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Leaving Polarization at the Door

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Left, "Jack and D. D. Ryan" by Alex Katz. Behind, work by Norman Rockwell (hanging), Martin Wong, left, and Katy Grannan, center.

Robert Rauschenberg, who died four years ago after a career as big-spirited and optimistic as any in postwar art, was not considered first and foremost a politically motivated artist.

But he was deeply involved in the civil rights movement, in environmentalism and in artists' rights. And in 1987, testifying before the Senate to oppose Robert H. Bork's nomination to the Supreme Court, he warned in the headline-grabbing terms of a candidate on the stump about the danger of a weakened First Amendment.

Invoking the closing of the Bauhaus only months after Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933, he said cultural repression was always the first, easiest and most effective means of political control. "It's a subtle move," he said, gesticulating to underscore his words, "to destroy a society."

Last week in a warehouse at 455 West 19th Street in Chelsea owned by the foundation he formed many years before his death, a political convention of sorts was taking shape that Rauschenberg undoubtedly would have loved to attend, miniature flag in hand. There were blue staters and red staters, the young and the old, 1 percenters and paycheck-to-paycheckers, straight and gay people, cowboys and Indians. Bella Abzug was there, not far from the Village People. President Obama was there, too, in sunglasses, exuding celebrity. And high on a wall across from him was an immense cardboard cutout saving space for Mitt Romney, who was expected to arrive at the last minute.

All of these delegates — in painted, sculptural, photographic, print or video form — had temporarily set aside their differences and gotten together for the show "We the People," the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation's debut as a New York exhibiting institution and its attempt to inject a little of contemporary art's voice into a presidential election cycle in which it has been largely absent.

The show, which opens on Wednesday and runs through Nov. 9, immediately sets out two of the foundation's aims: to focus mostly on work beyond that of its namesake (the exhibition includes a single Rauschenberg work, a 1970 screen print) and to establish itself as a kind of socially engaged cultural presence that Rauschenberg thought artists could, or should, be.

"Bob wasn't all that interested in just his own voice," said Christy MacLear, the foundation's director. "He was a big believer in the overall strength of artists as a community."

Many of the artists marshaled for the inaugural show, living and dead, are not often considered part of the same community. (A few haven't been heard from in quite a while.) And they are rarely even seen hanging in the same vicinity. But the idea of the show's organizers, the curator Alison Gingeras and the artist Jonathan Horowitz, was to populate the space's 2,700 square feet with works that would both embody and confound the way politicians and pollsters have micro-sliced the American electorate over the last several decades.

And so it is that a LeRoy Neiman serigraph of a Revolutionary War minuteman with his rifle resting heroically on his shoulder — Mr. Neiman's martial response to Sept. 11 — keeps company with a 1997 John Currin fantasia of two ample-bosomed women lounging in pastoral ease. And that a Norman Rockwell war bonds poster, with the message "Save Free Speech," is juxtaposed with a 1946 Ben Shahn painting of a man ambiguously holding his large hand over his mouth, borrowed from the Museum of Modern Art.

"When was the last time somebody got to install a big Botero with a gilded frame on the same wall as a Cady Noland?" Ms. Gingeras said. She looked toward a Fernando Botero family painting that telegraphed both prosperity and immigration and that hung alongside a work on rough-edged aluminum by Ms. Noland that is based on a blurred photograph of the Symbionese Liberation Army and Patty Hearst. "We followed these threads that ended up being a lot of fun," Ms. Gingeras added.

If the show feels a bit like a Social Realist tent revival with undertones of "Schoolhouse Rock!," a dash of '90s identity politics and enough figurative sculpture to populate a cocktail party (by George Segal, Duane Hanson, Alex Katz, Robert Heinecken, Rirkrit Tiravanija), that is what its curators had in mind, more or less.

"We discovered our shared fetish for Social Realism, for the kind of work it feels like you don't see around very much," said Mr. Horowitz, whose own work often takes on political issues in politically ambiguous ways. He said the first vision for the show when he and Ms. Gingeras began batting ideas around several months ago was for it to have an almost diorama quality.

In a natural-history-museum sense?

"In a cover-of-'Sgt.-Pepper's' sense," Ms. Gingeras said.

Bella Abzug (a large portrait by Alice Neel), Mr. Obama (a tiny portrait by Elizabeth Peyton) and the Village People (a photograph by Alvin Baltrop) would soon be joined by the show's largest work, a photo-realistic portrait of Mr. Romney, more than 8 feet tall and 14 feet wide, that the artist Richard Phillips was making specifically for the show, racing to finish it in time. Unlike a well-known portrait that Mr. Phillips made of George W. Bush soon after his first presidential election, which showed him grinning sheepishly, his face flanked by bright-pink slabs of color borrowed from a Donna Karan lingerie ad, this image of Mr. Romney will play it mostly straight, monumentalizing a photograph of the candidate from The Associated Press.

"It's not the biggest piece I've ever done — that goes to Deepak Chopra," Mr. Phillips said. But he added that he thought size, in this case, was especially important for a painting of a presidential candidate in the last weeks of a divisive election.

"What realism has, and what painting has in particular, is the power of slowing down all of these images that are bombarding us to a full stop, so we can look and think," he said.

Politically, the exhibition is probably not the kind that would sit comfortably in, say, Alice Walton's Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Ark. (Nicole Eisenman's "Dysfunctional Family," showing Dad hitting the bong and Mom exposing her crotch, might nix it from the outset.) But the curators said the show would be a failure — and most likely a disappointment in Rauschenberg's eyes as well — if it were read as a sanctimonious affirmation of blue-state, art-world liberalism.

"There are a lot of tentacles here, running between and among the works, and a lot of contradictions," Ms. Gingeras said. "What we wanted was for everyone — for our moms — to be able to go see it and experience it in a profound way."