

The Telegraph

Susan Weil: 'As a woman artist, you were very second-class'

Aged 93, and ahead of a new show, the artist talks about being only briefly married to Robert Rauschenberg but always overshadowed by him

By Helen Barrett

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Susan Weil and then-husband Robert Rauschenberg in 1951 | CREDIT: Susan Weil

You may not know Susan Weil's name. But you will almost certainly have heard of Robert Rauschenberg, the acclaimed American pop artist to whom Weil was briefly married more than 70 years ago. The marriage was over when she was just 21.

"What could I do?" she asks today, her hands held high in despair. The 93-year-old artist is sitting in her Brooklyn studio with a cup of coffee "Susan W-style" – a dense shot laced with a blob of ice cream – recalling the moment in 1952 when her career and young life fell apart.

“I went to visit Bob and he said, ‘I need a divorce’. And there I was with a new baby.” She pauses, then shrugs. “So it was a little surprising.”

Rauschenberg (1925-2008), then 27, was one of a handful of American artists, mostly men, whose work would dominate the history of Western art in the second half of the 20th century. Weil was a New York art-world ingénue five years his junior.

“Robert and I had been close friends, and important buddies, and then I married him and suddenly I had Christopher [their son].” She recounts events grasping her coffee cup tightly, as if still making sense of the situation. “But I said to myself, Christopher always has to have his father as part of his life. Nothing negative was ever said about Bob when he was growing up. And we certainly stayed friends.”

Rauschenberg was gay. He would, from the mid-1950s, have relationships with many men, including artist Jasper Johns.



Configurations, by Susan Weil | CREDIT: Sundaram Tagore Gallery

Weil had met Rauschenberg in 1948 at a summer painting school at the Académie Julian in Paris (“he was lively, exciting”). Later, they were students at Black Mountain College, the progressive North Carolina art school that drew European Bauhaus émigrés as teachers. Photographs of Weil and Rauschenberg taken during their two-year marriage in 1951 for Life magazine and an article headlined “Speaking of Pictures” present them working as confident equals, demonstrating their techniques for cyanotype prints, or cameraless photography, as naked models position themselves across reams of paper.

Domesticity and motherhood often curtailed the careers of women artists of Weil's generation. But not Weil. "I kept working. I figured it out."

She has worked and exhibited ever since, though with less recognition and acclaim than her male contemporaries. But now it's Weil's turn in the spotlight, and she and Sundaram Tagore, her gallerist, are in the midst of selecting pieces for *Breaking Glass*, her major retrospective at the Cromwell Place gallery in London, which opens next month.

It is taking a while: Weil's archives of more than 2,000 pieces cover nearly 70 years' worth of work. She hopes to travel to London for the opening.

Weil is a tiny, fragile figure with a quickfire, New York accent. She glides about her studio with the help of a walking frame, navigating piles of artworks and flanked by assistants who anticipate her movements and carry out her instructions.

These, she issues cheerfully and decisively – pointing out collages, sculptures and paintings.



Susan Weil today in her studio | CREDIT: Susan Weil/Sundaram Tagore Gallery

Among the works are bright, abstract cyanotype prints on canvas, the technique she and Rauschenberg were working on in their apartment the day Life sent their photographer. One of their joint abstract prints (Untitled, 1950) is held in the permanent collection at the Museum of Modern Art. Rauschenberg would go on to use cyanotype to acclaim throughout his stellar career. But he learnt the technique from Weil. It had been her family's hobby for generations.

"I taught Robert how to do it," recalls Weil. "My great-grandfather was Dankmar Adler [the architect who built much of 19th-century Chicago]. My grandmother took a glass negative picture of her girl-self to her father's office and put it on his blueprint paper, and so I have this beautiful blueprint of her as a child, long before I was born. Here, I'll show you."

Weil retrieves an exquisite image of her grandmother's profile, a young girl swathed in Victorian dress, which Weil thinks was made in about 1880. "My grandmother did it as a child, and so did I. It was a big part of my life."

How did she feel about Rauschenberg turning her hobby into one of the most successful art careers of the 20th century? "Well, it was part of the way women artists were always treated," she says. "We were very second-class. That was something to cope with for all women artists. You were not respected the way men were, and that was difficult."

Weil credits her resilience to her dynamic, supportive parents ("creative, lovely people"), but the events that led to her choice of career were more tragic even than her disastrous early marriage. Born in 1930 to an affluent, cultured family of writers and artists, Weil spent "very carefree" family holidays with her brother, Leonard, on the family's island. In 1941 when Weil was 11, the children were in the cabin of their boat when its engine caught fire. Weil spent a year in hospital recovering from her injuries. Leonard, who was 13, did not survive.

"I didn't even know my brother had died until I left the hospital," she says. "My parents didn't want to tell me because they thought I would think I was going to die. I had many, many operations."



Weil's Bicircle (2007), from her forthcoming Breaking Glass exhibition | CREDIT: Sundaram Tagore Gallery

Weil was left with restricted mobility. Protective of their surviving child and conscious of her disability, her parents moved to the Upper East Side and sent her to the progressive Dalton School, which also produced Helen Frankenthaler, the Abstract Expressionist painter and Weil contemporary. “The classes were small, and as a damaged person, it was a comfortable place to be,” Weil recalls.

Weil’s home since 1965 is in Chinatown. She travels to her studio, which she has occupied since 1985, twice weekly by car. Even at 93, she works full-time: “I develop my thinking at home, then I bring it all here.” We tour her studio, Weil pointing out pieces she is considering shipping to London.

Abstract wall sculptures from the 1980s and 1990s suggest the weight of flesh. A series of delicate pieces chart the phases of the moon – time passing in concentrated abstraction. Bird motifs are everywhere – swooping around the walls and ceilings in sculptural form or lurking on Weil’s cut-out planets.

She deals in abstraction but, perhaps unlike her friends and contemporaries, Weil’s work is quiet and subtle. It captures lifeforce, the passing and collapsing of time, and slow shifts in the natural world. More recently, she has perfected a technique for drawing with cracks in mirrors, which explains the title of her exhibition. These pieces introduce a sense of fracture and tension to her body of work. I wonder why artists never retire. “Oh, your work is your life. It never leaves you.”

‘Susan Weil: Breaking Glass’ opens at Cromwell Place, London SW7 on Oct 10; cromwellplace.com