in the 1970s.

*Robert Rauschenberg: Fabric Works of the 1970s* is curated by Michelle White, Senior Curator, The Menil Collection.

**Press Preview:** Thursday, September 18, at 10 a.m. at the Menil Collection, Houston

### **About the Menil Collection**

Philanthropists and art patrons John and Dominique de Menil established the Menil Foundation in 1954 to foster greater public understanding and appreciation of art, architecture, culture, religion, and philosophy. In 1987, the Menil Collection's main building opened to the public. Today, the Menil Collection consists of a group of art buildings and green spaces located within a residential neighborhood in central Houston. The Menil remains committed to its founders' belief that art is essential to human experience and welcomes all visitors free of charge. [menil.org](http://menil.org)

### **About the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation**

The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation builds on the legacy of artist Robert Rauschenberg, emphasizing his belief that artists can drive social change. Rauschenberg sought to act in the "gap" between art and life, valuing chance and collaboration across disciplines. As such, the Foundation celebrates new and even untested ways of thinking. [rauschenbergfoundation.org](http://rauschenbergfoundation.org)

### **About Rauschenberg100**

Robert Rauschenberg's (1925-2008) strong conviction that engagement with art can nurture people's sensibilities as individuals, community members, and citizens was key to his ethos. The Centennial celebrations seek to allow audiences familiar with him and those encountering the artist for the first time to form fresh perspectives about his artwork. A year of global activities and exhibitions in honor of Rauschenberg's Centennial reexamines the artist through a contemporary lens, highlighting his enduring influence on generations of artists and advocates for social progress. The Centennial's activation of the artist's legacy promotes cross-disciplinary explorations and creates opportunities for critical dialogue. [rauschenberg100.org](http://rauschenberg100.org)

### **Funding**

This exhibition was organized with support from the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. The Menil Collection joins an international roster of institutions commemorating the artist's 100th birthday. Underwriting for this exhibition is generously provided by Kathy and George Britton. Major funding is provided by Barbara and Michael Gamson. Additional support comes from Nora and Bob Ackerley; Cece and Mack Fowler; Carol and David Neuberger; Jacquelyn Barish; Frost Bank; Sissy and Denny Kempner; Betty Moody; and the City of Houston through Houston Arts Alliance.

### **Image**

Robert Rauschenberg, *Sant'Agnese (Venetian)*, 1973. Mosquito net, wood chairs, shoelaces, and corked glass jugs, 32 1/4 × 105 3/4 × 22 1/8 in. (81.9 × 268.6 × 56.2 cm). Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. Photo: Ron Amstutz

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