

James Rosenquist

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Destruction All Around

RICHARD B. WOODWARD
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The Museum of Modern Art's installation restores this 86-foot-long, four-sided behemoth to the original arrangement intended by the artist.
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James Rosenquist's "F-111" is so familiar by now that memory has begun to smooth its shark-tooth edges and recall the Cold War period it exemplifies with nostalgic sighs. For some of us it's hard to recall a time when this wicked satire of the U.S. Military-Industrial-Consumer Complex was not around. A controversial hit when first exhibited almost half a century ago, the painting was quickly designated a Pop Art icon in textbooks. Students have been parsing its candy-colored tapestry of incongruous images on art-history quizzes for decades.

What's jarring about its current installation at New York's Museum of Modern Art is that, until now, museums may never have done justice to the piece. That's reason enough to visit the fourth floor, where until July 30 the 86-foot-long behemoth can be seen as Mr. Rosenquist introduced the painting in 1965 at the Castelli Gallery in New York: a four-sided, wraparound mural for a space (23 feet by 22 feet) little bigger than a squash court.

This old/new arrangement alters the experience and perhaps even the meaning of the work. On previous occasions when I had stood in front of the 10-foot-high images—a turbocharged montage that splices together a U.S. fighter-bomber, a Firestone tire, a vanilla-frosted cake, a light bulb, a girl beneath a hair dryer, a nuclear-bomb explosion, a beach umbrella and a plate of spaghetti—the items were presented tautly stretched across one wall or at most two walls. Installed in this manner, viewable from far away, "F-111" could be digested as entertainment. Despite the threat of human extinction in the combustible ensemble, the work had the eye-catching appeal of a billboard along Sunset Boulevard for a disaster movie. (Mr. Rosenquist's sense of humor and spectacle is not unlike Stanley Kubrick

and Terry Southern's in "Dr. Strangelove." Indeed, their black comedy about nuclear Armageddon was released in 1964, as the artist began work on his painting.)

In the current MoMA installation, however, the violence isn't so easily laughed off. Bent around the four walls of a tiny space, the piece now offers uncomfortably little area for the visitor to step back. The confinement is menacing. Being forced to look at the mural from a few feet away is like examining the X-rayed stomach contents of a giant anaconda, one that has slithered its way into your dining room and is flexing its coils. The aggressive, cynical maleness of the piece is almost overwhelming.

Mr. Rosenquist has said he made it in angry reaction to U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam, a claim that has never squared with the fetishistic rendering of the sleek, deadly instrument for which the work is named. Rather than an earnest work of protest, "F-111" has always seemed patriotic, an ironic salute to national might and knowhow. (After all, the atomic bomb was an American invention.)

The silhouette of an F-111, the most advanced jet aircraft of its day, runs the length of the work and is painted on 23 aluminum panels. This high-tech material supplies the undercarriage for the images and is in some ways inseparable from them. Our eyes are asked to run along the shiny metallic skin.

Pop Art is permeated by ambiguity toward the bounty of America's consumer society, and Mr. Rosenquist's attitude is no different. He just amped up his mixed emotions in a work of unprecedented size and complexity. (Its gigantism reflects his training in commercial art, painting billboards above Times Square during summers in the early 1950s.) As with Warhol, the visual language inserts images from magazine advertising and journalism into a re-edited commentary on the culture at large. David Salle and Barbara Kruger are but two artists who in the 1980s adapted these photo-mechanical techniques to make large paintings as combative as "F-111."

New Wave cinematic rhythms for images on this scale were unheard of in 1965. Read like a strip of film, they are connected by jump cuts instead of clear transitions. The central figure (and the only human) is a smiling blond girl, a figure lifted from a 1950s Saran Wrap ad. Wearing lipstick and with her hair in ribbons but inside a hair dryer, she's a child aspiring to sophistication beyond her years. The machine on her head is also a jet engine—cone-shaped, blasting heated air, made of reflective metal—and may be sucking her up with a force she is unaware of.

Knowingly or not, Mr. Rosenquist may have woven her into his design under the influence of the so-called Daisy television ad. Broadcast in 1964 only once, but analyzed widely while "F-111" was being constructed, that notorious attack by Lyndon B. Johnson's political team on Barry Goldwater as a dangerous extremist operated on a similar sneaky level to make its point.

It, too, featured a fair-haired girl and a nuclear explosion. Standing in a field, she counts the petals she is pulling off a daisy. Suddenly an anonymous voice interrupts her and starts counting down to zero as the camera narrows to her eye. The screen then fills with a mushroom cloud. Created by media guru Tony Schwartz, the Daisy ad never mentions Mr. Goldwater. It ends with a written message: "Vote for President Johnson on Nov. 3. The stakes are too high for you to stay home."

As in advertising, the images within Mr. Rosenquist's panorama act on us subliminally, not logically. Other meanings that were elusive before are harder to ignore in cramped quarters. The spaghetti in tomato sauce, which dominates the right side of the mural, no longer seems merely to represent an unappetizing meal out of a can typical of the

American diet in the 1950s and '60s. Viewed up close, the strands of pasta are alarmingly squirmy, like maggots or spilled human intestines.

MoMA has restored some of the shocking energy that "F-111" must have had in 1965. (Curiously, the dead spots in the work are also easier to detect; Mr. Rosenquist never quite figured out how to make it turn the corners at the Castelli Gallery.) It's still hard to accept the mural as an antiwar statement on a par with "Guernica," a comparison the artist vainly invites. Then again, he was addressing the escalating madness of Vietnam in the 1960s, not the destruction of a Spanish village in the 1930s. In retrospect, he may have created the first (and only?) psychedelic masterpiece.

VANITY FAIR

James Rosenquist on the Re-Staging of his *F-111* at MoMA, the Zen of Duchamp, and Teaching Dalí to Drink a Screwdriver

MARK GUIDUCCI
JANUARY 30, 2012

The fourth floor of the Museum of Modern Art has a new resident. James Rosenquist's *F-111*, a monumental 23-panel piece, is being exhibited for the first time since 2006 in the original 1965 configuration that the artist created for his debut show at Leo Castelli's 77th Street gallery. At 10 feet tall and 86 feet long, *F-111* covered all four walls of Castelli's gallery—painting in the round, if you will—so that the painting engulfed the viewers, encircling them, and left only a small break for a doorway. Working with the artist, MoMA curators have replicated the configuration of *F-111* so that each of its unlikely collaged subjects—spaghetti, a swimmer, a mushroom cloud under a beach umbrella, light bulbs, a piece of cake, a Firestone tire, and a little girl under a hairdryer, all set against the body of an *F-111* fighter jet—will overwhelm viewers exactly as they did in 1965.

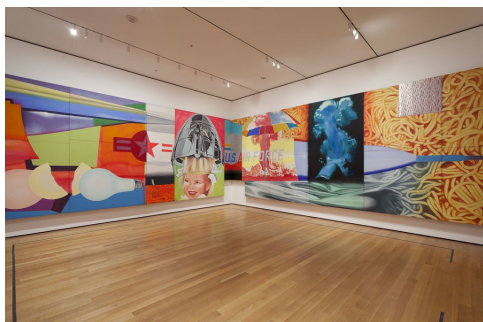


By Jonathan Muzikar.

To coincide with the re-exhibition of Rosenquist's work, often considered a cornerstone of the Pop-art movement, Vanity Fair visited the artist at his Tribeca home to discuss *F-111*. Arriving at the Rosenquist town house (white façade, turquoise trim), one immediately notices a sign over the six buzzers at the front door: RING ANY BELL. "Isn't that fun?" the artist will later say. "I own the whole building!"

Mark Guiducci: Seeing *F-111* on MoMA's fourth floor is like walking into a piece of installation art. At least that's probably what we would call it today. Is that what you were thinking about in 1965, installation art?

James Rosenquist: Well, look. It's all very simple. It's just that the room in Castelli's gallery was something like 22 by 23 feet. Boom! That was it. So I thought, Hey baby, I'm gonna do a big blast in there for my first show with Leo. Leo had always said [in a heavy Italian accent], "Jeem! Jeem! If you ever think about leaving Dick [Bellamy, Rosenquist's former dealer], think of me first..." I saw him on a plane once and it was the right time. So we did this, my first big show there.



James Rosenquist, F-111 (detail), 1964–5. Oil on canvas with aluminum, 23 sections, 10 ft. x 86 ft, the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alex L. Hillman and Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (both by exchange). © 2012 James Rosenquist/Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photographs: left, *© Christopher Felver/Corbis; *right, by Jonathan Muzikar.

I was talking to [MoMA chief curator] Ann Temkin about how much galleries have grown, literally, since 1965. As big as F-111 is, with its 23 panels, it still feels quite intimate when you're surrounded by it. But F-111 filled the whole space of Leo Castelli's gallery in '65. And this was Leo Castelli! [Rosenquist is now represented by the Acquavella Galleries.] The most important gallery at the time was the size of the room we're sitting in.

Ya. And now museums are building bigger, bigger, bigger places to show things, but the danger [for an artist] is to do a big nothing with it... So I really worked and worked and worked and put a lot of thought into each picture. And I tell ya, I have seen younger artists do big paintings with nothing in it. You know, ideas can be fantastic; however, you have to do something pictorially that is as fantastic as your ideas.

What else do you remember about that period of your life? What else was influencing you?

Let's see. My friend the photojournalist Paul Berg had just come back from a combat mission in the police action in Vietnam. It was not really escalated to a war by then. And I went to this amusement park in Dallas, Six Flags Over Texas, and I saw a corroding B-36 bomber. Never used, I think. And I learned that the original idea of Chinese income taxes was not a demand but a contribution, so if you felt like it you contributed to a community, to a town or whatever, to build a life...I didn't like the idea of paying taxes for obsolete war weapons [like the E36 bomber]. All these things entered my mind when I started to think about [F-111]. And actually, it seems to me the right time to show it again, in light of the world right now. Even though it's 47 years old.

A lot of artists affected me...I have a Marcel Duchamp here by my front door. We traded works. He was an amazing guy. You know, he didn't try to kill you with his intellect or make you afraid. He was just a hell of a nice guy. I used to think that a lot of his thinking must have come from Eastern philosophy, and I once asked him about it. He said, "No. I read Zen and the Art of Archery once, but that's about it."

Dalí, too. I was doing winter window displays for Teller's [department store] at one point, and I went outside to see how they were looking. And there was Salvador Dalí going like this [rolls imaginary mustache]! I didn't meet him or anything. But then out of the blue he called me. I think my name must have been in the window. So he invited me to the St. Regis; he had a corner there. And that was his corner, man. It was his whole bar! At one point I was tired and I went like this [places elbow on the table to support his chin], and I put my elbow in the goddamn nut dish and all the peanuts flew up in the air. And he goes "WHOA! What do you want to drink?" And I said, "Ah, man, give me a screwdriver," and he goes, "Genius! A screwdriver!" He had never heard of that drink before. He thought I was being surrealistic or something! Everything had an exclamation point, for him.

You once said that you only ever needed four tools to work—a ruler, some paint, brushes, and blue chalk string...

That was for billboard painting!

I know, but would you say that it's still true for your work now?

Yeah, yeah. I don't need many materials. You need an idea, but the tools of oil painting are really simple. The great paintings in museums around the world are merely minerals mixed in oil, schmearred on cloth with the hair from the back of a pig's ear (that's where the Chinese bristle brush comes from). The famous drawings in the Albertina are merely burnt wood on parchment. You can't get any simpler than burnt wood. For ideas, you don't need computers or any of that business.

I don't want to rely on electricity to see my work in any form. No cinema, no video, no nothing. Like an Egyptian tomb. All you need to see my work is to bring your own intuition and sunlight. So you can slide the cover off the tomb that my painting is in and bam! You'll see it. Imagine how they first put light in those Egyptian tombs when they were discovered and the damn gold was still bright and shiny after thousands of years! So I think, well, if I use high-quality paint, you might discover my stuff in a cave someday and it will still look good with a little sunlight. I don't need a power source.



James Rosenquist, F-111 (detail), 1964–5. Oil on canvas with aluminum, 23 sections, 10 ft. x 86 ft, the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alex L. Hillman and Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (both by exchange). © 2012 James Rosenquist/Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photographs: left, © Christopher Felver/Corbis; *right, by Jonathan Muzikar.

Art in America

Painting, Working, Talking

Michael Amy Interviews James Rosenquist

MICHAEL AMY
FEBRUARY 2004



The right half of *The Swimmer in the Econo-mist (painting 1)*, 1997-98, oil on canvas, 11 ½ x 90 ½ feet overall. Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin.

In the late 1950s, James Rosenquist (born in 1933 in Grand Forks, N.D.) made a living by painting billboards in New York City. He learned how to combine disparate images in compositions that he would execute high above the ground at vastly enlarged scale. When in 1960 Rosenquist abandoned the perilous business of billboard painting for the life of the artist, he decided to adapt the techniques, scale and popular imagery he knew so well. These would allow him to give form to an idiosyncratic body of work examining many aspects of modern American life, while radically departing from the Abstract-Expressionist precepts he had experimented with in his earlier easel painting. By then, the artist had developed a canny understanding both of how images drawn from the mass media project meaning and of how accepted meanings can be destabilized by fragmenting and enlarging images, simplifying their forms, softening their focus, modifying their color and placing them in unexpected situations.

Following his first solo show, at Richard Bellamy's Green Gallery in January 1962, Rosenquist was quickly recognized as one of the many protagonists of the developing Pop art movement. In huge paintings that often invite allegorical reading, monumental, dramatically cropped objects and figures are juxtaposed. In more recent work, the painter creates colorful, quasi-abstract configurations fraught with dynamism. James Rosenquist's retrospective exhibition was recently on view at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City.

Michaël Amy: You have been painting fragments of things since the inception of your career. How did that come about?

James Rosenquist: I was probably born with the ability to draw, but that does not make you an artist. My first teacher, Cameron Booth at the University of Minnesota, had studied with Hans Hofmann somewhere in Europe after World War I. He taught picture making, dynamic picture making, including Cubism—ideas about form and fragments and everything else. How to make a dynamic picture plane—that's what I was really interested in.

I won a scholarship to the Arts Students League in 1955 and went to New York with 350 bucks in my pocket and studied with Morris Kantor, Robert Beverly Hale, George Grosz, Edwin Dickinson, Sidney Dickinson, Will Barnet and so on. I met a lot of people and was still studying composition. Then I went broke, busted. I was homeless for a while [laughs], then a friend of mine, Ray Donarski, said he knew of a great job as a chauffeur and bartender for some very wealthy people. So we went up to see them and split the job. I took it for a year, and after a year, he would take it. I lived in the lap of luxury with very little money, and was a chauffeur bopping around in a '56 Lincoln Town Car and a '56 Lincoln convertible with great big fins.

I did that for a year and then transferred into the International Sign Painters and Pictorial Painters Union Local 230 in New York, where I painted outdoor pictures on billboards again. I had painted billboards for a short time in Minnesota with General Outdoor Advertising, so I had entered the union back then. My union rep was about 99 years old. You won't believe this, but he was a boy piano player in the 1800s in the Wild West with a medicine show. In my life, I have been fortunate to meet a lot of really old people, who go back another century—American history is very short. So I began painting in Brooklyn, painting a Hebrew Salami sign on Flatbush Avenue, and then I was laid off and eventually went to work in Times Square for General Outdoor Advertising.

I am saying all of this because it explains how my personal artwork developed. Every morning, I would approach this big desk and on it there would be all kinds of images—a tomato, an automobile, a movie star, a piece of bread, a pack of cigarettes—this very varied imagery I was supposed to put in the right place on a billboard sign in Times Square. Now these images I got were not in the right scale. Some were really little; others were really big. I had to change the scale of these images and put them in this diagram that somebody gave me.

I had to learn how to render things well. You learn a lot from painting those big billboards, because of the light, color and everything. For instance, you never use pure black paint—you add a lot of white to it, because of the light. I learned a lot of tricks like that.

So anyway, I painted all sorts of things, and then in 1959 I quit because two guys got killed. Abbie Marcus fell off Klein's department store, and another guy fell off a Budweiser sign in New Jersey. So I thought: "God, this is dangerous," because I used to work on a scaffold 20 stories up. Then I went back to work for a little longer, up to 1960, I think. I finally left, got married, had very little money—my wife worked—and got a studio. Those were the golden days in New York. I had a five-room apartment on the Upper East Side for \$31 a month; finally, I got a waterfront studio on Coenties Slip, 45 bucks a month, a pretty big loft; breakfast was 25 cents. New York at that time was a great cosmopolitan city where you could exist with very little money, which was a wonderful thing. My neighbors were Ellsworth Kelly, Jasper Johns, Bob Rauschenberg, Bob Indiana, and Jack Youngerman—so there was a nucleus of artists there at that time, 1959, '60, '61.

In the art schools, everyone was still being taught to express themselves by throwing paint. But I thought, gee whiz, I was to do things differently. I wondered, how can I make a mysterious painting by painting enlarged fragments—very realistically—and putting them in a picture so that the thing closest to you would be recognized last? So that the space would spill forward, out of the picture, instead of receding like all painting had done in the past? Even when you look at great French paintings in the Louvre, it seems as if you are looking. At an aperture, even though they are big; and Surrealism, too—it's all an aperture. Things appear as if you are standing at a window or in front of a view. I wanted my pictures to be impersonal and knock you in the face!

MA: Your earliest paintings had a very soft touch to them, a soft focus, a blurring at the edges. Does that come out of billboard painting?

JR: It comes out of painting; it comes out of art [laughs]. People say I use my billboard technique to make art. Baloney! I used my art technique to make billboards. The other artists were sort of like stiff illustrators, while I knew how to paint [laughs].



Astor Victoria, 1959, billboard enamel and oil on canvas, 5 ½ x 6 ½ feet.

MA: Were there artists you were particularly drawn to during the 1950s and early '60s?

JR: When I was living in the Midwest, I saw a picture in *Life* magazine of two guys painting a sign for the Astor Victoria Theater, which was 58 feet high and 395 feet long, and I thought: Wow, if those guys can paint that, they can paint the Sistine Chapel if they have any ideas. Within about two years, I was working right alongside Frank Richert and Jay David Mischnik, who was in that picture—I was doing the very same thing. So I thought: if I can learn how to control a big space like that, I can paint anything, if I have ideas. Then I met other artists who would put together an equation of ideas by some means that would include painting. One of those artists was Jasper Johns. He was an inspiration. He demonstrated that painting was a medium that could express ideas. I met Johns and also Rauschenberg—he became a very good friend of mine—in '56.

MA: Is your work autobiographical?

JR: It's all autobiographical, everything is, all of it.

Students ask me: “Where do you get your ideas?” and I answer: “Go back to your youth, go back to when you were very young and remember the things that happened to you, things that were very odd and peculiar.” During World War II, I saw an exhibition in a museum of a shrunken head, a live flower and a little painting, which constituted a collage of sorts, and I thought: what the hell does that mean? As a kid, I used to see optical illusions that were caused by the heat on the prairie in North Dakota. You could see things like three-story-high horses walking by. And time and space.... In a desert of a prairie, you see something from a long distance, and you can watch that thing approach, like a car or a train or a boy running, or whatever, and you have all this time to think about why it is coming at you. It’s a different sensation out there. Those things have been inspirations.

MA: Although you have always been fascinated by color, sometimes you choose to steer away from it and use grisaille instead.

JR: I began using grisaille when I first started, because I was trying to get below zero in my work. I was thinking: How can I introduce images again, after the development of nonobjective paintings that show only pure color and form, with no other references? Then I thought of images that were anonymous, that were about four to five years old, because the memory of things that occurred three to four years ago is a little less than nostalgia, but it is not about the present. That was the same with the Beat generation people. They got a kick out of things that were a little rusty, a little old, not too old, and not brand new, because they could not afford them. They’d say: “Oh man! Look at the patina on the old bicycle—isn’t that bee-u-tee-full!”

MA: Was Cubism of interest to you?

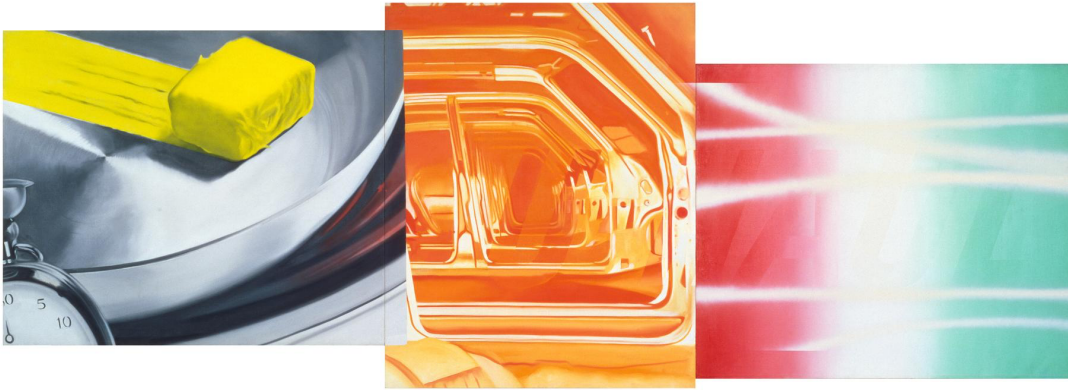
JR: Cubism is dynamic. I am sure that every Hollywood cinematographer knows about composition and the Renaissance gold mean and Cubism and everything. One uses all the knowledge one can acquire to make an interesting painting. It goes on and on and on. It does not end with Cubism—there are new ways to delight people [laughs].

MA: There is also the size of your images. Scale is of tremendous import.

JR: I paint large paintings, so that when you stand near them you cannot really tell what they are. You are sort of enveloped in an ambiance of color, and if you get back and look at them, you can see that these really are compositions, these really are paintings. If you are close to it, a big painting is just a feeling around you, that’s all. Also, for me, painting large is a physical workout; it’s fun to attempt physically—with one arm—to paint these large pictures, it’s fun seeing big forms of color. I like the physical connection of painting with a paintbrush.

MA: Have movies influenced you?

JR: Sure. Remember the old-time outdoor movies, the drive-ins, with those huge outdoor screens? Sometimes I would just look at the lower left-hand corner of those huge images of people and things. It was a totally abstraction with fuzzy colors, and I really got a kick out of that.



U-Haul-It, 1967, oil on canvas, 5 x 14 ½ feet. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

MA: When we first spoke over the phone, you told me that II attached too much importance to what the images represent and that, instead, you could see the images as a system of forms and colors, almost in an abstract sense.

JR: Maybe, maybe, maybe. The '50s were a period of great abundance in America. World War II vets were supposed to have a house, a car and two and a half children, and their own private airplane [laughs]. In the '50s, we had an exterior ambience of color. We had pink toilet fixtures and blue sinks and purple refrigerators, and we had bright colored cars—I remember Sugar Ray Robinson's pink Cadillac. You never had that in Russia, where it was all very pastoral and very drab. I was in Leningrad in 1965 and I saw a truckload of plain wooden boxes go by, and then I went back to Stockholm and I saw a truckload of apples go by with bright red apple labors, and this blur of color going by seemed to me more interesting than this pastoral Russian 19th-century look.

So I was given the opportunity to see all this color. I could see the color of the interior of a supermarket, which had this big splashy array of Day-Glo-colored cereal boxes and soap boxes and a lot of other things that were very exuberant. Cereal boxes are designed as eye-catchers. The things I dislike is that today the cereal in those boxes costs about seven cents in a grain. My uncles and cousins are farmers. They get a few dollars for a bushel of wheat, yet Kellogg's and so on get \$4.00 a box. You pay much more for the color packaging than for the ingredients. I think that's topsy-turvy. The same goes for advertising, generally speaking. It still goes on. Russia—which never had any outdoor advertising—advertised the hell out of Snickers candy bars, which resulted in a backlash against the United States [laughs]. I thought that was hilarious.

MA: When we first spoke, I stated that today we are bombarded with images, and you said that we have always been flooded with images, that this is no new phenomenon, that there are only new ways of bombarding people.

JR: There is more rapidity now. I've watched television since 1950 probably. Now, there are 10 or 20 commercials during programs, instead of two. Anyhow, painting those advertisements and hearing advertisements all the time felt like getting beaten over the head with a hammer. This noise pounded into my sensibility, and I thought, in this noise, in this numbness, I want to make a new kind of painting by using the power and strength in the stroke of a billboard painter's brush. That big free style, that's what I liked.

I still think in the grand tradition of painting from Europe—Western painting, I need Western dynamism, a solar-plexus punch as in a Rembrandt. I want a visual punch to my paintings.

MA: You have been labeled a Pop artist. How do you feel about that?

JR: They called me a Pop artist because I used recognizable imagery. I didn't meet Andy until 1964. I met Roy a little earlier, but I didn't really know these guys at all. I went to some Oldenburg happenings, met him and did not know him very well. We all sort of emerged separately and all became friends. In America, there was not a lot of backbiting. There seemed to be an abundance of ideas. If you did not want to use an idea, then maybe someone else did. Andy was always very casual about it. He would ask people if they had any good ideas he could use [laughs]. Funny guy. I think he was interested in acceleration of life—the speed. It's almost like existentialism—that's what existentialism—that's what I think his work was about.

MA: Does that also apply to you?

JR: Well, yeah, early on it did.

MA: You frequented the Cedar Bar.

JR: I hear about the Friday Night Club. It was a private club. You paid 50 cents and could go in some loft and hear really well-known underground artists like Stuart Davis, de Kooning, Milton Resnick, Franz Kline, a lot of people. They would be there, and they would get up and talk about painting or about art. Then I learned that they all went to the Cedar Bar, and I used to go there. It was really kind of a crummy bar. It wasn't cozy. In there would be the most famous underground artists of the time.

When I was a student, all the students were copying de Kooning. He was ferociously into the viscosity of paint. I really liked de Kooning's involvement with paint and color. And I really liked him a lot, because he was not self-conscious at all. He told jokes, he didn't give a damn [laughs]. He was really a rough and tough guy. He was friendly. So was poor Franz Kline, who died in '62. And Barney Newman was a good friend.

Strange thing happened to me. I was flying from Florida to New York and I sit down on the plane and there is this big old boy there with a three-piece tweed suit. He's old. The stewardess comes by and he says to me: "Would you like a drink, I'm buying," and I said, "That's very nice," and so he says to the woman, "Give me three Jack Daniels and give this fellow a Jack Daniels," and I said, "Well thank you very much." Then he says, "What do you do?", and I said I'm a painter, and he says, "Oh really, I jumped ship with a painter back in the '20s named de Kooning. You ever hear of him?" I said "Yeah," and he says, "How's he doing? Is he doing OK?" "He's doing pretty well." So I said "What do you do?", and he says, "I'm the head of the New York State Liquor Authority, but I'll probably get fired because it's an appointment." He didn't care. It's funny.

MA: Was de Kooning open to your work?

JR: He said he liked my spaghetti painting—he said it was sexy. Bill de Kooninig! [laughs] I knew him in New York, then he moved to East Hampton. When I moved out to East Hampton, I went to see him, and he's painting and having a drink. He says: "Goddammit! Who the hell asked you to come here?" So I said, "Screw you. Goodbye," and I get out the door and in my car, and he puts his arm in the window and he says, "Don't leave me, you bastard, come in and have another drink." Things like that. I mean even worse [laughs]. He was a famous, famous, famous underground artist, really.



The Serenade for the Doll after Claude Debussy, Gift Wrapped Doll #1, 1992, oil on canvas, 5 feet square. Margulies Family collection, Miami.

MA: Do you always use photographs instead of the actual objects as your models when you paint? Take the doll paintings.

JR: Yes, my paintings are often composed from photographs that I take. I found some old generic dolls and wrapped them in transparent Saran Wrap and took their pictures, and some of them looked terrifying, some looked sweet, some looked ugly. I only selected 30 out of hundreds of photographs. I painted the paintings exactly the way the photographs were. I did not make changes at that stage—I made the changes with the camera. I got the idea for gift-wrapped dolls from Claude Debussy, who wrote pieces for his little daughters. The idea of covering, the distortion of something, was bound to the idea of AIDS. People almost had to make a business arrangement before they made love because of the fright of contracting AIDS.

MA: The dolls coincide with the growth of your young daughter.

JR: That's true, because I thought: what is my poor little daughter going to encounter in the future?

MA: A large retrospective exhibition like the one presently at the Guggenheim Museum must be both thrilling and terrifying. It offers you the opportunity to study works you have not seen in many years and think about your development as an artist. It also forces you to consider your next move.

JR: Oh yeah! [laughs] Well, it's not terrifying. Each painting is specific to a certain time. As I go through the exhibition, the paintings—especially the earlier ones—conjure the atmosphere that I lived in. With some of them I go: “Wow! That's when I got married; that's when I got divorced; that's when I had a terrible time; that's when I was in debt; that's when I sold a painting for a million bucks” [laughs]—and so it goes. So it's like a roller-coaster ride of emotion.

MA: Your retrospective includes collages that are preparatory for your paintings. You use small collage sketches to build up your compositions. The process of collage goes back to early modernism.

JR: Every one of the collages exists as a work. In other words, I am not exhibiting doodles. I always through of keeping the collages as a catalogue in case someone wanted their painting repaired: I could go back to the collage and use it as my own instruction manual.

Other exhibitions that did not have drawings and studies in them seemed to be missing something—for instance, Roy Lichtenstein did many, many, many drawings in preparation for his paintings, and that connection was missing in his Guggenheim show. So I thought, well, I am going to show these. What the hell!

MA: I am surprised that your use of collage did not lead to more experiments with the shaped canvas, a pictorial format that you tried out, for instance, in 1966, in pictures like *Big Bo, Aspen, Colorado and TV Boat 1*.

JR: Yeah, yeah. Why should I go on doing that?

MA: You used the shaped canvas at one point during your career. Then you have other paintings consisting of several canvases of uneven height and width forming a highly irregular horizontal composition.

JR: You know what it is, Michaël: ideas come unqualified, and then you have to figure out how to do them, and that's what it is really; it's how do you do the idea, and if it takes a shaped canvas, you do it, and if it doesn't, you don't.

Sometimes I wanted people to see themselves in my work, and so what I did in the corners of my surrounding room paintings was to use reflective surfaces, so that when you move, the image would move a little bit.

MA: A couple of your works from the '60s actually moved, electrically, and of course *Tumbleweed* [1963-66] was lit by neon.

JR: But in general, I've avoided electricity and cinema. I started thinking that all you need to realize the idea is your own intuition and the sun—no cinema, no electric plug-ins, nothing. A number of artists did beautiful work, like Jean Tinguely, and then the things that he used in his sculptures—like radios with vacuum tubes—went out of date and they broke, and the little motors did not work. Now, the pieces still look gorgeous, but you should have seen them when they were working: it was a whopping craziness!

MA: The horizontal format you use in so many of your paintings invites a kind of narrative reading.

JR: Sometimes, yes, sometimes things are like narrative. Whenever I got a new studio, I made the largest possible painting [laughs], and since the ceiling was low, the painting became horizontal. As a changed studios and got larger spaces, I made bigger paintings.

MA: Your paintings almost defy explanation.

JR: They don't if you ask me, because I can usually tell you what they're about. It all has meaning to me. As I explain my paintings, I hope that they get away from me, that the idea takes off and has a life of its own. My *Star Thief* painting [1980] was originally called *A Fractured Head on a Nuclear Pillow*, and then I named it *Star Thief*, and an

astronaut thought it was about space, but it wasn't, it was a metaphor of work, almost like playing chess. If you do physical work to get somewhere, you learn from that and you can go further, but if you don't do the physical part of it, it remains only a concept.

MA: Every painting has a story.

JR: I have stories for every single one of them.

MA: Do these stories or anecdotes precede the act of painting?

JR: I try to develop paintings that are purely visual, to work in a visual language.

MA: So are your paintings about the ambiguities of seeing and of understanding what one sees, of making sense of all those visual sensations?

JR: When I start working on a composition, the whole idea bothers me. What is going on? This is really peculiar! The real meaning of something may be masked by something else. I try to put parts of my images together in very dynamic, colorful ways. I try to think of my work almost as if it were nonobjective painting, and I try to do something that has a total visual attitude about it, so you think of it without words, totally visually. But people like to have a title on it, because it's something extra. My dealer Leo Castelli would say [imitates Italian accent], "Jim, what is the title of this?" And then I had to work hard to try to figure out a title for something I only wanted to be visual—and then the license plate on Leo's car said: "Untitled"! [laughs]. Then again, sometimes a notion starts with a title, and then you say: "Gee! That's a peculiar idea! How can I make a picture about it?"

MA: You have been fortunate in your choice of dealers. Dick Bellamy, Leo Castelli...

JR: Totally by luck! Dick was a Beat person who was like a street poet who used to hang out in bars, and I knew him for years, and all of a sudden he knocked on my door with Henry Geldzahler from the Met and Ivan Karp, and he said: "I am opening a gallery and I would love to show your work!" And I said to myself: "What?! I am going to show with this guy who hangs out at the Cedar Bar and he's a Beat?" Then there was a complete turnabout of my feelings, and we became really best friends, and he turned out to be an amazing... He remained a poet who became fascinated with a certain group of artists. You don't find dealers like him around any more. He was a very straight, honest fellow. Also Leo Castelli. Leo was a gentleman, and I worked with him for 30 years with only a handshake. No contract. Likewise with Dick Bellamy. I worked with him a number of years, and I left him because of his personal difficulties, not for financial reasons. People said he didn't continue because he had financial problems. Well hell, his gallery went from red to black in only one year.

MA: You previously said that all your work is autobiographical.

JR: Of course! It could not be otherwise.

MA: That terrible car crash you, your wife and son were in back in Florida in 1971, did it have an impact upon your work?

JR: Suffering does not make art.

MA: Did it give rise to ideas having to do with death and mortality that can be found in your work?

JR: Well, my dear man, one might think of death and mortality all the time, or from time to time, before that accident and after it. I painted a picture after the accident called *The Persistence of Electrical Nymphs in Space* [1985]. So Liv Ullmann said [Scandinavian accent], “What does that mean?” and I said, “That’s either Mahatma Gandhi’s funeral or the sound of all the souls after the earth blows up,” and she went, “Oh, ja!”

Have you ever watched anyone die? They are struggling for life, and then they are dead, and something seems to have left the room—an electrical spark, a soul, I don’t know what it is, but there is a cadaver left, and the spark is gone. That’s very, very peculiar I think. Energy allegedly has to go somewhere. It does not disappear. Where does the energy go if the earth blows up? That’s a good question.

MA: Your paintings are about energy?

JR: Of course! What do you do on a two-dimensional picture plane, how do you activate it? You give it a whirl.



The Stowaway Peers Out at the Speed of Light, 2000, oil on canvas, 17 by. 46 feet.
Courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

MA: As I bring up the issue of mortality, I am thinking that your imagery often deals with youth, splendor, beautiful things—however transformed. Are these evocations of ephemeral situations, of situations that are transient?

JR: [laughs] That’s funny!

MA: What about the tropical flowers that appeared in your pictures of the 1980s?

JR: That’s a long story. In some of those paintings, I thought of ideas of reincarnation. If people who died were transformed into flowers of whatever, what a surprise it would be if they woke up [laughs].

The whole thing also came from the space program. They sent fruit flies into space, kept them alive; monkeys, kept them alive—but they couldn’t keep them from going crazy, because of their parallel existences on earth and in space. So the astronauts started bringing up golf clubs and baby dolls and things to remind them of their lives on earth. I was interested in this idea of people metamorphosing, as a pictorial device. So I started using slivers of recognizable

things, in contrast to other things, so that peering through the slivers you would see another dimension, but the slivers were enough as a suggestion of a person.

MA: So that's how the cut up women's faces came about?

JR: I did lizards, dogs, wolves, other animals—but most of them were female fashion models.

MA: You have an abiding interest in science.

JR: I always have. Years back, in 1967 I think it was, I did a whole room of walk-through images that was inspired by the notion of the rearrangement of molecules, the idea that one could physically walk through a wall, could walk through solid substances. I exhibited this huge room in Paris and in Venice—it was called *Forest Ranger* [1967]. It consisted of many, many images hanging on Mylar polyester plastic that I painted the way I painted theater marquees for Artkraft-Sttrauss. Then I cut the Mylar into vertical strips. I painted a big armored car being sawn in two like a piece of meat, a hat—a fedora—sitting off the ground—you could kick it and it would go into digits and come back into being a hat—that kind of idea. Also, I was interested in holography at that time, but it had not quite come into anything, and it didn't continue, either. I thought holography was going to be amazing. I thought there was the possibility of presenting, for example, rehearsals for actors where there would be a group of images sitting in a room saying their pieces and one could enter in as a third party and interact with those holographic images as rehearsals for films, plays, everything else. It never got to that.

MA: Are you interested in the Internet as a source?

JR: No.

MA: Do you draw inspiration from literature? Have certain books inspired you?

JR: No, not really. Unusual contemporary situations inspire me. Any kind of idea—a word or a thing—but usually not literature of the past. In other words, I don't do paintings about *Moby-Dick*.

MA: Are you interested in virtual reality?

JR: No. Not really at all. I am more interested in Hollywood invention. I met Douglas Trumbull years ago. He did the effects for the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and everything he did was purely mechanical, and I got a big kick out of that. My own technique is mechanical.

I tell young people that the greatest paintings in museums are made with minerals mixed in oil schmeared on cloth with the hair from the back of a pig's ear. It's that simple. That's what's fascinating: to try to create beautiful paintings with the simplest means, which is what the old masters did. It blows me away.

I saw some big Miró paintings at the old Pierre Matisse Gallery and I thought, "God! What is that? That is fascinating," and when I got up close, I saw that he had rubbed color onto the canvas with silk to form big soft biomorphic shapes. The were done with the simplest techniques, and I thought they were don't with airbrush or something else. I love that, when someone can make a painting with sticks and clothes and brushes instead of high technology.

MA: You recently brought Picasso into the picture. I am thinking of *The Swimmer in the Econo-mist* [1997-98], the huge work you did for the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin. How did that come about?

JR: I looked at *Guernica* for years when it was at the Museum of Modern Art. I thought, how could I possibly touch *Guernica*? But then I thought, well, Picasso painted from Velázquez and everyone else, so why not? So I did an image of *Guernica* in a spinning vortex.

MA: Is *The Swimmer in the Econo-mist* about the 20th century?

JR: I was asked to do paintings for the Berlin Guggenheim, which occupies part of the Deutsche Bank building. I had previously visited East Berlin, and it was a mess—it looked bombed out. The Russians had just left. I did a 38-foot-wide painting called *The Holy Roman Empire through Checkpoint Charlie* [1994] at a time when the Germans were really fearful that they could not assimilate East Berlin and build it up, because the cost was too much. Then I was asked to paint this painting for the Berlin Deutsche Bank and I thought of a person struggling and working, like a swimmer in the fog, going somewhere, not knowing quite where they are going, but forcefully working, working, working. Well, they did it! I went back to Berlin—Holy cow! East Berlin looks like the year 2025 now. It's incredible!

MA: So *The Swimmer* is about the triumph of capitalism.

JR: Certainly, the painting addresses finance, capitalism. But basically, it is also about what is going to be the end of man: is it going to be a meteor or hunger? [laughs]. Years ago, it was the hydrogen bomb, and then one day the Russians turned the rockets away from Manhattan and went out for lunch, and no women, no mothers went out on the street and yelled and shouted, unlike when World War II ended. At the end of that war, my uncle Tommy went out with his shotgun and shot off three shots when the Japanese surrendered. Well, this time, nobody did anything. It was a gigantic relief, for a moment, to stop worrying about Russia.

MA: You are interested in the military-industrial complex. Take *F-111* [1964-65].

JR: I have done paintings like *Brighter Than the Sun* [1961]: What's more powerful? A hydrogen bomb explosion or the label of a soap box, the economy—or hunger for instance?

MA: Are there changes as far as your interests are concerned, you range of subjects?

JR: That changes all the time, sure. A recent series is called "Speed of Light." The idea of the "Speed of Light" pictures is: according to Einstein, the traveler and the spectator look at the same thing and they see it differently because of the speed of light. This came to me because when I would do paintings, I was always amazed at who liked what, and I thought the most sophisticated people sometimes weren't, and the people who I thought weren't sophisticated really could see things visually. Some people are visual people and some people aren't visual. They can talk about it, but they don't see thing at all in a picture. So, in *The Stowaway Peers Out at the Speed of Light* [2000], what people are looking at is something that has been changed by the speed of light. But what they don't see is all the archeology of my own history of paintings underneath all that stuff, my knowledge of paint.

MA: What's your next series of paintings going to be about?

JR: Don't know yet! I have been thinking about it. I have a couple of commissions, one huge one, but I don't know if that is going to come to fruition, because politics always get in the way. I've done 12 tot 13 commissions, where people ask me to do things and I do a lot of thinking about it. I say, "Can you give me any input? Can you say anything?" I really like to have their input. That's only with commissions.

MA: Is it difficult to part with work?

JR: It was in the beginning. I did not want to part with my paintings because they were my companions and my environment, and then my dealer Dick Bellamy told me he could sell three of them, so I sold them in order to be able to buy more paint and paint more pictures. I have maybe 15 or 20 favorite paintings. I tried to buy some paintings back. Some I did. I sold them from 700 bucks and bought them back for 150,000. Sometimes, the best paintings aren't sold, they are not acknowledged and you get them back because people don't understand them. I feel very fortunate that people saved what I did, because then I have memories. Paintings are things to remember things by.

Time Pieces

James Rosenquist at the Guggenheim.

PETER SCHJELDAHL

OCTOBER 19, 2003

The James Rosenquist retrospective now at the Guggenheim turns Frank Lloyd Wright's helix into a pinball machine. Your ambulatory gaze is the rolling ball. The paintings and the occasional sculpture are lights and bumpers, emitting tacit *dings* and *thoks* when struck. Rosenquist—one of the big three masters of American Pop painting, with Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein—has always striven, as a matter of earnest principle, to make his works befuddlingly sensational at first sight. The show's installation on Wright's ramp, by the curators Walter Hopps and Sarah Bancroft, amplifies spectacle to a pitch of happy panic. The consequences are mixed. Rosenquist's best work exhibits firm formal command and deft philosophical nuance, rewarding contemplation, and these aspects of the art suffer. One notes them numbly, in passing. Conversely, inferior works—mostly from the nineteen-eighties and nineties, when Rosenquist regularly indulged in overbearing, mere razzmatazz—come off rather better than they deserve. The show's off-ramp, rectilinear galleries provide oases of discrimination. One room contains the artist's masterpiece, "F-111" (1964-65), which has long had my vote as the Great American Painting. Another displays collage studies for that work, which, in a scrappier sort of way, are as prepossessing as Picasso's drawings for "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)."

Pinball machines are obsolete, of course, in the manner of dial telephones and leaded gasoline. But obsolescence is a central concern, which proves to be evergreen, of Rosenquist's definitive works of the nineteen-sixties. He culled images of cars, clothes, hair styles, food (a hot dog, canned peaches), and whatnot from magazines several years old—*Life*, usually—and painted fragments of them in abrupt, enigmatic juxtapositions. Wildly disparate in scale and varied in acrid colors and grisaille, not to mention possible meaning, the images in those works are unified by a mode of brushwork—broadly stroked modulations of white and one other color at a time—that he learned as a professional billboard painter, scaffolded above Times Square. Was importing the method into art a bit of a cheap trick? So were Warhol's photo silk-screening and Lichtenstein's limning of panels from comic strips. The goal in all cases was to fuse painting aesthetics with the semiotics of media-drenched contemporary reality. The naked efficiency of anti-personal artmaking defines classic Pop. It's as if someone were inviting you to inspect the fist with which he simultaneously punches you.

Being slightly out of date—like the circa-1950 car combined with the heads of a loving couple and a snarl of tomato-sauced spaghetti in "I Love You with My Ford" (1961)—estranges Rosenquist's early images in time as billboard technique (calculated to produce illusion only when seen from afar) does in space. In every era, the recent past is a rolling blind spot of culture, occluding things that are too stale for fashion and too fresh for nostalgia. Exploiting the eeriness of such entities is a defining practice of so-called "postmodern" artists, who tend to hold Rosenquist in high regard. Actually, the poetry of recent pastness is as old as self-conscious modernity. Charles Baudelaire noticed it in 1859, as a "ghostly piquancy," apropos of outdated fashion plates. To deem the phenomenon novel is a perennial, honest mistake that attends each generation's awakening sense of itself as unique in history—a sense that is born in

shock at the evanescence of what, in childhood, had seemed to be the world's normal state. Rosenquist anatomized the recurrent trauma in his work of the sixties.

A blue-collar, prairie Baudelairean, Rosenquist was born in Grand Forks, North Dakota, in 1933 and grew up on the move with his father, who was an airplane mechanic, among other things, and his mother, a sometime pilot who encouraged his interest in art. His art education, at the University of Minnesota and then at New York's Art Students League, coincided with jobs painting gas stations in the Midwest and billboards in New York. In 1956, while struggling to be a credible abstract painter, he fell into a charmed circle of emerging artists that included Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Ellsworth Kelly. In 1960, he rented a studio that had been vacated by Agnes Martin on Coenties Slip, way downtown near the East River piers; Kelly and the painters Robert Indiana and Jack Youngerman worked nearby. He made his first distinctively Pop paintings while unaware of similar work by Warhol and Lichtenstein, who were unaware of him and of each other. That was a moment of Zeitgeist like branched lightning.

In "President Elect," which Rosenquist began in 1960 and finished in 1964, the grinning face of John F. Kennedy appears to sprout hands that offer cake to an old car. The artist has said that his intent was satirical, having to do with the dubiousness of politicians' campaign promises. (Politically, he is a populist skeptic of the Midwestern "show me" ilk.) But any interpretation of the picture is overwhelmed by the clanging qualities—J.F.K.'s glamour, the car's dowdy styling—and the lurching disjunctions of its parts. You cannot look at the painting and have cogent thoughts about it at the same time. Looking and thinking jam up like derailed train cars. At his best, Rosenquist is a maestro of distraction, delivering it in exact, potent doses. The effect feels broadly significant. This art comprehends the typical worldly experience of the people who come to look at it. To be undistracted, in modern times, requires selective, blinkered attention. Rosenquist rules that out.

There are often shaggy-dog sorts of stories behind Rosenquist's works. While driving at night on a visit to Texas, the artist was fascinated by tumbleweeds looming in his car's headlights. The memory spawned the sculpture "Tumbleweed" (1963-66), a tangle of chromed barbed wire around three crossed wooden beams, threaded with a curlicue of glowing blue neon tubing. Knowing the source of the piece is remarkably and instructively not helpful. The specificity of the forms and materials and of their respective associations anchor "Tumbleweed" in the here and now, as a touchstone of modern sculpture that improbably combines surrealistic giddiness and matter-of-fact minimalism. You know that a work by Rosenquist is good when your futile efforts to make sense of it run in rather precise circles—mental wheels turning, pleasurably, in a void of decidable meaning.

Rosenquist started to go wrong in the seventies by forsaking specificity of both subject and technique. He was caught up in romances of space exploration and high-tech industry. He also seemed to fall in love with his own increasing skills as an oil painter, making sheer virtuosity the effective subject of mural-size extravaganzas in which starry skies, gleaming machines, common objects, and perhaps shards of a woman's face or hand tumble forth to no discernible purpose. Jettisoning both billboard brushwork and the pathos of recent-pastness, Rosenquist proved how indispensable those elements had been to his earlier achievement. Formerly mysterious, his work became confusing. I gladly report that, of late, the artist has found a new balance, not by trying to revive Pop strategies but by backing up farther, to resume his youthful ambition as an abstract painter. A recent painting in the Guggenheim show, the gigantic "The Stowaway Peers Out at the Speed of Light" (2000), seventeen feet high by forty-six feet long, is a congeries of swirling, crumpled, highlight-bedizened, unidentifiable shapes pulled flat by uniformly fuzzed brushwork. It is beautiful.

Then there's "F-111," installed in a space that reproduces the dimensions of the front room of the old Leo Castelli Gallery on East Seventy-seventh Street, for which it was designed. Ten feet high and eighty-six feet long, the multipanelled wraparound work punctuates a nearly actual-size rendering of the eponymous Vietnam-era fighter-bomber with raucous vignettes: a car tire, a cake, light bulbs, a little girl under a warhead-shaped hair dryer, a beach umbrella superimposed on an atomic-bomb cloud, bubbles ascending from a diver's helmet, and spaghetti in unappetizing yellow and red. As the imagery recedes visually in pictorial space, assertive surface patterns, panels of reflective aluminum, and Day-Glo colors advance. A viewer is at once seduced and assaulted at every point, with every glance. With terrific poise and mighty rhythm, "F-111" stirs a binge feeling—part "too much" and part "never enough," dread and exhilaration—that distills the excess of America in the sixties. The work conveys not why we were in Vietnam but what we were there and everywhere, at a moment of soaring and crashing confidence. To have created it should assure Rosenquist the permanent gratitude of a bedevilled nation.

ARTFORUM

Sign Language

James Rosenquist in Retrospect

MICHAEL LOBEL
OCTOBER 2003



James Rosenquist, *I Love You with My Ford*, 1961, oil on canvas, 82 ½ x 93 ½".
All Rosenquist works © James Rosenquist / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

This month, more than forty years after JAMES ROSENQUIST began capturing on canvas the larger-than-life, color-saturated imagery of consumer culture, a major traveling retrospective of his work comes to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. We asked art historian MICHAEL LOBEL to reflect on the thinking behind the big paintings before turning to MARCIA TUCKER, FRANK STELLA, ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG, ED RUSCHA, BARBARA KRUGER, DAVID SALLE, and RICHARD PHILLIPS for their thoughts on the artist's influence yesterday and today.

IN 1966, JAMES ROSENQUIST WAS "THE MAN IN THE PAPER SUIT." Or at least that was the title of a *New York* magazine profile that chronicled his exploits wearing the brown paper suit he had commissioned the fashion designer Horst to construct for him. Rosenquist wore the outfit to gallery and museum openings and, on one occasion, appeared in it at a panel discussion on Pop art in Toronto, where he shared the stage with media pundit Marshall McLuhan. Although it may have seemed on the surface like nothing more than a one-note joke or gag—a literally flimsy Pop gesture (Rosenquist reportedly obtained the special paper from the Kleenex company)—his paper suit spoke to many of the central concerns treated in his paintings of the time. It reflected on a culture of disposability and planned obsolescence at the same time that it called attention to the lure of novelty and fashion (paradoxically,

people took note of the outfit precisely because of its banal material). Rosenquist had already explored the subject of men's fashion in works such as *Necktie*, 1961, and *1947, 1948, 1950*, 1960, which offer close-up views of various configurations of shirt collars, suit lapels, and neckwear. In these paintings, he focuses on the details of business attire as emblems of postwar American middle-class masculinity while simultaneously using them as abstracted compositional elements. Rosenquist's persona as a Pop artist was from early on constructed around a very different sort of outfit: the paint-spattered work clothes that he wore while employed as a billboard painter throughout the 1950s (photographs of Rosenquist posing in that uniform appear frequently in the monographic literature on the artist). His workman's garb stood in sharp contrast to the finely tailored suits worn by the admen on Madison Avenue, even if Rosenquist was effectively connected to the same industry of advertising. In some ways, then, Rosenquist's paper suit—as picked up on in the title of the *New York* article—served as a knowing riposte to that emblem of '50s conformity, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. The title character of that novel (portrayed by Gregory Peck in the film) pursued a career, one should note, in public relations.



James Rosenquist, *F-111*, 1964-65, oil on canvas with aluminum, 10 x 86'.

The paper suit is not, alas, on view in the current retrospective exhibition of Rosenquist's work. The show, organized by Walter Hopps and Sarah Bancroft, opened in May in Houston (where it was divided between the Menil Collection and the Museum of Fine Arts) and travels to the Guggenheim branches in New York and Bilbao. While such a show will no doubt serve the expected task of reaffirming Rosenquist's status as a major postwar American painter, it also offers us the opportunity to reconsider some of the less immediately visible and perhaps more experimental aspects of his oeuvre. Viewers will certainly be drawn to the big paintings for which Rosenquist has become known. These signature works—monumental in size and generally oriented in horizontal landscape format—combine a dizzying mix of fragmentary images that range from magnified renderings of the female form to depictions of aviation and space travel. Yet the show also features much smaller works that are in their own way of equal importance to Rosenquist's project—particularly the source collages that the artist assembled as studies for his paintings beginning in the early 1960s. The relation between these small preliminary studies and the much larger finished works offers crucial insight into Rosenquist's working practice. For if he culled many of the images for the collages from the pages of *Lifemagazine*, he took them not from copies picked up at the newsstand but from issues that were a decade or so old. To cite just one example, the front end of the car in the 1961 painting *I Love You with My Ford* is in fact that of a 1950 model. As he stated in an important 1964 interview with the critic Gene Swenson that appeared in *Art News*: "I use images from old magazines—when I say old, I mean 1945 to 1955—a time we haven't started to ferret out as history yet. If it was the front end of a new car there would be people who would be passionate about it, and the front end of an old car might make some people nostalgic." By bringing to light this feature of Rosenquist's methods, the collages speak of an artist concerned with the distinctive experience of time in consumer culture. Moreover, with their torn edges, smudges and dabs of paint, and hastily scrawled notations, they are also significantly "artier"—that is to say, more expressive—than the slickly rendered paintings. This perhaps explains why Rosenquist didn't exhibit the collages until relatively recently (they were first shown as a group at New York's Gagosian Gallery in 1992). After all, he is part of a generation of artists (which also includes Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol) who were determined to reject the expressive legacy of the Abstract Expressionist painters. Like so many of his peers, Rosenquist took great pains to jettison evidence of the artist's touch from his work. Yet the collages show just how much effort it took to create paintings that looked machinelike and devoid of expression. If

the juxtaposition of found image fragments provided a means early on to move away from expressive abstraction at the same time that it offered a possible way to deconstruct the workings of advertising imagery, in some of Rosenquist's more recent works the relation between abstraction and commercial figuration seems to have shifted in a new direction. In paintings such as *After Berlin II*, 1998, and *The Stowaway Peers Out at the Speed of Light*, 2000, it is as if the gleaming surfaces and Day-Glo objects that have for so long been depicted in the artist's work have been subjected to such radical and dizzying distortions that they have become almost completely abstract.



James Rosenquist, *Growth Pla*, 1966, oil on canvas, 5'10" x 11'8".

As with his signature fragmentation of images, the large scale of much of Rosenquist's work was initially intended to offer the viewer some critical perspective on commercial imagery by calling attention to its numbing blankness. I'm reminded of *Arts Magazine* reviewer Amy Goldin's vivid description of Rosenquist's mammoth, wraparound *F-111*, 1964–65, at the time of the painting's first showing, as a "worm's-eye view, confused, nearly blind, of gross and baffling presences." Yet one might also feel that at times this monumental size becomes merely an end in itself, serving primarily to confront the viewer with an overwhelming visual experience. It is refreshing, then, to see that some of the artist's most affecting works of recent years are among his smallest, particularly the "Gift Wrapped Dolls" of the early 1990s. (Yes, each of these is still relatively large at five feet square, but nowhere near the immense size of many of his paintings.) All the hallmarks of Rosenquist's mature style—the slick rendering, the vibrant Pop colors, the sustained attention to the surfaces of commodity objects—are brought together to imbue these works with an uncanny psychological resonance. The dolls face us with the promise of a look back that is never fulfilled, while the depicted cellophane barrier—interposed between viewer and doll—invokes the frustration of childhood desires. The cellophane wrap is also used to startling painterly effect: In each of these works Rosenquist offers us a recognizable image that nonetheless melts at various points into abstraction. Inasmuch as these paintings give us something different from what we've come to expect from the artist—no monumental scale, no jarring juxtaposition of montaged elements—they underscore his frequent willingness to experiment with form.

Another feature of Rosenquist's practice that may not be so immediately visible in a conventional museum show is his oftentimes rather refreshing disregard for the sanctity of the art object. On several early occasions, Rosenquist completely repainted works he had already exhibited (hence the painting-construction titled *Candidate*, 1963, repainted as *Silo*, 1963–64) or destroyed works outright (as with early sculptures such as *Untitled [Catwalk]* and *AD, Soap Box Tree*, both 1963). This approach even extends to *F-111*, that landmark of '60s art, which is sure to be a centerpiece of the exhibition in New York (the work was not on view in Houston and will not travel to Bilbao). Consider that, according to the artist's own account, the fifty-one individual panels that comprise the massive eighty-six-foot-long painting were originally intended to be sold off individually, thus effectively destroying the work as a

unified whole. During the course of the work's initial gallery exhibition in 1965, Rosenquist's dealer Leo Castelli seems to have done just that—sold various panels to individual buyers—until collector Robert Scull intervened and bought back the complete painting, reportedly on the day after the show closed. I, for one, would have preferred the originally planned fragmentation to Scull's quasi-heroic reconstitution of the work. Its dispersal into numerous collections surely would have tested the mettle of any curator wanting to reassemble the painting for a show such as this one. When exhibited, the work would have inevitably been incomplete, with at least a few panels always missing. The painting would have existed whole only in photographs and remained a fragmentary presence, which, like the artist's paper suit, would have attested to the more fleeting qualities of Rosenquist's art.

Rosenquist's Big Picture

With his heart and ambition on his sleeve, James Rosenquist hit New York City in 1955, got a job painting billboards in Times Square, and soon plunged into a ferment of talent—Lichtenstein, Warhol, Oldenburg, et al.—that became the Pop-art movement. His vast canvases nailed the 60s *Zeitgeist*, playing with space and scale, and lifting commercial imagery to near-abstract heights. In advance of a major Rosenquist retrospective, INGRID SISCHY would meet the dashing 69-year-old whose passion, skill, and stories explain his towering impact

INGRID SISCHY
MAY 2003

'When things become so peculiar, so frustrating or strange, I think it's a good time to start a painting,' said James Rosenquist recently, while we were watching the news together. By his criteria, then, this should be a golden age for art. We'll see. In the meantime, what's certain is that this is once again a moment in which people are hungry for Rosenquist's work after a period in which it has felt as if he were on the periphery rather than at the center of the action. The painter himself seems almost amused by the vicissitudes that come with being an artist. As he says, speaking from the vantage point of his 69 years, 'It's not an uphill grind. It's up, down, up, down, et cetera. That's what makes it interesting. It's not like you're climbing a hill all your life—not like in some corporations, where you might end up at the top, only to get bred.'

Rosenquist's "comeback" is due to a variety of factors. Pop art itself is enjoying yet another major renaissance in the art world and the culture in general. (There's even a fashion magazine called *Pop*.) The new Pop-aholism—most subversive in the work of the brilliant multi-media artist Takashi Murakami—is omnipresent not only in galleries and on runways but in music videos, interior and graphic design, the look of television, and (welcome to the hall of mirrors) advertising itself, which was part of Pop's original subject matter. As with the first go-round, some of these impulses may be a response to prosperous times (or, in the current instance, recently prosperous times); once again there seems to be a desire among artists and other creators to make commerce work *for* one rather than *against* one. And so the resurgent interest in "the founding fathers" of Pop art. (Although plenty of women are part of the current landscape, the story of 60s Pop—or at least of the stuff that made it to the surface—is a male-dominated one.) Andy Warhol is more copied, more quoted than ever. Roy Lichtenstein's comic aesthetic is all the rage in the world of graphic design. As for Rosenquist, his art is reverberating with the *Zeitgeist* in a whole bunch of ways. People haven't always acknowledged it, but his work's influence on several subsequent generations of artists, from Jeff Koons and David Salle to Damian Loeb, is obvious. For other artists, who are looking for a way out of the apathy that has been so pronounced in recent times, Rosenquist's history of integrating politics and sociology into his art is also inspiring. But that's not all. There are veins of abstraction, Surrealism, and photo-realism in his work—areas that are also of high current interest. Quite a few roads taken by younger artists lead back to Rosenquist.

All this and more renders the timing of the Rosenquist retrospective—organized for the Guggenheim Museum by the curators Walter Hopps (who knew this story inside out, since he was there from the beginning) and Sarah Bancroft—just about perfect. The exhibition opens this May in Houston, at both the Menil Collection and the Museum of Fine Arts. After that it is scheduled to travel en masse to the New York Guggenheim in October, and then

eventually to the Guggenheim Bilbao. The show, which includes never-before-seen preparatory collages, will offer a chance to assess Rosenquist's place in art history beyond the usual one-dimensional categorizations; among other things, it will allow viewers to see his connection to abstraction rather than perpetuate the idea that his work was a total rejection of it.

Rosenquist was never a laid-back kind of guy. Whereas Warhol and Lichtenstein were cool and ironic, sometimes even opaque, Rosenquist was always hot to trot. He was hard-living, jazzy, and, when he arrived in New York City in the mid-50s, ready to turn the town on its ear. (As a leftover from the old days he still says, "You dig?") He is hilarious on the subject of the what-will-the-neighborsthink? attitude that is such a characteristic of today's careerist artists. (First question at a typical panel discussion: "How do I get a gallery?") "I'll tell you what I've encountered," Rosenquist told me. "I've gone to cocktail parties with successful young artists and nobody says a peep. It's like *shhh*, hush, hush. I remember going to a party with Bob [Rauschenberg] and his boyfriend. They'd shout, 'We can't leave the party yet! Because if we leave, there won't be any more party!' ' The artists in my group weren't afraid to make fools of themselves. Young artists today are so careful to seem smart, and they don't want to let their hair down."

Rosenquist, an artist who has spent his life getting under the skin of images, feels no such need to protect or inflate his own—which makes him not only a gust of fresh air but inspiring and touching. As he knows only too well, he is one of the last of a legendary generation. When he talks about this, one feels how much he misses his deceased contemporaries: "I used to say that my old friends are libraries of worthless information to keep my sanity. But I can't call them up for a recipe anymore. Roy Lichtenstein's gone. Andy. Donald Judd. Dan Flavin. I guess it happens to everybody. Who do I go to for stuff like 'How do you make rabbit-skin glue again?' " (The reference is to a traditional method of coating stretched linen canvases with a glue literally derived from rabbit skins; John Singer Sargent's paintings are a good example of how this rather stinky process can enrich a sense of depth.)

It's a long way from Grand Forks, North Dakota, where Rosenquist entered the world in 1933, to the life he made for himself after he moved to New York. In the flush years right before he was bom, his parents, both pilots, had had schemes for the family to start a small airline business that would fly the mail route between Grand Forks and Winnipeg. This went the way of all Dust Bowl dreams when the Depression hit. After that, Rosenquist's father tried to eke out a living working a string of jobs that included pumping gas. The family was constantly having to pick up and move. Rosenquist, an only child, became his mother's favorite date, whether going with her to movies and stage spectacles or just staying home and listening to the radio. But there was nothing Rosenquist liked better than drawing by himself, covering long rolls of cheap wallpaper with crayoned war scenes. (One sees this pleasure played out over and over on an adult scale in the vast horizontal paintings that have been such an important part of his art.)

The family eventually put down stakes in Minneapolis, where his father had found employment at Mid-Continent Airlines during the war and where Rosenquist finished high school and went to the University of Minnesota. But the curious young man wasn't about to stay put for long. In the summer of 1951 he answered an ad in the local paper for a traveling sign painter and got the job—and therein lay the seeds for a whole new chapter in art history. First, though, Rosenquist would live an adventure that sounds like a cross between *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* and *Lust for Life*. Painting signs on grain elevators, gasoline tanks, and billboards by day, and whooping it up by night, Rosenquist and the rest of his itinerant crew (many of whom were ex-cons) worked their way across Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, North Dakota, and South Dakota. He remembers, "I had some very starry, strange experiences out there." The job (which included painting Phillips 66 signs and Coca-Cola ads) allowed him to save enough money to head to New York in the fall of 1955, having earned a one-year scholarship to the Art Students

League. His first eyeful of Midtown bustle, following a night at the YM.C.A. on 34th Street, made a real impression: "I had breakfast and then I stuck my head out the door. I thought, Whoa! I'd better have another cup of coffee before I go out on the streets here!"

After that second shot of caffeine he marched over to the League and declared, "I'm here now!" I asked him if the place erupted in cheers, and he laughed. Even though they hadn't exactly been waiting for him, soon the new guy was getting everything he could out of this longed-for opportunity; Hans Hoffman, the famous teacher of abstraction, was gone by then, but Rosenquist learned from many other renowned faculty members, including George Grosz, Will Barnet, and Edwin Dickinson. But he was broke by spring and his scholarship was up. He became a kind of boy Friday for a while before going back to his earlier trade—sign painting. First, though, he had to join the International Brotherhood of Painters and Allied Trades union. "They asked, 'Whaddya wanna join this union for? There's no jobs for yew,' " Rosenquist recalls, slipping from his ever-so-slight Fargoesse accent into a broad New York patois. "I got up and made a speech. I said, 'I'm ready to recognize the rights of all the older gentlemen here, and I'm willing to take my turn.' They replied, 'All right, kid, bring your initiation money around Thoisday.' "

The artist was basically on his way. For the next three or so years, he worked painting billboards and marquees, mostly around Times Square, often at dizzying heights. (His assignments included giant likenesses of the stars of the day, including Gregory Peck and Jean Simmons; for an audition, he had had to render Kirk Douglas's head.) At night and on weekends—whenever he could—he did his own work. He also joined a drawing class organized by a couple of new friends who were eager to take art in new directions, Jack Youngerman and Robert Indiana, whose name was Bob Clark at the time. Gaes Oldenburg, who would also be counted as an important early Pop artist, took the class, too.

For Rosenquist, the question of what to do in his own work was the big conundrum, as it is for many artists starting out. One leg up: thanks to his day job he had free paint, bringing home rejected mixes. "I'd take the billboard colors that were considered wrong—the paint that was thought of as too dirty for the neck in an Arrow-shirt ad, for example, or for beer. I'd paint a big glass of beer and the salesman would come in and say, 'We can't accept it. There's not enough hops in that glass.' " Rosenquist, never one to miss an opportunity for irony, called the resulting work the "Wrong Color" paintings. These canvases are mostly abstract, but there's also evidence of the artist's experience as a sign painter. In one of the strongest works from that time, 1959's *Astor Victoria*—named after a theater, the marquee of which Rosenquist had often painted—most of the letters *E* and *W* boldly enter the pictorial space. This transitional work is surprisingly powerful.

While Rosenquist was trying to find his voice as an artist he was also soaking up a lot of atmosphere. There were favorite hangouts along the waterfront—including a bar known as Keller's, where Rosenquist and his pals would go to get "blind." Sometimes after work, Rosenquist and a few buddies would check out the gallery openings on 57th Street, where there was plenty to look at (and also plenty of free wine). And then there was all the action downtown. The first time he made it to the Abstract Expressionist gang's famous "Friday Night Gub," he walked into Jackson Pollock's boozed-up wake. "People just kept getting up and saying, 'Jackson Pollock will live with us forever.' Finally, de Kooning gets up and says, 'Goddammit, *no!* He is dead. He is six feet in the *ground!*' "

Rosenquist wasn't an art snob. When he first got to town he would often stand on line to try to get into some of the TV shows that were being taped around Times Square. He has fantastic stories about what he saw, including Elvis three times on the Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey show. Rosenquist's favorite anecdote, though, is about Jack Kerouac's appearance on *The Steve Allen Show*. The artist recalls, "They announced, Ladies and gentlemen, tonight we're

going to have the so-and-so dancers, the so-and-so jugglers, and Jack Kerouac of the Beat Generation. This guy comes out of the wings with a three-day growth of beard and a long overcoat and a curl in his hair and he sits down. Steve Allen says, 'Tell us, Jack, what is the Beat Generation?' Kerouac says, 'Nothing.' And he left and never came back. He was so cool. "

Rosenquist is one of the great raconteurs, and by all accounts he always has been. He's a true charmer, and a looker, and no doubt these attributes served him well as he tried to invent a life for himself as an artist in the big city. (As a young man he looked like he could have starred in the road company of *Oklahoma!*—tall, blond, and fit as could be.) He seems to have gone everywhere, met everyone; he even scored a job modeling for a Volkswagen ad. Of all the people he came across in the early days, it was Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, both a few years older than Rosenquist, who made the biggest impression. He gives them the most credit for his evolution as an artist because of the way in which their work empowered his own experiments. Johns and Rauschenberg were, of course, ahead of the Pop curve, and some of their art—Johns's flag and target paintings, Rauschenberg's three-dimensional *Coca-Cola Plan*, for instance—had already been causing a major stir by the time Rosenquist came on the scene. He remembers the two artists, who were a couple back then, being friendly to him. They, in turn, have vivid memories of their first Rosenquist sightings. "I first noticed him on the street," Rauschenberg told me. "He looked like such a unique person. He was absolutely not outfitted for Wall Street, and he looked like a blond angel. I stared at him a little bit and then went on my way. The next time I saw him he was knocking on my door."

This was 1960, and Rosenquist was wandering around the waterfront in Lower Manhattan searching for a place to rent. A man who worked at a sandwich store directed him to the building where Johns and Rauschenberg lived and worked on different floors. Tips were shared, including a connection to another plugged-in guy at another local store, and soon Rosenquist made a deal to take over Agnes Martin's loft in Coenties Slip, a seaport neighborhood where a number of other artists had found cheap pads, including Indiana and Ellsworth Kelly. Rosenquist had just quit the sign-painting business to focus on his own work—like Warhol, he'd also picked up some quick cash creating window displays for Bonwit Teller, Macy's, and Tiffany & Co—and the pressure was on. "I didn't want to reiterate what was being done, like a second-generation abstract painter," he says. Instead, he pushed himself and broke through with *Zone* (1960—61), one of his first paintings to incorporate the types of techniques, perspective, and content he'd been working with on his commercial jobs. It took him a long time to arrive at the approximately eight-by-eight-foot canvas's final composition, which featured a woman's face, taken from a cosmetics ad, and a huge gray tomato; Rosenquist says that if curators X-rayed the canvas they'd find, among other painted-over images, "three cows and someone committing suicide."

I asked Jasper Johns if it had seemed unusual at the time for an artist to earn his living as a sign painter. Johns, always thoughtful, answered, "What was unusual was that he was an artist and a billboard painter, someone who was within two worlds, someone who came from both positions, who introduced one into the other." I asked Johns about the perspective and scale of Rosenquist's work. "He was seeing something—I think it was a result of the billboard painting—that was different from what the rest of us were already seeing. Of course, one relates some of it to other artists, too. Others had brought up the idea of wishing the viewer to be so close to their work that they couldn't see the whole thing, or to have the work so large you couldn't see the whole thing. That idea emerged more or less from several positions at the same time. It wasn't just Jim's idea. Other artists, like Barnett Newman, had some similar feelings. It must have been in the air, or about to be in the air. It certainly manifested itself very strongly." Johns gave me a kind of bottom line on Rosenquist: "At the time those works occurred, what was surprising wasn't how they related to other things. It was how they didn't."

The seeds of Rosenquist's signature approach were actually planted several years earlier, thanks to an epiphany. "In 1957," he says, "I was painting Schenley-whiskey bottles on every candy store in Brooklyn. One day, after painting about 50 bottles, I got tired of filling in the label, which was supposed to say, 'This spirit is made from the finest grains,' in script. Instead, I started to write, 'Mary had a little lamb, her fleece was white as snow,' on the damn labels. From the street you couldn't tell what it said, but when they took the ads down, they asked, 'What the hell is this kid doing?' That's when Pop art occurred to me. That's when I asked, What is this bombardment of advertising that's driving you nuts?... I thought, How can I use this method to show the emptiness and numbness of all this? I wondered how I could make a mysterious painting in which I painted huge realistic fragments of things, the largest of which would be recognized last. That was my idea at that time. Many of my fellow students were just copying de Kooning's calligraphy. I didn't want to be like everyone else, even if they laughed."

"PAINTING IS PROBABLY MORE EXCITING THAN ADVERTISING SO WHY SHOULDN'T IT BE DONE WITH THAT POWER AND GUSTO, THAT IMPACT."

Many did laugh, or grumble that Pop art signified the end of civilization. (At a later symposium on the subject at the Museum of Modern Art, the opening speaker said, "Tonight we're going to bury the Pop." Rosenquist, who was there, remembers Marcel Duchamp in the back row, taking it all in with his overcoat pulled up over his ears.) For Rosenquist, 1960 and 1961 were busy years. He hit upon his mature style of painting, got married to Mary Lou Adams, a textile designer he met while at work in Times Square, and received many important visitors at his studio, not only artists but practically every dealer with good antennae, including Allan Stone, Deana Sonnabend, Ivan Karp, Leo Castelli, and Richard Bellamy, who became Rosenquist's first dealer. Henry Geldzahler of the Metropolitan Museum of Art came by for a look-see, as did Robert Scull, the owner of one of the city's biggest taxi fleets and the collector who would be the first to buy a work from Rosenquist. A one-man show at Bellamy's gallery in January 1962 really propelled Rosenquist into the limelight. (It also sold out.) That fall, G. R. Swenson, one of the era's most perceptive critics, wrote his landmark essay, "The New American Sign Painters," which first grouped Rosenquist, Lichtenstein, Indiana, Jim Dine, and "Andrew" Warhol.

Two years later, in a famous 1964 interview with Swenson in *ArtNews*, Rosenquist explained his approach this way: "Commercial advertising... is one of the foundations of our society. I'm living in it, and it has such impact and excitement in its means of imagery. Painting is probably more exciting than advertising—so why shouldn't it be done with that power and gusto, with that impact. "

Both at home and abroad, the media were now all over Pop art, and many galleries and museums wanted to give the new hot artists group or solo shows. As one of Lichtenstein's paintings put it, "POW!" The Pop-art "movement" was really an explosion of work by many artists in both America and Europe, with roots in all sorts of art from earlier in the century, including Cubism and Dadaism. There are other obvious antecedents, such as Marcel Duchamp's appropriation of everyday objects (for instance, his famous 1917 urinal sculpture) and Stuart Davis's paintings of commercial products (including his 1924 rendering of a bottle of Odd disinfectant). And then there's the role of photography—the work of Walker Evans, for example—which is intrinsic; without photography, there could be no Pop. But, as often happens, the mass media, historians, and even critics cut out a lot of the history that led to this new art and reduced it to a clean package. (The actual term "Pop art" has been credited to the critic Lawrence Alloway, who is said to have used it sometime around 1954, but he has written that he doesn't know exactly when it was first uttered. He speculates that he probably used it in conversation in the mid-50s in the context of popular culture and work by a group of English artists that included Richard Hamilton, whose 1956 collage, *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?*, is such a hoot.)

One of the best books on the subject to date is Lucy R. Lippard's *Pop Art*, published in 1967. In it she makes a critical stab at listing who really counts, telling the reader that "the New York five" are Warhol, Lichtenstein, Rosenquist, Oldenburg, and Tom Wesselmann. Apart from some quibbling here and there, this judgment has pretty much held up in the intervening years (as has the idea that Johns and Rauschenberg were vital precedents for American Pop artists).

Rosenquist had met Oldenburg in the late 50s, but he, Warhol, and Lichtenstein didn't get to know each other until Pop had already become a noteworthy phenomenon; though each was tapping into the *Zeitgeist* with works that would later be connected by critics, they were doing so independently. When the core group finally did spend time together they seem to have gotten on like a house on fire. None of the old macho Abstract Expressionist fisticuffs for this group; while they were competitive, they amused one another, too. Rosenquist tells a funny story in this regard. He'd run into Warhol, who'd remark in his slightly ironic, famously flat tone, "Oh, you're the greatest artist." Rosenquist would reply, "No, Andy, *you're* the greatest artist." And the two would continue to josh each other this way until one gave up. (Rosenquist also enjoyed seeing other artists take Warhol's droll compliments seriously.)

Now that nearly four decades have passed, it's hard to believe that up until recently Rosenquist, Warhol, Lichtenstein, and the others were lumped together so definitively. The differences of vision, of style, and of content are enormous, even when they paint the same subject. Warhol's Marilyns, for example, are plainly iconic and glamorous, whereas Rosenquist's treatment of the actress is almost a deconstruction. He has also painted straightforward pictures, but Rosenquist's work often accumulates, morphs, and layers disparate images; the final results can be real head scratchers. He seems to like the fact that his work is so open to interpretation. In fact, he initially chose commercial images because he wanted a kind of blank slate. He told G. R. Swenson: "If it were abstract, people might make it into something. If you paint Franco-American spaghetti, they won't make a crucifixion out of it, and also who could be nostalgic about canned spaghetti? They'll bring their reactions but, probably, they won't have as many irrelevant ones."

Rosenquist clearly believes in art's ability to affect consciousness. When I visited him recently in Aripeka, Florida, a marshy, unspoiled hamlet north of Tampa, where he has produced much of his work since 1976, he said, "I want people to get my art, but I want to put them in a new mind-set." This isn't just talk. You can witness it in action in Rosenquist's strongest works. Perhaps the most famous example is *F-111*, an 86-foot-long multi-paneled masterpiece, completed in 1965, that melds domestic, commercial, and martial worlds—a little blonde girl under a hair dryer that resembles a soldier's helmet, a resort umbrella providing shade from an A-bomb blast. The painting, which has often been interpreted as Rosenquist's statement against the Vietnam War, has also been called the *Guernica* of the 60s. The artist's own description is more Rosenquistian, equal parts poetic and blunt: "It's a life-size painting of a bomber flying through the flak of consumer society; and a statement on all the money and power that buys war weapons to supply this society." The sheer ambition and thrill of this massive painting, even without the evocative imagery, make it a showstopper, a work that displays all of Rosenquist's talents, not least his mastery of drawing and painting—*F-111* would not succeed in the way it does without Rosenquist's sophisticated palette, his facility with perspective, and his willingness to experiment. With *F-111*, the sign painter had made a masterpiece out of signs.

When the work was first shown at the Leo Castelli Gallery (which Rosenquist had joined in 1964), it caused a major ruckus. Speaking for skeptics, the critic Hilton Kramer called *F-111* an "irredeemably superficial" work that "leaves the spectator feeling as if he ought to be sucking on a popsicle." The controversy didn't hurt: *F-111* was soon

traveling from museum to museum in Europe. By then Rosenquist had established himself as a true original, a highly conceptual painter who could perform a kind of alchemy with images. One sees this combination of mind and matter in unforgettable paintings such as *Blue Sky* (1962), *Air Hammer* (1962), *Promenade of Merce Cunningham* (1963), *Joan Crawford Says...* (1964), and *Growth Plan* (1966). Sometimes his work reminds one of the Surrealists, in particular Magritte. What's interesting is how Rosenquist does and does not conform to the typical Surrealist strategies, where the imagery may be strange but there's still some sense of traditional perspective, as if one were looking through a window. Rosenquist, on the other hand, often wants to explode the frame.

By the late 60s, he had become one of the most in-demand artists on the contemporary circuit, and he used his success to help causes he believed in, as well as to have fun—including a nutty project commissioned by *Playboy* a kitschy take on pregnancy that featured strawberry shortcake, a large sour pickle, and giant breasts with "surprised" nipples. As for the money that came with all this success, as Rosenquist now ruefully says, "everything went for peanuts." His point is well taken by the standards of today, when Pop art is being sold at auction for staggering prices. *F-111* sold originally for \$50,000, of which Rosenquist got half. In 1996 it was bought on behalf of the Museum of Modern Art for a reported \$5.5 million. But even in the 60s, sales of his work were healthy enough to allow Rosenquist to move his family—he now had one son, John—to East Hampton, where he lived for 10 years, joining a long tradition of East End artists including Pollock and de Kooning; like them, Rosenquist was drawn by the area's luminous light, a by-product of all the surrounding water. He was extraordinarily productive in his first years there, and when both the Whitney Museum in New York and the Wafra-Richartz Museum in Cologne announced that they would put on retrospectives of his work in 1972, the future must have seemed set.

But before the celebrations could begin, Rosenquist's family went through hell and back. He was driving in Florida with his wife and son, who was now six, when their car was involved in an accident, injuring all three and putting his wife and child in comas for months; hospitalized in Tampa, they both eventually recovered, but with permanent reminders. The retrospectives went forward, but these were painful, difficult times for the artist. As he says, the medical expenses alone put him under intense pressure; the emotional costs, of course, were even worse. In 1972 he was also arrested in Washington for protesting the Vietnam War. (While in jail he conceived of a couple of paintings which feature nails neatly lined up in rows, as if counting by hatch marks. "The idea was, Am I doing time or am I marking time?" Rosenquist recalls.)

The exhibitions kept coming and the work continued, but Rosenquist himself seemed to move more into the background by a certain point in the early 80s. You couldn't read about a big night out on the town without coming across Andy Warhol's name; Rosenquist had become a wallflower by comparison, though he did have a few high profile friends. (He once told the actress Liv Ullmann he was working on a painting that would express "the sound of all the world's souls after the Earth has blown up." "Oh *Ja*," she blandly replied, as if such concepts were commonplace. "She had been with Ingmar Bergman too damn long," Rosenquist says today with a laugh.) He had gotten divorced in 1975 and soon afterward started to build his modest compound in Aripeka. Since then he has spent much of his time working in Florida and commuting to Manhattan and, more recently, Bedford, in Westchester County, where his family lives in a white clapboard farmhouse down a dirt road. (In 1987 he married Mimi Thompson, a painter, writer, and curator who had also been an assistant editor at *Vanity Fair*; the couple has a 13-year-old daughter, Lily.) In the intervening years, Rosenquist has been industrious, working on commissions for all sorts of venues, including the Four Seasons restaurant in New York, a restaurant at the Stockholm Opera, the Palace de Chaillot in Paris, and, curiously, a Starwood hotel in downtown San Francisco. And even though Rosenquist's art of the 80s and 90s has shown less obvious evidence of his old occupation as a sign painter, he has remained true to his complex pictorial approach.

Some of his most dynamic pictures of the early 80s, such as *Star Thief* (1980) and *Fahrenheit* (1982)—with imagery that includes symbols of glamour such as lipsticks and a fingernail that's been manicured to look like the tip of a fountain pen—have the visual sock-in-the-face quality of his 60s work, but with more of a sense of mystery. Other paintings are infused with palpable emotion, such as *Through the Eye of the Needle to the Anvil* (1988), a response to his mother's death in 1986, or *Gift Wrapped Dolls*, a group of oils about AIDS created in the early 90s. Quite often, though, his intentions have remained difficult to read. But even if he's no longer causing furious debate the way he once did, Rosenquist's love of painting, his understanding of scale, and his fascination with the space between abstraction and realism have never left him. (In this regard, he reminds me of Gerhard Richter, the German artist of the same generation whose paintings also have this constant swing between the two genres.) *Joystick* (2002) is a monster-size work, 17 feet by 46 feet, that has objects sticking out of the picture—there's a clear plastic rod with two ropes tied to a trapezoidal mirror. Altogether the painting evokes feelings of being high above the ground, perhaps like a child on a swing, or a passenger in a small plane. (When I asked Rosenquist why he enjoys painting such enormous pieces he answered, "Because they're a big workout." And for the most part he completes them without the help of assistants.)

Among Rosenquist's most ambitious recent works are the three paintings, each titled *The Swimmer in the Economist*, that he created in the late 90s for the Berlin branch of the Guggenheim Museum. They're much more intricate than the 60s work, but they remind me of it. In addition to classic Pop iconography such as lipsticks and household products, there are direct references to *F-111* as well as to Picasso's *Guernica*. These are bold, colorful, dazzling paintings—fascinating too, in the way one passage flows into another with real verve. Here you see Rosenquist using different perspectives, warping space with the kind of innovation that made certain early Cubist works so astounding and memorable. These paintings must have been challenging to pull off, but then Rosenquist likes that: "A real artist has to get a bigger and bigger kick out of his or her idea."

That's one thing Rosenquist is: a real, old-fashioned artist. I guess because he's been a big deal for so long I wasn't quite expecting the man I found at the Tampa airport—standing alone, waiting to pick me up. In this age of famous people being impressed by themselves and wanting to impress others with their material success, the mere fact that Rosenquist didn't dispatch an assistant to fetch me makes him unusual. This personal quality defined our time together as it defines his work. What makes both Rosenquist's art and the man himself so compelling is that each contains contradictory elements. Like painters of centuries past he'll work only with natural light, yet his subject matter has often been the fake. As Rauschenberg says, "He is always a surprise." The down-home and the futuristic coexist in Rosenquist's world, and spending time with him can be like landing in one of his paintings. One morning he baked us corn bread and scrambled some eggs; the night before, we'd driven to dinner at a local mall in his brandnew electric-hybrid Toyota.

When Rosenquist is in Aripeka, having left his family up North in Bedford, he is there to work. Apart from excursions to the nearby general store, where he likes to get the news from the locals, he seems to relish his isolation, painting by himself or maybe going out alone on his boat. In order to feed himself he's become the Edward Hopper of the strip malls. Practically every meal we ate was at one or another mall, and all of the people at these joints seemed to know him. But chitchatting with the owners of the Golden China restaurant seemed to be the extent of his socializing. I got the feeling that when he's there all his energy is saved for painting.

His office is a riot. I have never seen a table with more piles of papers on it. For a while Rosenquist's mother ran things, and after she died it took him some time to hire someone else. Beverly Coe, his main assistant, who has

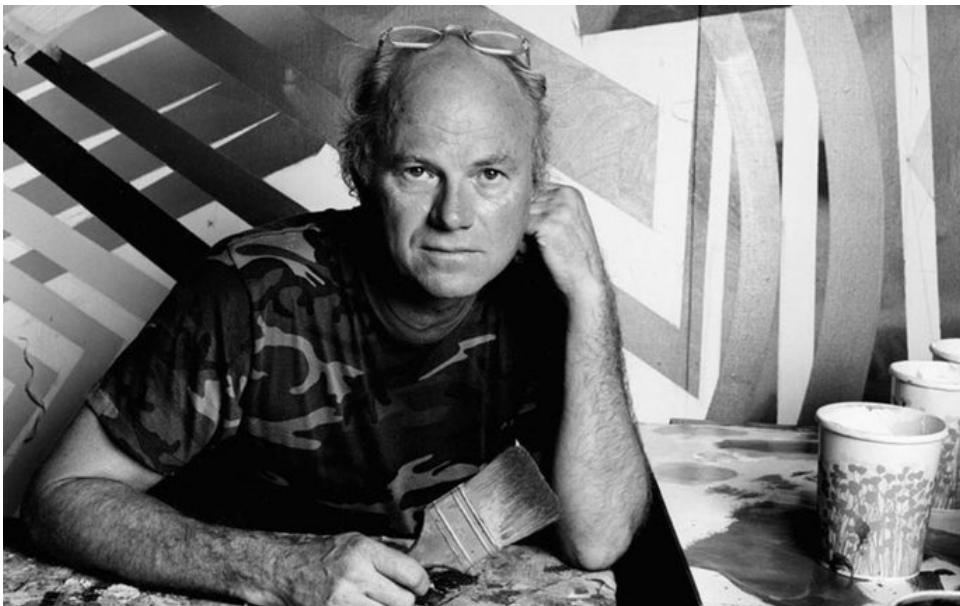
worked with him for 17 years, laughs that her resume got lost under a pile of papers and it took a couple of years before he finally came across it. Granted, when I was there they were in the midst of preparations for the retrospectives, but I had the sense that a perfectly organized business is not one of Rosenquist's priorities. At this point he doesn't even have an official art dealer. As for studio assistants, there were some fellows hanging around the large, prefabricated studio, but they were tinkering with old cars—a Chevy and a Lincoln—that are parked right in there with the paintings.

Being with Rosenquist, I found myself thinking about something I might have expected had I been visiting an old Abstract Expressionist, but not one of the founding fathers of Pop art: the romance of painting. Rosenquist has a great story about his first show in Paris, in the early 60s, which caused a fight between an artist and a poet: "Eduard Jaguer said I was a Surrealist. Then Pierre Alechinsky said no, I was a New Russian Realist. They kept arguing, and finally Alechinsky popped him in the jaw and knocked the guy over. I thought, Wow, Paris is a fantastic place, because they sock somebody for an aesthetic." Clearly art is his air—he lives and breathes it. Consider this description of what it's like for him to do his work: "When you start a big painting, it's like a little ant climbing up a hill. When you get to the middle of it, you can see that it's coming off, that it doesn't look too bad. Then when you're sort of finishing it, it's like a sleigh ride. It's downhill and you're very happy. It's like, 'Hey, this is gonna come off, this might even be a painting.' You rush to finish. Bing. Bang. Boom. Then it's done to that point. But you look at it for a long time afterwards. This is different than a lot of contemporary people who just throw paint at the canvas and send it to a museum or to an art gallery. Centuries ago, I believe, painters even had a system. They painted something, looked at it, then they painted it again and again until the paintings achieved a deep chiaroscuro, not because of varnishes or anything else, but because the paint could run deep I do that to a degree."

Sounds like a hell of a way to spend the day, doesn't it?

One of Pop Art's Pioneers is Making Waves Again

DOUGLAS C. MCGILL
JUNE 22, 1986



James Rosenquist, subject of a retrospective opening Thursday at the Whitney – "I'm trying to show the noise of humanity," he says. Image: Jack Mitchell.

James Rosenquist is painting a new mural. It will be 18 feet long and 11 feet high and is to be hung - corporate executives willing - in a communications technology exhibit in the A.T.& T. building at Madison Avenue and 55th Street. Pulling a chair up to the kitchen table in his spacious Manhattan loft the other day, Mr. Rosenquist excitedly described the work.

"It will be filled with signs and symbols like a kiss mark, a skull and bones, and two people with a thunderbolt between them," the artist said, sketching the work on a legal pad. "It will have ladies of the world - Chinese, African and Caucasian ladies. There will be two parrots and a dog, along with calligraphies in French, Russian, Telugu, Tamil, Indian, Hebrew and Persian. In a two-dimensional surface, I'm trying to show the noise of humanity.

"The parrots and the dog are animals that look like they are attempting to speak," he added. "Man is an animal in a state of evolution, trying to communicate further, and this mural is going into an environment of machines that are trying to help us communicate."

Energy, humor and daring leaps of logic - such as the role that dogs and parrots might play in a mural about communications technology - have been the hallmarks of James Rosenquist's career, now spanning more than two

decades. In his person and his paintings, the 52-year-old artist has always favored oblique, some would say Zen-like, expression that still always finds its target.

One of Pop Art's most successful figures, he was also highly controversial; his billboard-sized paintings enticed viewers with their size and color but confounded them with fragmentary images in crazy-quilt collages. While fellow artists Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol made art from familiar objects - comic strips and Campbell soup cans - Mr. Rosenquist arranged similar images in perplexing scenarios, like an airplane tailpipe spewing spaghetti, a piece of yellow sponge cake covering a car, and a dewy tomato pressing on a woman's face.

How do such puzzles look from a distance of more than 20 years? That is the question posed this week by the Whitney Museum of American Art, which on Thursday opens a retrospective exhibition of Mr. Rosenquist's work. The show, which contains 43 paintings and continues through Sept. 21, includes many of the paintings from the early 1960's that helped launch the Pop Art movement and brought Mr. Rosenquist fame.

It also includes many works from the 70's, a period during which the artist was prolific but slipped from fashion, and from the 80's, when his fortunes have been on the rise. From the first, Mr. Rosenquist has made fragmented collages, although their style has evolved from being sharply disorienting in scale and imagery to being, in the 70's, more flowing and readable, and, more recently, making use of a complex interlacing of splintered images.

The revival of interest in Mr. Rosenquist's work has been closely linked to the emergence of a highly-popular art style, in the late 70's and early 80's, which consists of fragmented images borrowed from the media, and which has its roots in Pop. In particular, Mr. Rosenquist's work of the early 60's helped to lay the groundwork for much Neo-Expressionist painting, which came to dominate the art world in the early 1980's.

That style, embodied in the work of Robert Longo and David Salle, among others, revived the use of specific imagery, especially the human figure, following years in which conceptual and abstract art held sway -much as Pop Art had revived the use of specific imagery following years in which Abstract Expressionism had been the leading style. In many Neo-Expressionist works, images are built from fragments, and a number of Neo-Expressionist works bear a striking resemblance to earlier paintings by Mr. Rosenquist.

Today, although the domineering influence of Neo-Expressionism has subsided, the style still thrives in the hands of some of its practitioners, who acknowledge their debt to Mr. Rosenquist.

"His work helped me understand the freedom that was there," Mr. Longo said. "A lot of other Pop Art seemed pretentious, with an intellectual guise around it. His work seemed more fun, direct and straightforward. It wasn't pictures of movie stars, it was everyday life. He was painting a matrix of life, like a man eating Spaghetti-O's, with the radio on, and an airplane flying overhead. It was a cerebral pictorial space, like a billboard of memory."

In New York the other day in preparation for the Whitney show (he lives most of the year in Aripeka, Fla.), Mr. Rosenquist discussed these and other matters. He is tall and blue-eyed, with a halo of sun-bleached hair and an intense expression that is frequently broken by explosive laughter and an impish smile.

On the subject of his esthetics, he spoke slowly and quietly, choosing his words with care, on occasion brightening up to announce an idea: "Dig this!"

On the subject of himself, he spoke in glancing anecdotes whose point of view was partly modern and partly Zen. "My mother was working for a propeller factory when she was pregnant," he began, rocking back in his chair to laugh. "So I guess I was propelled into space. I wonder why I do what I do sometimes. I think I do have reasons, but they are not clear."



"Dishes," a 1964 oil that will be part of the James Rosenquist retrospective at the Whitney Museum. Image: Rudolph Burckhardt.

The artist was born in Grand Forks, N. D., and grew up in a variety of Middle West towns. A born sketcher, he took art classes throughout high school and college and spent summers painting signs on gasoline tanks, refinery equipment and billboards. In 1955, he moved to New York to study at the Art Students League, and in 1958 decided to try for a job with Artkraft Strauss, the company that painted the billboards in Times Square.

"My audition was an 8-foot-high head of Kirk Douglas," Mr. Rosenquist remembered. "I really wanted the job. I put saliva on his lips and tears in his eyes and a gleam in his hair. I made him look better than he was. The 80-year-old Mr. Strauss walked by, looked up and said, 'Hire that guy.' "

Throughout the late 50's, Mr. Rosenquist met many of the leading avant-garde artists of the day, and from them got a taste of the artist's life.

"Art seemed to be serious, but it was like an underground hobby," Mr. Rosenquist said. "Opposite the 57th Street galleries were the 10th Street artists like de Kooning and Kline and Milton Resnick. I admired those artists, who had so much spirit but seemed to remain rather unknown. I was drinking beer with them, and one would be talking about getting money from his mother every month. And he was in his 40's. I thought, 'This is a heck of a profession, still being supported by your parents in middle age.' But their work was full of fire."

By 1960, Mr. Rosenquist was painting Budweiser and Arrow Shirt signs by day and small abstract works by night. His hope was to become a "fine artist" by enlarging his abstract works to full-size paintings. That year, he quit his job

at Artkraft Strauss and rented a \$45-a-month studio in Lower Manhattan, where his neighbors included the artists Robert Indiana, Ellsworth Kelly and Jack Youngerman.

The first paintings in his distinctive style, however, were not simply abstract studies made large. Mr. Rosenquist realized that most of his contemporaries were trying to perfect the art of abstract painting - trying to invent ever-purer abstract forms. A truly new statement, Mr. Rosenquist thought, would be to create pictures that used images and drew on his experience painting billboards.

"Everyone was trying to get to zero with abstract painting," Mr. Rosenquist said. "I said, maybe I can get below zero by making objects and images again. I decided to paint fragments in different scales. The largest fragment in the painting would be so close that it would be recognized last, and therefore would pose a mystery."

An object depicted on a billboard, Mr. Rosenquist realized, was abstract when seen from six inches or even six feet, and only became recognizable when seen from a distance of further back. It was this middle ground of ambiguity - in which a viewer is unsure whether the depiction is figurative or abstract - that he chose to explore.

He also wanted to incorporate into his work a feeling he associated with America in the 50's.

"I wanted to use the power of advertising to show the numbness that I felt while making billboards," he said. "America, because of the way it was, had bright supermarkets, price labels on things, the beginnings of television. The numbness came from constantly being bombarded with advertising, which I did for a living. I thought, 'How do you exist in a society like that? How do you turn it off?'"

Of all his 1960's works, none received greater acclaim - or sharper criticism - than "F-111," an 86-foot-long painting of a controversial United States Air Force fighter bomber, overlaid with images of a Firestone tire, a fork stuck in spaghetti, an atomic cloud and a girl's face under a gleaming silver hair dryer. Hailed by some critics as the most important anti-war art statement of the 60's, it was described by others as a grandstanding sham.

In an interview at the time of the picture's showing at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1965, Mr. Rosenquist explained it was his intention to "paint an extravagance that would relate to the extreme power" of society. Asked recently about the work's political import, he answered with an anecdote.

"It was Liberation Day, and a reporter found Gertrude Stein somewhere in the south of France," he recalled. "The reporter, who didn't know who she was, asked her, 'How does it feel on Liberation Day in the south of France?' She said, 'Today is as tomorrow was as yesterday will be as today is.' The reporter said she was obviously shell-shocked. That's the political content of the work."

In the 1970's, Pop Art waned as abstract and conceptual art gained ground, and the Pop Artists, including Mr. Rosenquist, receded from public view. In 1971, as a result of an automobile accident, his wife and 8-year-old son were hospitalized for many months. He was soon heavily in debt, and the proceeds from the sales of his work went largely to pay the bills.

The turn of fashion away from Pop Art made that task especially difficult.

"My early paintings, that originally cost \$500, were going for \$40,000 at auction, yet I was broke," Mr. Rosenquist said. "I was having a hard time selling my current work. People would come and look at it, but they'd go and buy at auctions instead."



"Industrial Cottage" (1977)– There is a renewed interest in the artist's work. Image: Bevan Davies.

By the late 70's, though, he had discovered a new, lighter and sharper painting style that he exploited with zest. In 1980, he hit the headlines as he had not since the 60's, with a mural called "Star Thief" that was proposed for the Eastern Airlines terminal at the Miami International Airport. The 46-foot-long painting contained, among other things, a 20-foot-long image of raw bacon strips floating in a starry sky.

Frank Borman, the former astronaut and president of Eastern, rejected the mural angrily, saying that he had been "around the moon 10 times" and that space did not look like that. But with other public works - including a series of murals for the Florida state capitol in Tallahassee in 1977 and a large painting for New York's Four Seasons restaurant in 1984 - Mr. Rosenquist met with resounding success.

Today, it is the mural for the A.T.& T. building that is most on Mr. Rosenquist's mind. In it, he is experimenting with a kind of latticework of slivers of images that interlock like fingers.

"It gives you the ability to put layers and layers of meaning in a painting and have them seep out as slowly as you put them in," the artist said of the work, which is scheduled to be completed in a few weeks. "You compete with electricity and sound and movement, and music and movies and laser beams, and a lot of technological things."

While the actual images in the painting - two dogs and a parrot, women's faces, signs and symbols -are in Mr. Rosenquist's mind related to the subject of communication technology, it is more importantly in the look of the work as a whole that he seeks a kind of visual equivalent to the complexity of that technology.

"Man is searching ethically for technology to carry him further," he said. "But I have made a study of the visuals that accompany technology and I've found them to be dull. I've looked at diagrams of electricity, at computer diagrams of the lungs of a fish. It's not art, it's something else. The idea of technology is fantastic, but the look of it is boring."

Still, such images as the dog and the parrot do indicate a kind of back-to-basics approach to communication that Mr. Rosenquist advocates, notwithstanding the dazzling achievements of high technology.

"If I look in the mirror I see an animal," he said. "In Florida I see the wild animals, and I wonder how they communicate. This picture will go in an environment where the machines transmit things, but the machines don't have any humanity in themselves. That's the message, that there are live people here.

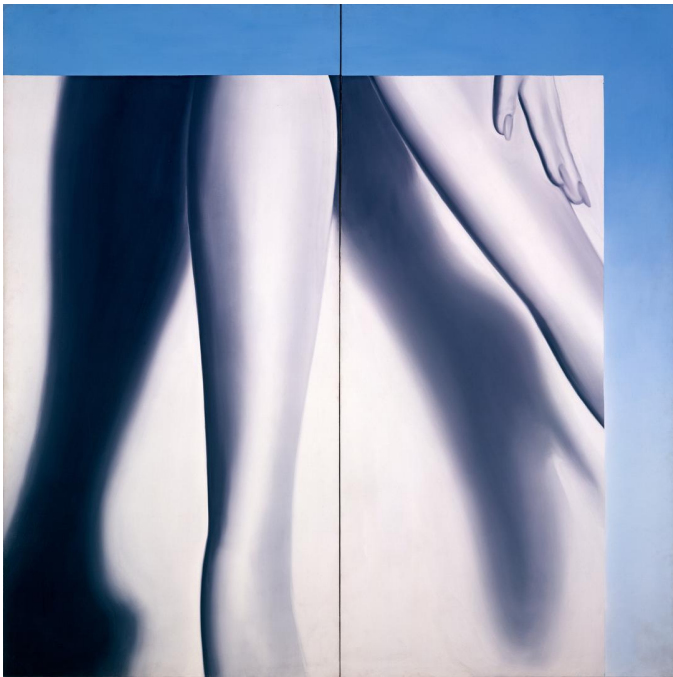
"If A.T.& T. doesn't like it, I'll have a heck of a souvenir, because I've enjoyed working on it," Mr. Rosenquist said of the new mural. "I think it'll knock 'em dead, but that remains to be seen."

ARTFORUM

James Rosenquist

Aspects of a Multiple Art

LUCY R. LIPPARD
DECEMBER, 1965



Above the Square, 1963. Oil on canvas. 84" x 84" (213.4 x 213.4 cm).

WHEN SOME OF THE LIGHTS on Forty-Second Street movie marquees were turned out in order to attract attention in that neon jungle, we reached a significant saturation point. Rosenquist departs from the resulting half-lit world of contrasts rather than from the all-out Fun Fair that preceded it. His references are oblique, his images obscured, his aims complex; his is a multiple, rather than a single-minded art, made up of a unique combination of sassy Pop realism, mysterious irrationality and an essentially non-objective sensibility. The key to Rosenquist's work is not its commercial vocabulary, nor its detachment, but its scale. "For me things have to be life size or larger. I believe it is possible to bring something so close that you can see through it, so it comes to you right off the wall. I like to bring things into unexpected immediacy—as if someone thrust something right next to your face—a beer bottle or his shirt cuff—and said 'how do you like it?'"

If a beer bottle is painted six feet tall, it radiates suggestively beyond the painting. (If the bottle is that big, what about the *people*?) Many paintings executed in conventional scale will diminish and lose their impact in the ordinary room or exhibition space. A Rosenquist retains its vigor in much the same way that a Rothko or a Newman holds its own in any space and in fact remakes the space in its own image. Their single images and Pollock's all-over compositions also reject the static relationship between objects imposed by conventional, consistent scale. The Cubists brought the objects portrayed forward to the picture plane; the Futurists attempted, with little success, to go beyond it. The

Surrealists, who made full use of juxtaposition and arbitrary scale, did so only within the limits of conventional space, depending on the recognizable framework—a room or a landscape—to define the size of an object. They still saw the rearrangement of scale in literary, nineteenth-century terms, and were involved in a limited alteration of scale, changing the way certain objects or places were seen, rather than in re-scaling a new immediate environment.

Rosenquist's work is often compared to that of René Magritte. Although he admires the Belgian Surrealist, the similarity is superficial. They share a knowledge of the mystery inherent in common images. Yet Magritte's remote and deadpan approach is closer to that of the other Pop artists than to Rosenquist's. His questions about illusion and resemblance are posed in an earlier, and static, spatial language; his picture within a picture motifs are concerned with dislocation rather than re-integration. Magritte plays devil's advocate rather than God with reality. He challenges known nomenclature but rarely renames anything. To Rosenquist it makes no difference what things are called. What they look like counts. He employs artifice as a formal tool and surface reality to rob objects and people of their identities. More important, and this is the crux of the visual difference between Pop and Surrealism, Rosenquist's disparities of scale are not intended to reflect upon neighboring images, but to act directly upon the spectator.



Untitled (Joan Crawford Says...), 1964. Oli on canvas. 92" x 78" (233.7 x 198.1 cm).

Traditional implications of illusionism are reversed. The disproportionate scale of Rosenquist's images forces them out rather than back into the painted distance, envelops the spectator in an elephantine trompe l'oeil. Where other Pop artists have used scale to overpower but not to attack, holding the image on the picture plane in an arrogant withdrawal, Rosenquist uses his gigantism as an assault on normality: this is the first aspect of his work. In the process of the attack, the object loses its identity and becomes form. This is the second experience—a more subtle and less recognized one. Lichtenstein and Rosenquist are the two non-objective painters involved in Pop. That is, they share basic intentions with their wholly abstract contemporaries. "One thing, the subject isn't popular images," Rosenquist has insisted. "It isn't that at all."

At one time there was a popular misconception that this “former sign painter named James Rosenquist” (*Newsweek*) was a kind of updated “peintre naïf,” hauled off his scaffolding by some inspired entrepreneur. In fact, he has been painting seriously for fourteen years. From 1952 to 1955 he studied art with Cameron Booth at the University of Minnesota, then came to New York for a year’s scholarship at the Art Students League. After various odd jobs he was hired by the General Outdoor Advertising Company, having learned sign-painting as a trade at the age of twenty. By 1960 he had developed a distinctive all-over style, predominantly grey, a heavily painted “grid of many colors, like an old rug.” The one transitional painting, still non-objective, superimposed a huge red arabesque derived from billboards. The fresh, lurid color of his present work was the final break with early influences.



In the Red, 1962. Oil on canvas. 66 ¼" x 78 ¼" (168.3 x 198.8 cm).

In winter 1959–60, Rosenquist made a series of window display murals for Bonwit Teller and Bloomingdale’s based on billboard techniques, and he has often spoken of his experiences painting signs and of the possibilities of working seriously in that manner. It was not, however, until the fall of 1960 that he first applied commercial techniques and subject matter to his own painting. *Zone*, the first canvas in his present style, still exists, though greatly changed. Aside from a huge face, it originally included some cows, a hand shaking salt on a lapel, a naked man committing suicide. A flood in the studio washed off some of the paint and it was reworked. The colors were too bright and too many. The little man was too small. “He fell into the old pictorial space,” and Rosenquist was primarily concerned with getting away from conventional pictorial traditions, especially those of scale and space. He began (as Andy Warhol did at roughly the same time) by rendering his new images in Abstract Expressionistic techniques and “drips.” Even after abandoning this to make a clean break, he retained for a few years a freedom of execution that went generally unnoticed. At a normally chosen vantage point an image would look almost stenciled; on closer inspection, loose, relaxed strokes could be discerned, though this derived more from the distance factor of billboards than from any Expressionist tendency.

Rosenquist still prefers to paint the individual images “so well that they might sell something, as though it had to be done by noon on contract. By painting fast and directly, even if it’s just to sell snake oil or stockings, more goes into it than you realize.” Most of his paintings go through myriad transformations, sometimes as many as five major

changes a day, each decided and executed at almost breakneck speed. No matter how large or how finished or how close to the deadline a canvas may be (The World's Fair mural, for example) he will begin from scratch on an entire section, or rearrange the whole composition the day before it is to be installed. While the basic principles of Rosenquist's fragmentation are those of collage, he completely eschews ready-made pictorial materials, and is equally opposed (for his own art) to mechanical aids and reproductive processes, finding them too limiting. "Change is what makes art. Collage is too divorced from materials. Painting goes into more depth. The work changes all the time no matter how careful you are to stay close to what you are copying." On the other hand, some of his preliminary studies are impermanent collages, bearing no strict resemblance to the completed canvas. He begins by making numerous composition sketches in the form of scribbled "ideagrams," pastel or pencil drawings with color and conception notes, and apparently nonobjective oil-on-paper studies. Color areas stand for the images, which, when chosen from magazines, newspapers or other commercial sources, are stapled onto a piece of paper, in approximately their final shape or order. But between these work sheets and the finished product, the scale and color of everything may be completely revised. Change of scale gives the artist complete flexibility and provokes new ideas even after the original decisions have been made. In the work sheet a man's trouser leg and a candy bar may be about the same size, while on the final canvas one is ten times larger than the other.

Even if Rosenquist wants to "avoid the romantic quality of paint and keep the stamp of the manmade thing," his approach is fundamentally romantic, which again sets him apart from the rest of the major Pop artists, except for Oldenburg. He is also a "wholesome" painter (though this word has been relegated to the level of bread and bad movies), a moral artist in the sense of Robert Motherwell's statement:

"I think a great deal of what's happening between America and Europe now—I'm speaking of younger artists—is our implacable insistence here on moral values, which I think is slowly disappearing among younger artists in Europe, who paint mainly with taste. And I don't mean this in a superior way, but almost primitively, as a kind of animal thirst for something solidly real. It's directed to what one really feels, and not to what one prefers to feel, or thinks one feels."

The idealism of today is irony. Satire and social protest are not major elements in Rosenquist's art. In fact, the only painting which is conspicuously "political" is a large triptych entitled *Homage to the American Negro*. Here a headless "white" man (posed, but unintentionally, like the Lincoln Monument), sits on a Negro's head. Through and around a pair of dark glasses the sky and rectangular background are subtly varied by color and value switches. A white mother whispering advice to her children is placed before a camera aperture reading "darken, normal, lighten," and her nose is decorated with IBM machine perforations. The only brown thing in the painting is the delicious looking chocolate frosting on a huge piece of vanilla cake that takes up the entire right side. Elsewhere the "colored people" are literally colored—green, blue, orange, etc. The painting is about color, but not the color of skin. "It is about the colors in a colorful person, the colors you do not see through glasses."



Painting for the American Negro, 1962-63. Oil on canvas. 66 ¼" x 78 ¼" (168.3 x 198.8 cm).

Rosenquist's last one-man show, (April 1965) which consisted solely of the 23-foot mural, *F-111*, was entirely devoted to a social theme, that of the artist's position in today's society, the insignificance of the easel painting in an era of immensity, of jet war machines and "nouveaux collectionneurs" buying wholesale. He has used scale here to force acknowledgment of the importance of art, as a "visual antidote to the power and pressure of the other side of our society." Nevertheless, this message is far from apparent to the casual or even to the concentrating viewer, and serves as further indication of the determinedly iceberg quality of Rosenquist's art and aims. The same is true of the specific images in the majority of his works. They have no "story to tell," but they often do have a personal significance to the artist, a significance which he refuses to make obvious because it is personal, and because the painting is to be seen first and foremost as a painting, as a "visual boomerang." He constantly avoids clever, witty, poetic, easily absorbed or humorous imagery in his use of juxtaposition. While the idea for a painting and its title usually occur to him simultaneously, neither is literal. *A Lot to Like*, 1962, seems to demand a generalized interpretation pertaining to the mad rush of the consumer to consume, but it was intended as a comment on the flaunting of masculinity. (The football player throws his "pass" through the hole in the razor blade and into the bottomless woman.) Blandly round and smooth forms are contrasted with sharp edges and associations, such as the blade (deceptively painted a soft grey), the point of the umbrella, and the hard green rain ("like Hiroshige, but radioactive, Hiroshima too"). Here, as elsewhere, there is a distinct abstract eroticism emphasized by the unidentified and consequently suggestive anatomical areas, and by the sinuous arabesques that join and transform the ragged, quick-flash image compartments. The irony of Rosenquist's work is pervasive, not specific. He refers to the '50s by hair styles, cars or clothes from the recent past, images that "people haven't started to look at yet, that have the least value of anything I could use and still be an image, because recent history seems unremembered and anonymous while current events are bloody and passionate and older history is categorized and nostalgic."

Rosenquist's experience as a billboard painter sharpened his reactions to the non-representational aspects of outwardly representational forms. This might not have been the case had he not had the eye of a non-objective painter. Being hoisted up Kirk Douglas' cheek to paint a four-foot eyelash, he became aware that Kirk Douglas had disappeared, the cheek was no longer a cheek, nor the eyelash an eyelash; that he was enveloped in a sea of purely plastic form and color defined by immense arabesques. In turn, it is this familiarity with the monstrous that allows Rosenquist to understate his enlargement. Most of us will get no closer to such an experience than seeing Jayne Mansfield's ten-foot high monotone breast emerging from the movie screen. There is something of the old 3-D films or even of stereoscopic images in Rosenquist's protruding forms, and parallels are suggested with advanced film technique such as the love-making scenes from "Hiroshima, mon amour," where specific parts of the body are seen in such close-up detail that they become the anonymous essence of union. In this sense he is again in opposition to Lichtenstein and Wesselmann, who have gone to great lengths to flatten and remove their images from spectator space in order to achieve that other ambiguity between two and three dimensions. Less rigorous and more

experimental than the other Pop artists, Rosenquist is also more uneven. His methods demand an intuitive control and at times the images float uneasily on the surface in a spatial no-man's land, or are landlocked in crowded incoherence when the formal idea is not fully resolved. His mastery of these complexities is grounded in a highly developed and still expanding vocabulary of spatial devices.



Early in the Morning, 1963. Oil on canvas and plastic. 95" x 56" (241.3 x 142.2 cm).

These devices are, for the most part, based on minutely varied color changes. The eye unaccustomed to such refinements misses a good deal in his work. Rosenquist acquired a heightened awareness of monotone nuance from the grisaille billboards. (In "Silver Skies," for instance, each grey is tinted a different color.) The white-lead base of practically all of his colors (except for the day-glo tones, which he was perhaps the first to use extensively) gives them a fresh and ingenuous air (also saccharine and pungently repellent when so desired). White is particularly important in the pale "unfinished" colors, like those of printers' color-separation proofs. In other contexts, white is used to segment and imperceptibly alter forms which are in other respects "whole." An all but invisible line, a psychological rather than visual division, is obtained by the addition of an infinitesimal amount of white; the result is like a shadow across the surface, almost unnoticeable, providing a quieter dimension to the excitement of an art which first seems implacably resistant to a subtle reading. Similar effects hold one image in front of another or signal sharp divisions within a single image, or set up dissimilar spaces. A pictured object, moving from one subtly defined compartment to another, may change abruptly in value but not in color, or vice versa. A brilliant cadmium may be juxtaposed against a still more brilliant day-glo red on one side, a cool grey on the other, forcing a change of identity in mid-form and, radically, but again nearly imperceptibly, distorting its role in the overall design.

Such subtleties are employed in a clearer and more formal manner in the use of a painted or separate and slightly projecting rectangle that repeats or modifies its ground. This stresses the nonobjective character of the work as well as reinforcing certain effects of scale. In *Noon*, a sky panel set in another sky enlarges an infinite and virtually

unenlargeable area by making it relative (an eminently Magrittean idea, but used for different ends). A more extensive exploration of the relief panels occurred in *Capillary Action I*, 1962, a large painting of a tree in a park landscape where green and greenish, photographic greys and “natural” tones are played against each other to expose the artificiality and banality of Nature. A grisaille foreground implies *Please Don't Step on the Grass*, a kelly green panel stuck over a swatch of paint-smearred newspaper and tape implies *Wet Paint*. Rosenquist says it is about “seeing abstraction everywhere, looking at a landscape and seeing abstraction,” in contrast to the usual spectator sport of finding the figure or landscape in abstractions. The implications of this theme were followed up in a construction—*Capillary Action II*, 1963, where the tree is real, about eight feet high and neither painted nor refurbished. Here too a piece of torn newspaper hints at the artifice of reality itself. The space is animated by three stretched plastic panels and a square drawn in wiggly red neon, all set at different distances from the surface of a larger, inset panel. “A painter searches for a brutality that hasn't been assimilated by nature. I believe there is a heavy hand of nature on the artist,” Rosenquist has said. This second piece proved him right in an extra-art manner. It was the result of a wild day and night search through Westchester for the “right tree,” which never turned up. “Nature couldn't provide it.”

When he began to add extraneous materials to his canvases consistently in 1962–63, Rosenquist chose carefully, concentrating on “abstract” substances, such as mirror, tin, clear plastic, glass, aluminum and rainbow streaked bars of wood. One of the most effective was sections of limp plastic drop sheet, either transparent or vertically dripped with paint, which acted upon the canvas below and combined visually to make new colors, providing a shifting chromatic screen through which that area of the painting changed continually, and adding a capricious dimension subject to the breeze or light in the room. In 1964 he made several free-standing constructions, most of which employed light. These were environmental in that they were more concerned with extending sensuous experience than with pure form. Light and clear plastics share with Rosenquist's iconography a quiescent immateriality, the ability to destroy conventional space and define further levels or “vantage points” from or through which an object might be seen. A chrome-plated barbed wire extravaganza with a flourish of blue neon streaking through it used light as abstract fantasy; a luridly multicolored ramp set over a sheet of brightly painted plexiglass, with colored light flashing beneath it was illusionistic; a ceiling panel of a floor plan with bare bulbs suspended from it was paradoxically “realistic.” All of this was part of a burgeoning interest in irregularity, manifested in various non-rectangular or centrally pierced works and two small paintings hung “off kilter” to stress the expendability of background and show that “a painting shouldn't be perfect. Perfection makes a pun. I'm tired of the Mondrian kind of relationship.”

For most of 1965, however, Rosenquist abandoned these experimental pieces and returned to a stricter and more highly polished evolution of his straight painting style, which culminated in *F-111*. Partially responsible for this switchback was a summer (1964) in Europe, where everything was so graciously “artistic and beautiful” that on his return he felt forced to revert to a raw, brash and “non-artistic” idiom to get started again. During the past summer, (1965) spent in Aspen, Colorado, Rosenquist became vitally interested in Oriental thought and also embarked on an extremely personal project to experiment with the effects of peripheral vision. Not painting, nor construction, and only ambiguously environmental, this series of tentlike arches of painted canvas may constitute the breakthrough into the non-objective which has been imminent for at least two years. The climactic summing-up of *F-111* would seem to necessitate it, were it not that the unexpected and wide open character of the man and the work defies prediction.

The New York Times

James Rosenquist, Pop Art Pioneer, Dies at 83

KEN JOHNSON
APRIL 1, 2017



“President Elect” (1960-61/1964) All Rights Reserved, James Rosenquist / Licensed by VAGA, New York.

James Rosenquist, who helped define Pop Art in its 1960s heyday with his boldly scaled painted montages of commercial imagery, died on Friday in New York City. He was 83 years old.

His wife, Mimi Thompson, said Mr. Rosenquist died at his home after a long illness.

Like his contemporaries Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, Mr. Rosenquist developed a powerful graphic style in the early 1960s that traditionalists reviled and a broad public enthusiastically embraced.

The Pop artists took for their subject matter images and objects from the mass media and popular culture, including advertising, comic books and consumer products. They also employed techniques that until then had been associated primarily with commercial and industrial methods of production, like silk screening or, in Mr. Rosenquist’s case, billboard painting.

Mr. Rosenquist himself drew on his experience painting immense movie billboards above Times Square and a Hebrew National sign in Brooklyn.

It was while working in New York as a sign painter by day and an abstract painter by night that he had the idea to import the giant-scale, broadly painted representational pictures from outdoor advertising into the realm of fine art.

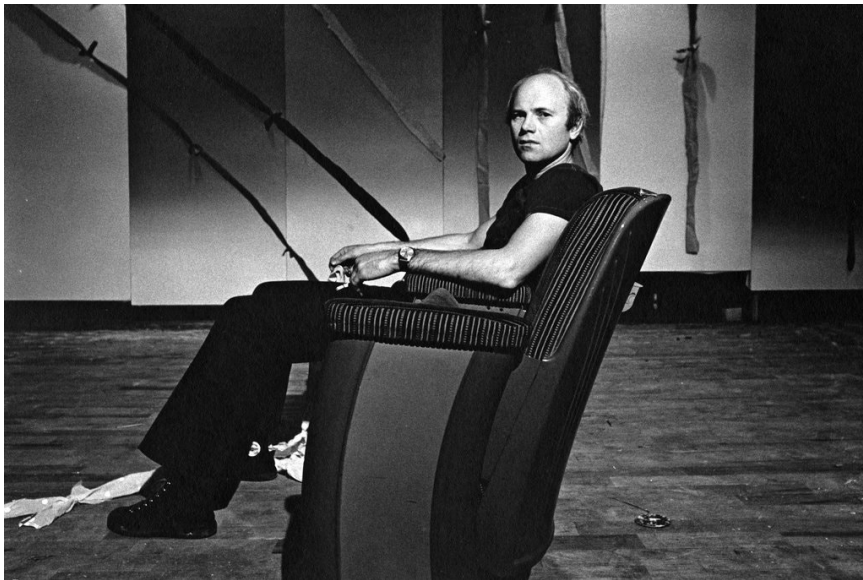
“Was importing the method into art a bit of a cheap trick?” the critic Peter Schjeldahl wrote in *The New Yorker* in 2003 on the occasion of a ballyhooed retrospective of Mr. Rosenquist’s work at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. “So were Warhol’s photo silk-screening and Lichtenstein’s limning of panels from comic strips.

“The goal in all cases,” Mr. Schjeldahl added, “was to fuse painting aesthetics with the semiotics of media-drenched contemporary reality. The naked efficiency of anti-personal artmaking defines classic Pop. It’s as if someone were inviting you to inspect the fist with which he simultaneously punches you.”

Mr. Rosenquist drew inspiration, too, from the tradition of Surrealistic collage, as well as from the montage designs of contemporary advertising, to create disjunctive compositions of cropped and fragmented images of cars, movie stars, food products and domestic appliances.

Though painted by hand in a lucidly simplified realistic style, the juxtapositions of images remain mysterious. The paintings could be viewed both as critiques of modern consumerism and as glimpses into the collective American consciousness.

“The art’s formal ingenuity can jump out at you as forcefully as the grill of a Ford or a fragment of Marilyn Monroe’s lips or the cap from a Pepsi bottle or a stack of Fiesta dishes in a dish rack,” Michael Kimmelman wrote in *The New York Times*, also in 2003.



James Rosenquist in 1969. He developed a powerful graphic style that was embraced by the public. Jack Mitchell / Getty Images

that way. It is now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

James Albert Rosenquist was born in Grand Forks, N.D., on Nov. 29, 1933, and grew up in various towns in Minnesota and Ohio before his parents settled in Minneapolis in 1944. His father, Louis, was an airplane mechanic, among other things. His mother, Ruth, an amateur painter who could also fly a plane, encouraged his interests in art, and he won a scholarship to study at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts when he was in junior high school.

Mr. Rosenquist studied art at the University of Minnesota from 1952 to 1954, and during his summer vacation in 1953 he worked for a contractor painting gas station signs, storage tanks and grain silos.

Mr. Rosenquist’s paintings rarely contained overt political messages, but his best-known work, the enormous “F-111,” was made in 1964 and 1965 in part as a protest against American militarism. In it, the image of a modern fighter plane stretching 86 feet across a grid of 51 canvas and aluminum panels is interrupted by images of a colossal tire, a beach umbrella, a mushroom cloud, spaghetti and tomato sauce, and a little girl under a chrome hair dryer that resembles a warhead.

Mr. Rosenquist meant to sell the painting as separate panels, but the collector Robert Scull bought it whole and kept it

After receiving an associate degree in studio art, he went to work for a billboard company painting advertisements for movies, liquor and soft drinks. One assignment, during the Davy Crockett craze that swept the United States on the heels of a Walt Disney mini-series, was to paint eight-foot-wide coonskin caps.

In 1955, Mr. Rosenquist received a one-year scholarship to the Art Students League in New York, arriving with \$350 in his pocket, he said. He studied there with Will Barnet, Edwin Dickinson and George Grosz, among others.

He also began frequenting the Cedar Tavern in Greenwich Village, a gathering place for painters and poets. "There was Bill de Kooning, Franz Kline," Mr. Rosenquist told The Times in 2003.

After leaving school the next year, he held a series of odd jobs before returning to sign painting, joining the sign painters union and working mostly for the Artkraft Strauss Sign Corporation, which painted some of the largest billboards in the world.



"Fahrenheit 1982" (1982). All Rights Reserved, James Rosenquist / Licensed by VAGA, New York.

"Much of the aesthetic of my work comes from doing commercial art," Mr. Rosenquist said. "I painted pieces of bread, Arrow shirts, movie stars. It was very interesting. Before I came to New York I wanted to paint the Sistine Chapel. I thought this is where the school of mural painting exists. You were painting things up close, like big chocolate cakes. In Brooklyn, I painted Schenley whiskey bottles two stories high, 147 of them over every candy store."

He continued the work until 1960, when he quit for good after two co-workers fell from a scaffold and died.

That year he rented the former studio of Agnes Martin at 3-5 Coenties Slip, a building on the East River in Lower Manhattan where Robert Indiana, Ellsworth Kelly, Jasper Johns and Jack Youngerman also had studios.

Until then, Mr. Rosenquist had been making paintings consisting of all-over fields of brushmarks in the spirit of Abstract Expressionism. Now, influenced in part by the works of Robert Rauschenberg and Mr. Johns, whom he had gotten to know, he began to use his sign painting skills.

During the course of his career, Mr. Rosenquist experimented with sculptural assemblage and environmental installations, and he sometimes attached three-dimensional objects to his pictures. But he remained mainly a representational painter. In later years, some of his paintings approached a kind of futuristic, kaleidoscopic abstraction, but the play with different sorts of images and illusions persisted.



Mr. Rosenquist's paintings rarely contained overt political messages, but his best-known work, the enormous "F-111" (1964-5), was a protest against American militarism. All Rights Reserved, James Rosenquist / Licensed by VAGA, New York

Mr. Rosenquist's first marriage, to Mary Lou Adams, ended in divorce. He is survived by Ms. Thompson, his second wife; his son John, from his first marriage, his daughter Lily, from his second marriage, and a grandson, Oscar.

Mr. Rosenquist's first solo exhibition, at the Green Gallery in 1962, sold out. That same year his work was included in a survey of new art at Sidney Janis Gallery called "International Exhibition of the New Realists" that put what would soon come to be known as Pop Art on the map of contemporary consciousness.

In 1965, he showed "F-111" in his first exhibition at the Leo Castelli Gallery, which by then represented most of major Pop artists.

The painting was subsequently exhibited at the Jewish Museum and then taken on a tour of Europe. Besides the show at the Guggenheim in 2003, Mr. Rosenquist had museum retrospectives at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa in 1968; the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 1972; and the Denver Art Museum in 1985. He had an exhibition at the Haunch of Venison Gallery in London, now defunct, in 2006, and a solo show at the Acquavella Galleries in New York in 2012. His most recent exhibition opened last fall at the Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac in Paris. And the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany, will host an exhibition of his work later this year.

For many years he worked out of a loft building on Chambers Street that he bought in 1977 for \$120,000. In 1978, he was appointed by President Jimmy Carter to a six-year term on the National Council on the Arts, a group that advises the National Endowment for the Arts.

In later years he spent much of his time in Aripeka, Fla., where he kept a home, an office and studio space. A catastrophic fire destroyed the properties in 2009.

William Acquavella, the New York art dealer, said that Mr. Rosenquist lost a significant amount of work in the fire. "He just rebounded from it," he said. "Another guy would have had a tougher time bouncing back. But he enjoyed working, he enjoyed creating things, and he enjoyed painting."

Mr. Rosenquist also had homes in Bedford, N.Y., and Miami. Recently, he had been spending most of his time in New York City, Ms. Thompson said.

In 2009, Mr. Rosenquist published an autobiography, "Painting Below Zero: Notes on a Life in Art," written with David Dalton. Reviewing it in The New York Times, Dwight Garner called it "a ruddy and humble book, lighted from within by the author's plainspoken, blue-collar charm."

In the book, Mr. Rosenquist talked about the movement he helped launch.

“Pop Art. I’ve never cared for the term, but after half a century of being described as a Pop artist I’m resigned to it,” he said. “Still, I don’t know what Pop Art means, to tell you the truth.”