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Photos, paintings, odd objects find home with Rauschenberg

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Amy Trachtenberg Hematite II 2003 Mixed mediums on canvas 36 x 36 inches

Berggruen's small show of paintings and prints by **Robert Rauschenberg** holds few surprises -- beyond the astonishment of the artist's staying power.

Few of his contemporaries besides **John Cage** (1912-1992) share Rauschenberg's credentials as aesthetic revolutionary. Like his friends Cage and **Merce Cunningham**, Rauschenberg reinvented appreciation by turning inherited conventions inside out.

Using found objects, found images, the camera and various transfer techniques, Rauschenberg let everything into his paintings of the late '50s and '60s. He made them topical without politics, contentious without polemics and accessible without obviousness.

The works on view continue in that line, the best of them exuding a verve and love for the world too rare in contemporary art.

The screenprints unexpectedly overshadow the paintings (actually dye transfers on polylaminate) here. In pieces such as "L.A. Uncovered No. 7" (1998) and "Slink (Marrakitch)" (2000), photographic images appear brushed onto the page, reminding us of the camera's ancestry in painting.

In "Slink (Marrakitch)" the overlap of images echoes the overlap of languages and cultures in Morocco. In this piece and others, it appears that Rauschenberg's true subject is the inward experience of memory. Images blur, bleed into one another, recur unbidden, all on principles we may never grasp because they work on us.
Trachtenberg and Alexander at Gross: Artists seldom expose turning points in their work, but we see one in Bay Area painter **Amy Trachtenberg**'s exhibition at Brian Gross.

Most of the paintings here belong to the "Weatherhead" series, so named because she based them on a photograph of an insulated electrical connector known as a "weatherhead."

An absorbing 78-part array of small panels, "Weatherhead Wall Sketches" (2003-04), shows that Trachtenberg's antic use of images and her blurring of process gain force from tight confines.

When she takes the same ingredients to a big canvas or even a busy, midsize one, such as "Hematite II" (2003), their power dissipates.

In two pieces here, the ink on cardboard "Like Sel de Mer" (2003) and the big canvas "Wind at the Ear" (2003), Trachtenberg surrendered to process completely, letting her media and materials perform for her.

Some viewers will think the results nonsensical, for these pieces cast off the lingering strands of reference in the "Weatherhead" works. But they pass an inadvertent but essential test here: They have the presence to keep good company with three paintings by Los Angeles luminary **Peter Alexander** hanging in the gallery alcove.

In his new "Water Paintings," Alexander derives dazzling, seemingly uncomposed abstractions from photographs of light dappling pool water.

He has reversed the obvious palette, using peachy tones for the paintings' uncertain depths and pale, shrill blue for the scattered reflections.
Anyone who remembers Larry Poons' early lozenge paintings, paradoxically unified by dispersed blots of color, will think of them here.

The casual authority of Alexander's "Water Paintings" may make them look easy. Fellow painters will know better.

Berry sculpture at Triangle: In recent work at Triangle, **Roger Berry** pushes not against sculptural tradition or modernist innovation but against a cultural cliche.
To the hurried eye his looping bronzes and steel pieces suggest the sort of generic squiggle a **New Yorker** cartoonist might draw in making mock of modern art or its public.

So Berry's sculptures earn serious attention only when they reawaken in us an alert sense of their improbability.

In the largest pieces, Berry appears to have twisted thick bands of Cor- ten steel into endless loops as easily as one might mangle a paper clip.

In fact, he designs each piece on a computer, using software that permits him to picture the work in the round. He then divides the planned work into metal segments that he can shape himself and weld seamlessly together into a closed loop.

Berry studiedly avoids obvious references in his work, even to other sculpture, but like dust particles, associations gather and settle on it anyway.

Endless loops in the history of ornament have served as symbols of the connectedness of everything, and the interpenetration of spiritual and material realms. Looking at a small piece such as "Dither" (2004) might bring to mind the tracery of a California freeway interchange.

But Berry's abstraction looks provincial not because it fails to fend off associations but because it sidesteps the critical shift in sculpture of recent decades: away from the human body as sculpture's traditional subject, toward articulation of physical being as we experience it from within.

Ironically, by its closure Berry's sculpture echoes our anachronistic sense of self-containment, the very impression supported more literally by the tradition of the human figure in sculpture. That tradition continues, of course, but in philosophically discredited **fashion**.