

The Conservation Treatment of Robert Rauschenberg's *Untitled (Early Egyptian)*, 1974

Rita Berg and Christine Frohnert

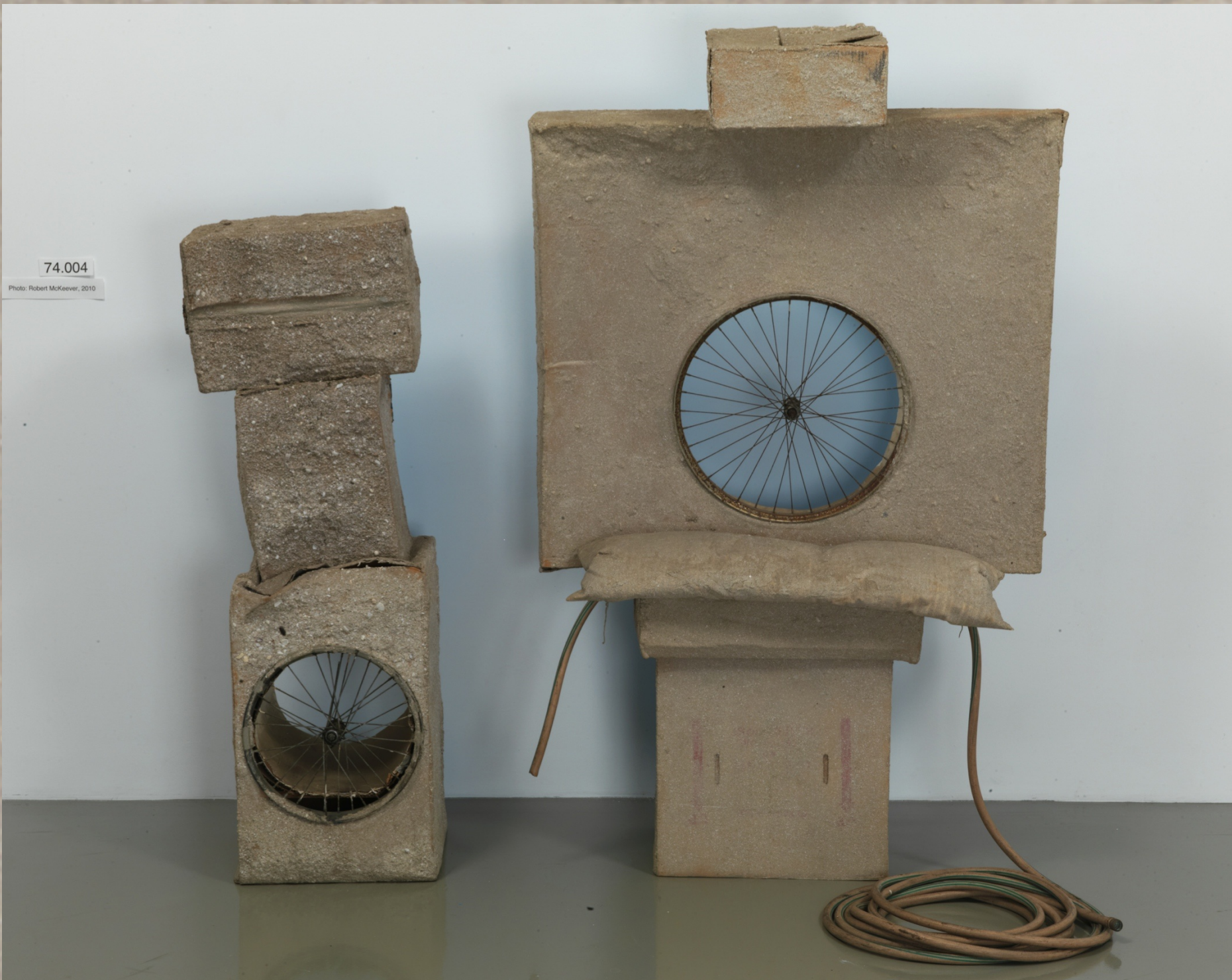


Figure 1: Robert Rauschenberg's *Untitled (Early Egyptian)*, 1974
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Untitled (Early Egyptian), 1974

Robert Rauschenberg's work is known for its variability of materials and techniques. The artwork *Untitled (Early Egyptian)* captures the artist's interest in the diversity of materials, forms, textures, and colors within various found objects. (Fig. 1) Used cardboard boxes, encrusted with sand, become the building blocks of large-scale freestanding constructions.

Each box is coated with glue and a layer of sand on all but the back sides and the bases. The work is striking for its texture and subtlety of color. The varied thickness and composition of the sand coating highlight the slight deformations in the cardboard surface and add to the unevenness of color of the whole structure.

Condition:

The visual balance of the artwork was compromised as a result of water damage. The lower 2 to 3 inches of the sand-coated cardboard elements that were in contact with the floor were soaked. The cardboard readily absorbed the water, expanded, and became slightly deformed from bearing the weight of the rest of the structure. A brownish tideline developed along the lower perimeter of the entire artwork. (Fig. 2)

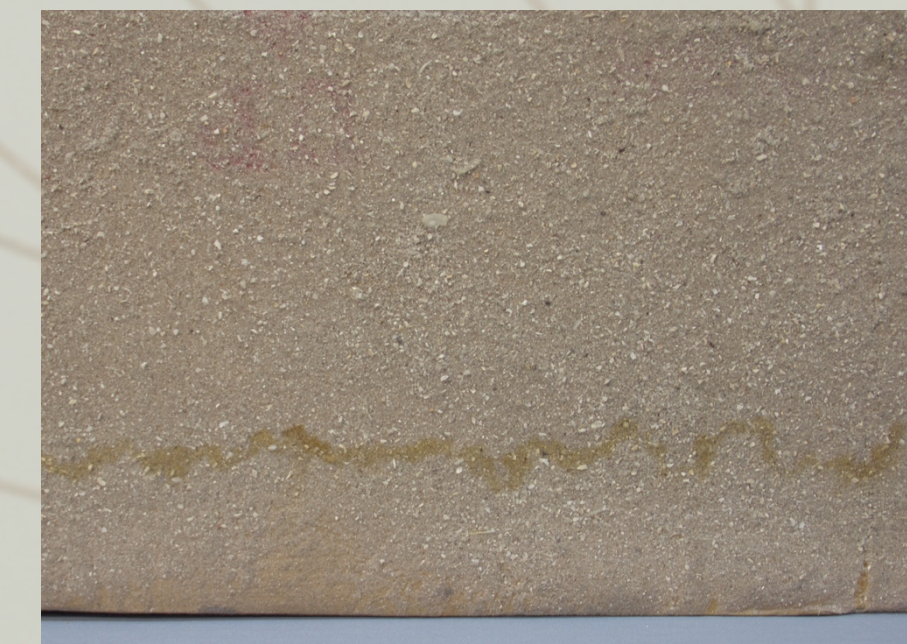


Figure 2: Detail of Tideline (BT)

The tideline and darkening of the surface that was in contact with the water overpowered the subtle color balance of Rauschenberg's construction. The original surface was further affected by deep cracks that developed in the sand coating. (Fig. 11)



Figure 3: Detail Delamination of the Cardboard (BT)

During the drying-out process following the water damage, local delamination of the corrugated material commenced on the bottom of the proper left free-standing element. (Fig. 3)

Treatment Methodology:

Treatment considerations focused on reverting the aesthetically and structurally affected passages to the original form, texture, and color, while preserving the integrity of the work to the highest degree. The conservation required innovative methods for stabilization, cleaning, and compensation.

Compensation:

Compensation was carried out using sand and Elvace®, an ethylene/vinyl acetate copolymer aqueous emulsion, applied with a brush. Cracks were "inpainted" with sand of a similar color and texture. (Fig. 12) No further filling or retouching was found necessary.

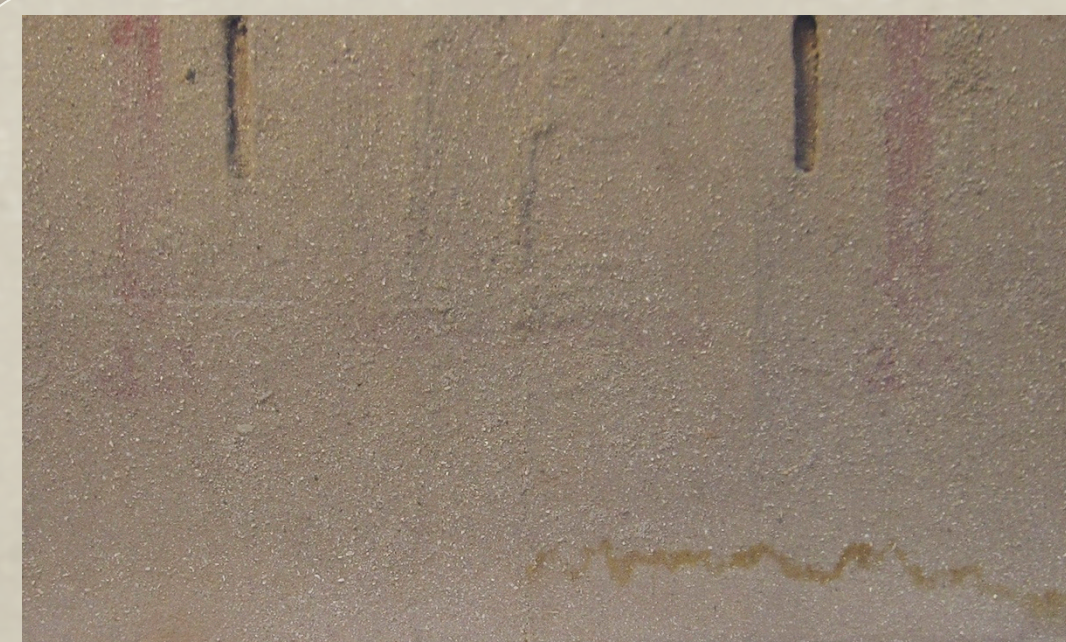


Figure 10: Detail of Tideline (DT)



Figure 11: Detail Crack (BT)



Figure 12: Detail Crack (AT)

Reinforcement of the Delaminated Cardboard:

The delaminating cardboard layers on the base were aligned, consolidated with methyl cellulose, and returned to plane. To restore the strength of the internal structure, the corrugated cardboard was reinforced with thin, lightweight rods made of various synthetic resins (Fig. 4). The rods, trimmed to appropriate lengths, were inserted in the channels of the corrugation layer, creating an internal structural reinforcement.

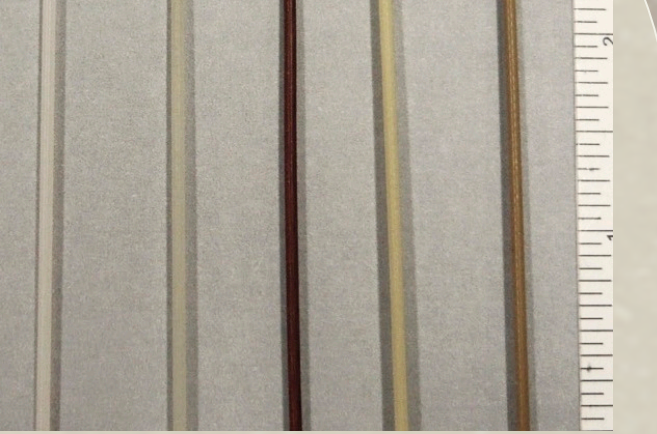


Figure 4: Resin Rods

Mock-Ups



Figure 5: Mock-up with sample sand and staining

The use of chelating agents was investigated as an option to remove staining.

Before the commencement of the treatment, several stain removal tests were carried out using cardboard covered with sample sand and stained. (Fig. 5) Various options were considered. Since the removal of stains from cellulose fibers with chelating agents is a common practice in paper conservation treatments, the use of chelating agents was investigated as a possible treatment option.

Cleaning / Stain Removal

The surface was cleaned using the selected chelating agent (EDTA, 5% in deionized water). Prior to the application of the chelating agent, the surface tension was relaxed with a small amount of warm water and Tergitol™, a nonionic surfactant, brush-applied to stained areas. The residue of the tideline was removed with multiple applications of paper pulp used as an absorbent. The chemical residue was cleared by repeated applications of warm water by brush and paper pulp used as an absorbent.



Figure 6: Application of EDTA (DT)



Figure 7: Stain removal (DT)



Figure 8: Stain residue on paper pulp



Figure 9: Detail (AT)

Authors:

The treatment was undertaken in April of 2011 at Cranmer Art Group and carried out by Christine Frohnert and Rita Berg.

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