

When I Paint My Masterpiece

After cooking for the Grateful Dead and working with his uncle, avant-garde art legend Robert Rauschenberg, Rick Begnaud emerges with his own artistic voice. By Mary Tutwiler

Rick Begnaud shakes his head often as he talks. Dark ringlets with the first threads of silver bounce with his movement. He's in town visiting his folks and winding down from the excitement of his first art opening at Gallery 549 on Jefferson Street. Long limbed and relaxed, he sits in the sun, the gurgle of a fountain playing in the courtyard of Stan's on Vermilion Street, and rambles on about the last 30 years. "Hanging out with Bob forever and traveling and really respecting what he does, and all of a sudden this whole other world of the Grateful Dead, no way in my wildest dreams would I have thought these would have come together."

The Bob he refers to is his uncle, internationally renowned artist and Port Arthur native Robert Rauschenberg. Begnaud, about to turn 50, spent summers since he was an adolescent on Captiva Island, Fla., where Rauschenberg lives and works. As an adult, he has circled the globe with his famous uncle, kept house for him in New York, and assisted on art projects that wound up in museums all over the world. The rest of the year, Begnaud lives in Mill Valley, Ca., hanging out with his buddy Bob Weir, singer/songwriter/guitarist of Grateful Dead fame.

In 1989 Begnaud's two worlds collided at a post-concert party he threw in his uncle's New York brownstone after a Dead appearance at Madison Square Garden. It was a fortuitous bonding, one that would foreshadow the turn Begnaud's life would take. "There was this great nice party up on Bob's third floor," Begnaud remembers, "which is where the kitchen is and the ping-pong table and the mummy. There's tons of art and [Jerry] Garcia was a painter too, so it was a blast for him to see all this stuff and Bob was at an AIDS function or something and he came home



Mixed-media artist Rick Begnaud uses scraps of fabric, photographs, printed material, diagrams and found objects to create his collages.



Begnaud with The Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia and friends in San Francisco Bay, 1986.

fairly tipsy. He had just gotten a tape of John Cage's 4'33" where he just walks out to the piano and sits silently. We were all sitting around in the kitchen watching this thing. It was just a blast, having the whole gang in the house."

A relationship developed between the two Bobs — Weir and Rauschenberg. "I'd have Weir come over when Bob would be in town, just to hang out with us," Begnaud says. "Those guys got into some pretty deep space at the kitchen table." During the 1990s, Begnaud alternated between the two worlds of catering in California for the Grateful Dead or whipping up lunch for Rauschenberg and friends like Talking Heads singer David Byrne or choreographer Merce Cunningham in New York.

Only in the past year did he reveal that he was pursuing another calling, following in the giant footsteps of his Uncle Bob. "After 20 years, I got burnt out on cooking. When I decided to take art on as a full time journey, I already had an art studio," Begnaud says. "But it wasn't until last year that I told him I was an artist. He took a big long sip of water, set his glass down. And said, 'No, you didn't tell me.' I could have had his support for 30 years."

Pursuing art publicly is a relatively new direction for Begnaud. "Back at Captiva, I'd sneak into the print shop, fire up the press," Begnaud says of growing up in Rauschenberg's studio. "I wouldn't tell him. I was too embarrassed." The guest list at Captiva was a who's-who of the modern art world. "Hanging out with Lichtenstein, Warhol, Rosenquist — it's a whirlwind really. Always stuff

going on, artists collaborating with Bob. One of my summer jobs was to drink certain beers and certain sodas. They were doing a project with the bottle caps. That was a sweet job. They paid for the beer and paid me to drink it."

Begnaud's mother, Janet Rauschenberg, married a Lafayette boy, Byron Begnaud. Rick Begnaud grew up in Lafayette, attended Lafayette High and USL. His mother, Janet, sells real estate, his father owned Begnaud's Pharmacy on St. John Street, and his uncle still runs Begnaud's Pharmacy in the Oil Center. Rick used to deliver for the store, in a stripped down Volkswagen Beetle. At the same time, in the mid 1970s, he was starting to listen to the eclectic sound of the Grateful Dead.

"The Dead never came around here," Begnaud says. "I was starting to go on the road, take weekend flights to see them, and that became really fun." Begnaud became a Deadhead, following the band on their tours. He saw them 50 times within five years before moving to California at the end of 1985. That's when he met the band.

"I met Weir in a little club in Mill Valley called Sweetwater. I went out to see Jorma Kaukonen [of Jefferson Airplane and Hot Tuna]. I just happened to be standing next to Weir in the crowd. And then we just happened to walk outside together at the break. I just walked up to him and introduced myself and said, 'Hey, do you like Cajun food?' He said, 'I love it.' I said, 'Well if you'd ever like someone to cook you Cajun food, that's

what I do.' He said, 'What are you doing Thursday night?' I said, 'Like, uh, nothing.' So I gave him a card."

Begnaud never expected that Weir would call him the next day. "We figured out this menu. I had my mom fly out some venison. I believe I made crawfish etouffee. I cooked all kinds of stuff that night. It was kind of a blowout. And it was an evening with [comparative mythology scholar] Joseph Campbell. That was the first time I met Garcia and the whole rest of the band. And it was just fairly surreal. The thing that blew me out was I have all the food set, it's time to eat, then Weir turns to me and says, 'Here's my friend Rick from Louisiana, he's going to tell you about the food.' And I turn around, it's dead silent in this room, I'm looking at Garcia, Joseph Campbell. I really couldn't even honestly tell you what I said. It was the beginning of 1986. I was 28."

Begnaud and Weir hit it off and hung out practically every day. Begnaud was a frequent visitor to the Dead's Front Street recording studio in San Francisco, where he fed the band and collaborators like Bob Dylan during rehearsals. "When they were recording the [album] with 'Touch of Grey' on it, we were just sitting there with the technicians, me and Weir and Garcia. And I had only met Garcia a couple of times before that. And he said, 'Weir, get Rick some headphones,' and so Weir goes over and does the vocals for 'Hell in a Bucket.' It was really kind of amazing for

me to be sitting there in the studio, me and Garcia, just the two of us, after having been a fairly big fan for a while." In all, before Garcia's death in 1995, Begnaud says he attended between 355 to 400 Grateful Dead concerts.

"Jerry was pretty interesting to hang around," he says. "I've never been around anybody who was so comfortable and seemingly knew something about everything. No matter what the subject was, the guy could speak intelligently about it. He was a sweet guy. ... I remember him being sick a couple of times, and I'd call him up and say



Slipper Code

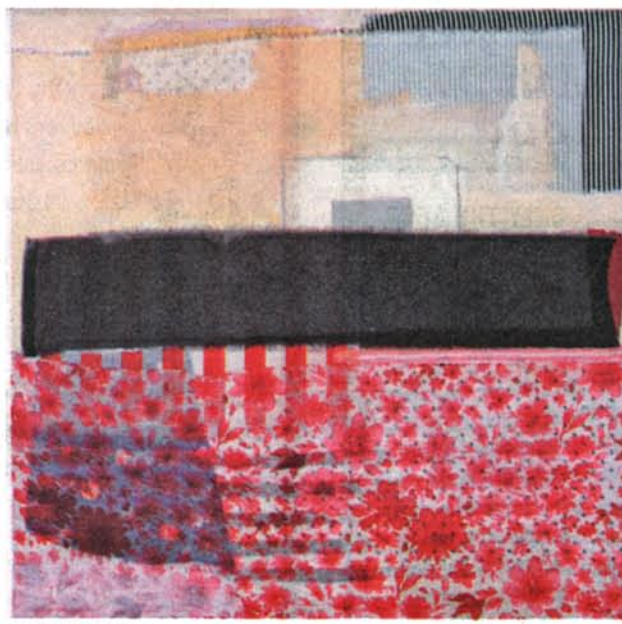
'I'm bringing you gumbo, man.' It's sad he's gone. He was certainly a bright light when he was here."

Neither the über artworld of Rauschenberg nor the trippy days with the Dead could erase the Cajun in Begnaud. "I remember one time I was at Muir Beach and Weir and I were going to get together for dinner, and I was driving home. Right in the middle of the road there was a squirrel. His tail was still going, wagging like that. He had just fallen out of a tree or something. I stopped, I had a newspaper and I rolled him up. He was fresh you know. So I call Weir on the phone. I say, 'I got a squirrel for dinner.' He said 'What?' I said, 'Go to Mill Valley Market and pick up a rabbit, we'll cook them together because one squirrel for two people's not really a lot.' He goes 'OK, man, but don't clean it till I get there. I want to help you clean it.' We ended up cleaning the squirrel and having a rabbit-squirrel dinner that night."

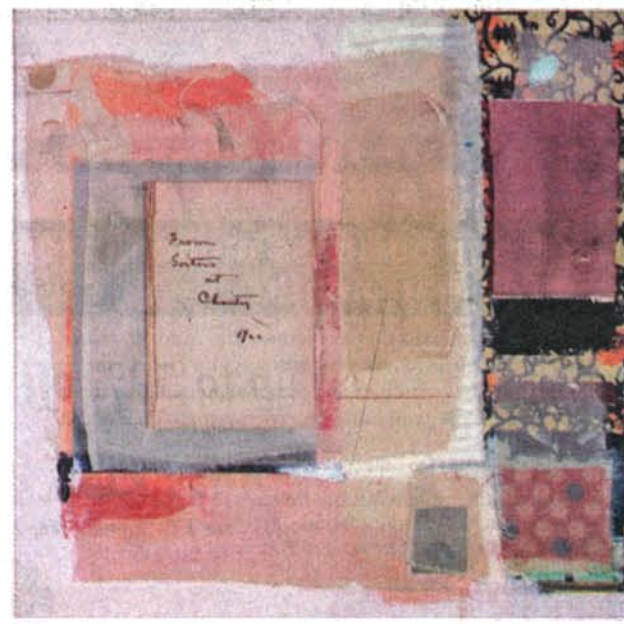
At times, Begnaud, Rauschenberg and Weir found their



In this 1989 photo, the family resemblance between Begnaud and Rauschenberg is obvious.



Tonic Bloom



Gift



A 25-year old Begnaud visited the Parthenon with his uncle Robert Rauschenberg in 1981.

way to Lafayette. Last year his parents' 50-year anniversary party grew into a belated birthday party for Rauschenberg as well. "Some friends were coming down in a private jet from California," Begnaud says, "and Weir jumped on because he knew Bob was going to be here, and Weir wound up bringing an amp and a guitar down and playing at my mom's party. I think Michael Doucet was in there, and Dickie Landry was in there. It was at City Club. Here we were dancing to Grateful Dead tunes at City Club."

Back at Captiva, Begnaud often worked as this uncle's assistant. He felt so heavily influenced by Rauschenberg that he didn't want to reveal what he was working on himself. "I'm not trying to copy anybody," Begnaud says, "but some of my work is reflective of his." It wasn't until Begnaud realized that Rauschenberg assistant Darryl Portoff was also creating his own work, using vegetable dyes and transfers similar to Rauschenberg's technique, that Begnaud began to relax with his creations.



Rick Begnaud and the Grateful Dead's Bob Weir

The works currently hanging at Gallery 549 are mixed-media collages — African fabric from Mali, paper, paint, maps, tape and small objects adhered to a canvas. Rauschenberg's influence "is more like a feeling" than any one thing Begnaud can put his finger on. "I love so many things that he does — his use of color, how things are spaced — these things have worked their way into my subconscious."

Gallery owner Don LeBlanc says that showing Begnaud's work is extraordinary for his gallery. "Rick's got a very contemporary approach to image making. He uses found materials — patterns, fabrics, printed materials, appropriated photographs, diagrams. Ready-mades. He creates his own world on the surface of the work rather than painting a picture of the world."

Using what's at hand, manipulating the materials, then incorporating paint, is Rauschenberg's general approach to making art. "Rauschenberg looks at the detritus, the debris of the world and uses it in a way that becomes sublimely beautiful," LeBlanc says. "Rick is doing that too."

Robert Rauschenberg says he's proud to witness his nephew's talents. "The sense of color and composition are proof of unique experiences and exposures," Rauschenberg says. "He obviously possesses some of the old man's genes."

Begnaud says he talked to his uncle three weeks ago, and Rauschenberg invited him to Zurich. Begnaud decided to stay home and work in his studio on pieces for a show that recently opened in Marin County. The weekend before that, he went to an Earth Day celebration in San Francisco, where Weir's band Ratdog played. Begnaud says as soon as they get some time, Weir wants some advice on making art. "He's toying with the idea of us getting into the studio together and making some stuff."