

# Art in America



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**JAMES ROSENQUIST**

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# James Rosenquist at Full Scale

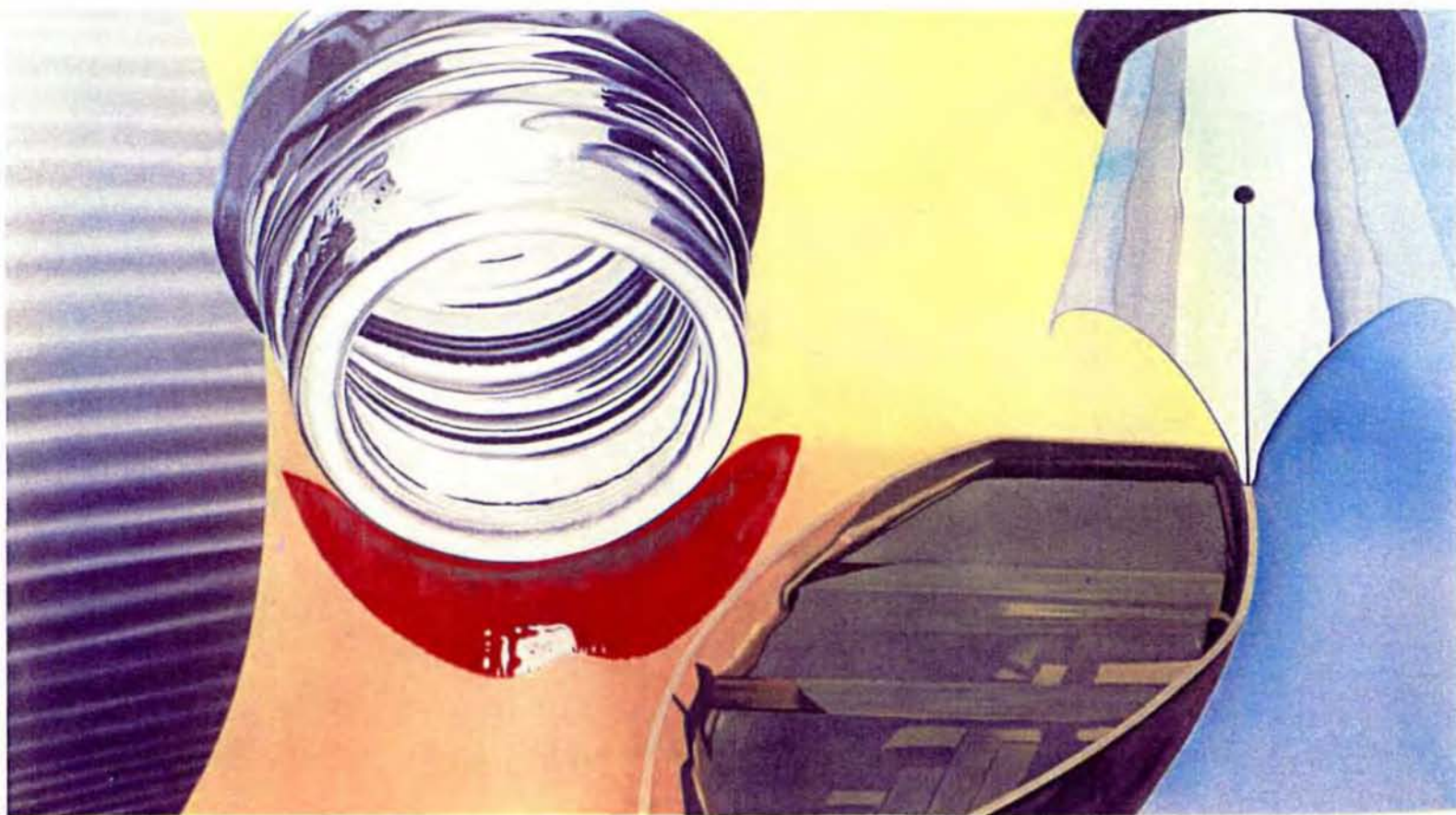
*It has been four decades since Rosenquist emerged as a central figure in the Pop art movement. A large traveling retrospective prompts a critical appreciation of the artist's steadfast visual inventiveness.*

**BY RICHARD KALINA**

Pop art in the United States has had a pretty smooth ride. Apart from some predictable anger, dismay and dismissal early on in the game (after all, how could Clement Greenberg or the displaced Abstract Expressionists really be expected to like the stuff?), the movement has enjoyed 40 years of relatively uninterrupted critical, curatorial and commercial success. It has influenced any number of artists along the way—from the Photo-Realists of the '70s to the Graffiti, Neo-Expressionist, and Neo-Geo painters and sculptors of the '80s and '90s to current art stars like Damien Hirst, Takashi Murakami and Elizabeth Peyton. Pop art is so pervasive, so much a part of the artistic air we breathe, that hosts of young, patently Pop practitioners are rarely identified as such, much less stigmatized for being derivative. The same benign and transparent influence could scarcely be claimed for Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism or even Minimalism. In addition, the work of the core Pop group and its immediate outliers has retained its esthetic coherence, both in its early manifesta-

tions and in its subsequent development. There does not seem to be a major push to rethink or revise our ideas about Pop, and the early texts on the subject feel surprisingly to the point.

Some repositioning has occurred. Think, for instance, of how exhibitions in recent years of Andy Warhol's lesser-known "abstract" work—the camouflage, oxidation, Rorschach and shadow paintings among them—have added unexpected depth to our understanding of his post-'60s work; or how, judging by last season's show of drawings at the Whitney, Claes Oldenburg's works on paper have quite possibly proven to be the most vital aspect of his oeuvre. For the most part, however, Pop has kept on a steady but expansive course. Nowhere is this more evident than in the art of James Rosenquist, the subject of a very large, thorough and exuberant retrospective organized by Walter Hopps and Sarah Bancroft. The exhibition started with a joint show at the Menil Collection and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston last spring, moved







**James Rosenquist: President Elect, 1960-61/1964, oil on masonite, 7½ by 12 feet. Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris.**

**Right, Collage for President Elect, 1960-61, cropped poster, magazine clipping, mixed mediums, 14½ by 23½ inches.**

**Opposite left, Sheer Line, 1977, oil on canvas, 6½ by 12½ feet. Private collection. Photos this article, courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.**

on to the Guggenheim in New York and ends its run at the Guggenheim Bilbao.

**R**osenquist, born in 1933 in North Dakota, has just turned 70. His recent paintings belie his age. Hyperactively ambitious, brimming with visual inventiveness and often hugely scaled (his three-part commission for the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin, *Swimmer in the Econo-mist*, extends to more than 158 feet), this work furthers an approach to painting begun in the early '60s and continued with unrelenting vigor over the years. Rosenquist arrived in New York in the mid-'50s and followed the normal path for young artists at the time: school (Art Students League), meeting other artists of more or less his generation (Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and others), hanging out at the Cedar Tavern with the older Abstract Expressionists and painting energetically moody abstract paintings (several of which are included in the show). Although things were cheaper then, rent still had to be paid and food and art supplies bought. Rosenquist, who had sign- and billboard-painting experience in Minnesota, found work as a billboard painter, rising to be the head painter at Artkraft-Strauss Sign Corporation, one of the leading companies in the field. That experience served him well. Rosenquist's contemporaries were beginning to look out at the world of popular culture and were increasingly engaged with



what they saw. Rosenquist became caught up with mass-media imagery, too, and his billboard painting provided him with some important tools: a vocabulary of commercial motifs, the ability to render forms with exactly the right combination of blur and sharp focus, and the experience of dealing with large scale. As Pop art began to coalesce as a movement at the dawn of the '60s, Rosenquist was one of those at its center.

A number of reasons are usually cited to explain the initial appeal and success of Pop art: the replacement of a played-out expressionism, the emergence of a new group of collectors, dealers, critics and curators, and the consolidation of American economic and cultural power. But the most important factor, it



seems to me, lay in the making of the art itself. The major movements of the 20th century got their grip because they provided a significant number of artists with innovative ways to create paintings and sculptures. Artists are, almost invariably, technically skilled. They like making things. What new movements do is provide formal and theoretical channels for this desire. (With Cubism, for example, all that pent-up academic drawing ability—and this includes the knowledge of how, precisely, to draw “clumsily”—was finally released and set on innovative and challenging tasks.) When something really fresh comes along, vistas open up, and suddenly there’s lots of new art just waiting to be done. Adding to the sense of promise and urgency is the fact that many other artists—both friends and rivals—are engaged in more or less the same thing. The new art is being made, talked and written about, and shown. The feeling among artists is: let’s get going, there’s no time to waste. The excitement factor is huge, and this is what art history tends to submerge with its cataloging and theorizing impulses.

The Rosenquist show lets us in on some of this—for want of a better word—fun. The Pop artists’ big discovery was that they lived in a world of images, mostly printed ones, and that they could make their art from *that* model rather than the “real” world of people, objects and nature. (Even the classic sculptural works of George Segal, ostensibly rooted in materiality—actual restaurant equipment, butcher shop and gas station paraphernalia, and of course plaster casts of people—seem to be less depictions of observed reality than three-dimensional imaginings of the sort of informal American scene photography exemplified by the work of Robert Frank.) In addition, as Pop (and Minimalism and Color Field painting) developed in the early ’60s, artists were able to shake themselves free of the assumption that the personal, the diaristic, the mystical or the transcendent were necessary elements of their work. Making something clean, crisp, unsentimental and unadorned can be a very attractive and liberating option. Artists were now allowed to exercise it.

One of the most revealing aspects of the Rosenquist show is the inclusion of the collages that he used as preparatory studies. Pictures clipped from magazines were cut apart—a barefoot but trousered set of striding legs for *Early in the Morning* (1963); dancing feet in white socks and clunky black oxfords for *The Promenade of Merce Cunningham* (1963); a plate of spaghetti, a hair dryer and an airplane for *F-111* (1964-65)—and combined with other photos, drawings, gridded lines for blow up and transfer, and scrawled instructions. In much of the early work (and a good deal of the later), the relative proportions of the collaged source material were left largely unchanged. In *President Elect* (1960-61/1964), for example, two of the three main elements of the painting—John F. Kennedy’s face, a woman’s hands holding a piece of cake, and the front wheels and hood of a Chevrolet—retain their original proportions, while the car on the right is slightly enlarged to provide the necessary visual weight to hold the painting down. This isn’t to suggest that Rosenquist leaves his source material unaltered—he crops images and adjusts their color and tone. Even more important is how he renders compelling the transition from one element to the other. In the *President Elect* collage, the photograph of Kennedy is in black and white; in the painting it’s depicted in color. Conversely, the hands and cake start off in color and become black and white in the painting. The car’s color, a rather bland beige in the original advertisement, is transformed into a light and somewhat nasty greenish yellow, which sets up a play of complementaries with the adjacent crimson field. (That color change foreshadows the substitution of a poisonously glowing chartreuse for the expected golden yellow in the slab of melting butter in *U-Haul-It*, 1967, a painting of disturbing intensity.) In *President Elect* it is the passage from Kennedy’s face to the hands and cake in the center that is of special interest. The hands seem to morph out of the face, a thumb growing out of an eyelid, a finger from a neck. A section of Kennedy’s mouth is overlaid in black and white, and to make things more complex, the background of the grisaille cake area is a rainbowlike gradation from red to blue.

**It’s surprising that Rosenquist, who often adds sculptural elements to his canvases, has ventured so rarely into pure sculpture—he clearly has a feel for it.**



**Tumbleweed, 1963-66, chromed barbed wire, neon, wood, approx. 54 by 60 by 60 inches. Collection Virginia and Bagley Wright.**

These sorts of operations can be accomplished precisely because the final product is *not* a collage. Rosenquist transforms the materially disjunctive qualities of collage into the planar unity of painting. When Surrealists such as Magritte and Delvaux put odd things together on a canvas, the goal was to create a seamless, psychologically plausible world. You could set a large shaving brush next to a small bed, but they were together in a recognizable and believable room—illuminated by the same light, casting mutually consistent shadows. With Rosenquist, that was not a concern. The universe that his objects inhabit is a combination of painting space and printed image space—the sort of visual environment that artists and audiences from the ’60s on would understand perfectly well.

**R**osenquist’s images are, in some ways, pretexts. The paintings certainly reflect the clamor, glamour and chaos of the modern world. I believe, however, that in spite of their obvious referents they are ultimately not about subject matter as such. Instead, they explore, through the vehicle of everyday



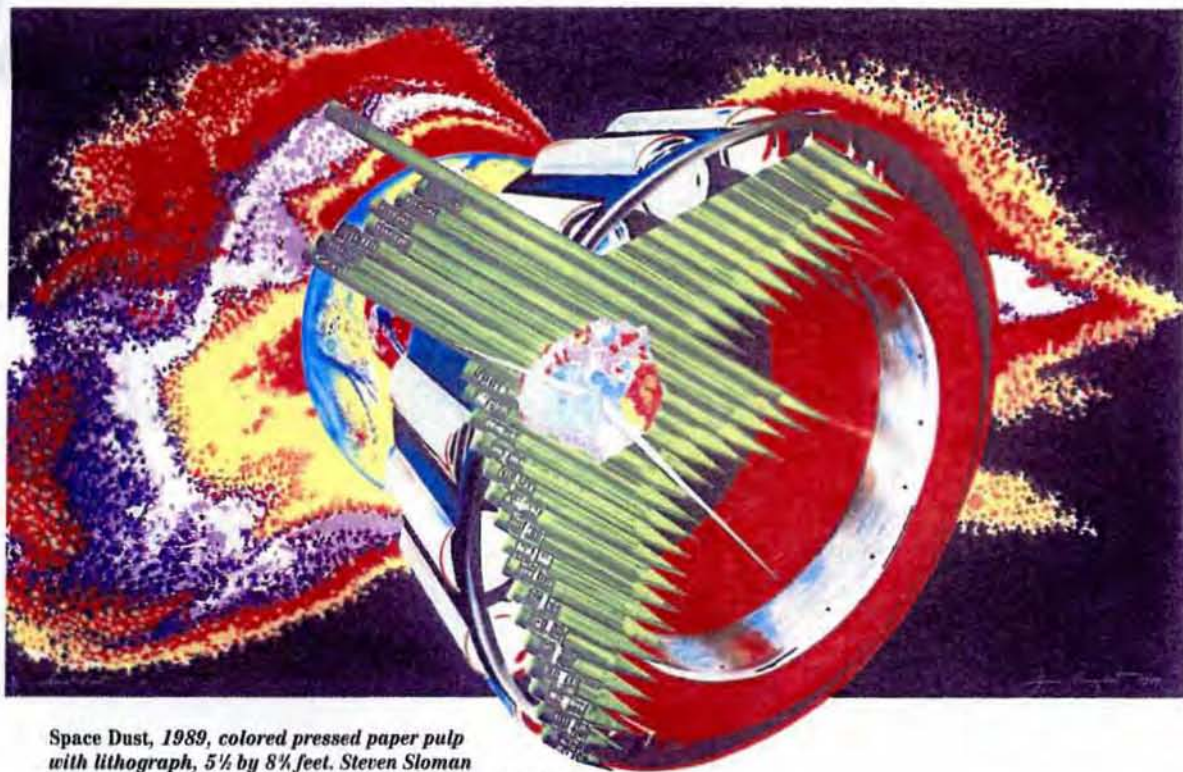
**By their nature, Rosenquist's works are prone to excess and overt artifice. He is always trying out new devices, new imagery and new combinatory methods.**

images (which of course trip multiple associational switches), sets of complex formal issues—the play of scale, color, tone, line and focus—and in doing so posit a visual language that is culturally and esthetically rich.

Look, for example, at *Untitled (Between Mind and Pointer)*, 1980, a 6½-by-5½-foot painting divided roughly into quadrants. Occupying the lower right section is a glass bowl with two egg yolks, above which is a white T-shirt, its

without resorting to direct (and easy) depiction, to mere naming. *Untitled (Between Mind and Pointer)* gets its real power not from any Surrealist frisson, but from the masterful way it is composed and painted. The comingling of transparency and opacity is handled with remarkable skill. The razor blade, for example, moves seamlessly from polished-mirror reflectiveness to glasslike insubstantiality, while the view through its open center portion goes deeper, cutting through the objects behind it to the ground of night sky. The bowl of eggs is as virtuoso a bit of paint handling as I've seen in a modern painting. The golden yolks, simultaneously substantial and fragile, float in a slightly bubbled pool of honey-colored whites, and the bowl, clear in the portion closest to the viewer, dazzlingly white on its far side, glows with an almost ecclesiastical luminosity. The white T-shirt is worthy of John Singer Sargent, and the can top, with its concentric rings, shows yet again (think of the hair dryer, perched on top of the little girl's head in *F-111*) Rosenquist's ability to effortlessly handle the depiction of shiny metal.

Compositionally, the painting is a study in circles and ovals: eggs, shell, bowl, can top, stars, the T-shirt's shoulder seam, the different sections of the key ring. The curved forms are held together with strong diagonals and anchored by the squared-off verticality of the T-shirt sleeve at the upper right of the picture. The razor blade, can top and shirtsleeve placed parallel to the picture plane reiterate its flatness, while depth is evoked by linear perspective, modeling and atmospheric depiction. This spatial give-and-take is echoed by the interplay of volume and edge, the way, for example, that the capacious interior of the bowl is set against the thinness of its rim. (A few years earlier, in *Sheer Line*, 1977, Rosenquist did something similar: a sunken rowboat, its volume emphasized by the water filling it, has its top right side traced out, as it were, by the point of a giant fountain pen set directly on it.) As for tone and color, the painting moves smoothly from darkness to brightness, and the range of yellows in the



*Space Dust*, 1989, colored pressed paper pulp with lithograph, 5½ by 8½ feet. Steven Sloman © James Rosenquist/Tyler Graphics Ltd./VAGA, New York.

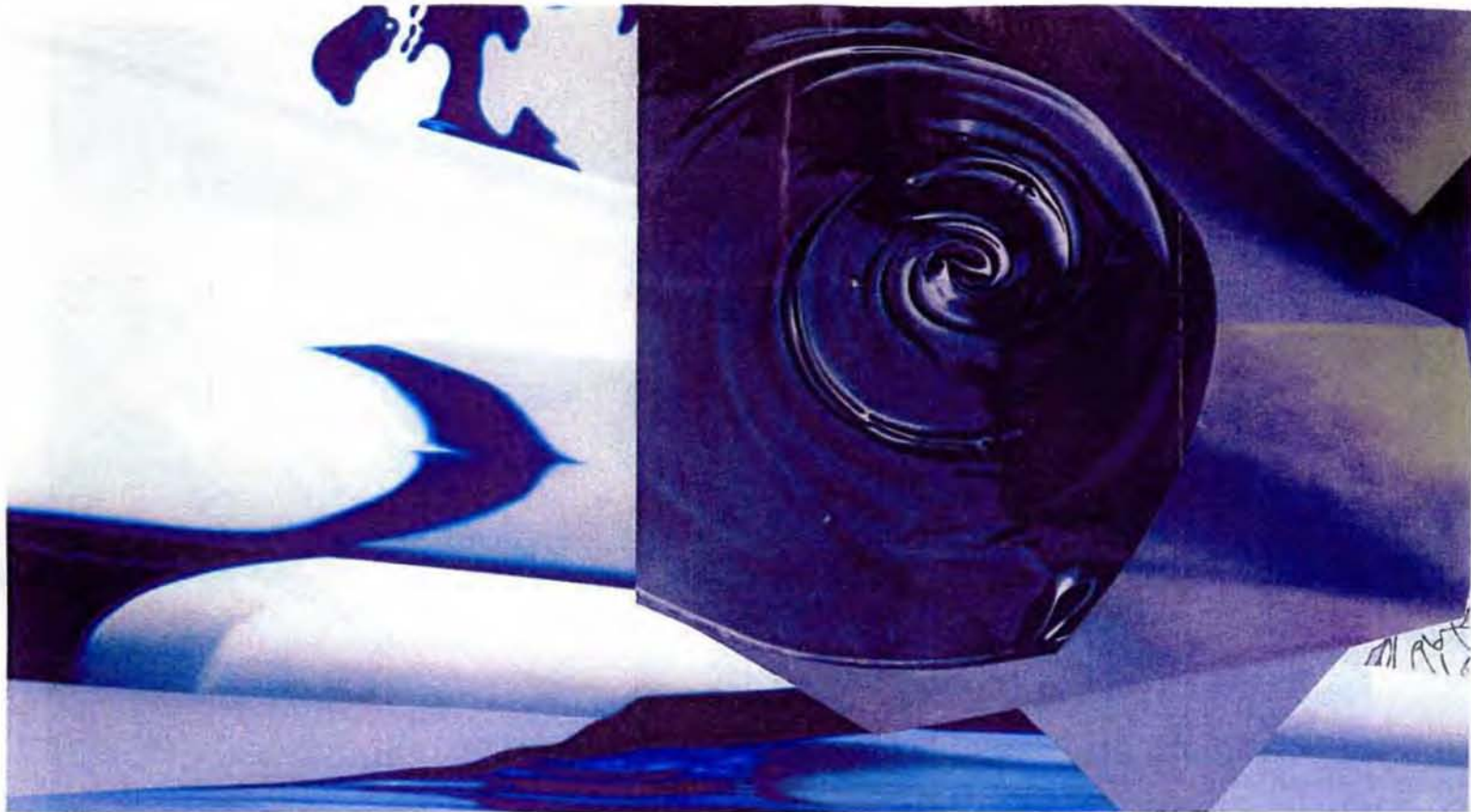
sleeve hanging vertically and its body poised at a diagonal. The left side of the painting consists of a top-down view of an aluminum can with two can openers attached to it; two triangular holes have already been punched out of the lid. Below the can top are a double-edged razor blade, what I take to be a key chain and a half shell of one of the eggs. The whole picture, with the exception of a slice of a counterlike surface on which the bowl rests, is arrayed against a star-filled sky. It's permeated with thematic connections: the opened can and the opened eggs; church keys (colloquial for bottle/can openers) and key chains; the razor-sharp creases of the shirt and the razor blade; the transitoriness of the soon-to-be-cooked eggs contrasted with the permanence of the stars (as with much of Rosenquist's work, the quotidian is folded into the sublime). Rosenquist's paintings set up the visual equivalent of a free-floating language, with the depicted objects and the spaces between them functioning as nouns, verbs and modifiers, depending on how we view them. It is a language given to punning and play, and, not unimportantly, to a deadpan wit.

It's essential to keep in mind that Rosenquist is a product of the mid-20th-century esthetic view that valued content over subject matter. As opposed to the more openly narrative work of artists today, there was a strong feeling at the time that significant things could and should be said

eggs diverts us from the fact that this is, for all intents and purposes, a grisaille painting.

The same kind of analysis can be applied to most of Rosenquist's multiple-image paintings, and I find distinctions between early and late work to be, at heart, minor. If you like what Rosenquist is up to generally, then you are going to be attracted to a wide range of his work, though certainly not everything. There's a reason for that besides the usual qualitative ups and downs. Rosenquist's paintings are, for the most part, complex confections. A host of disparate and clearly readable items are brought together and positioned to interact with each other in a pictorial arena. They don't really want to do that, and even though disjunction is firmly ensconced in 20th-century esthetics, a certain internal resistance from the constituent parts is to be expected—or else the work of art would not be read as dissonant in the first place. In Rosenquist's case, the elements of his paintings are particularly immiscible. Technical bravura becomes the principal glue that keeps the work intact. We are, however, suspicious of conspicuous skill, and value a certain awkwardness of facture as a sign of sincerity or vigor. Rosenquist's paintings are anything but artless. They are elegant pictorial constructions, crafted to a high state of finish, and cannot hide the fact. Unlike most of Lichtenstein's





**Rosenquist's hugely scaled recent works further an approach to painting begun in the early '60s and continued with unrelenting vigor over the years.**

and virtually all of Warhol's paintings, they do not mask their sophistication behind a facade of straightforwardness and simplicity. Nor do they, as with Rauschenberg's transferred images, downplay disjunctiveness by obscuring, fading, bleeding or blurring those images.

By their nature, Rosenquist's works are prone to excess and overt artifice. He is always trying out new devices, new imagery and new combinatory methods. Their allure to him is palpable, but not everyone will be similarly taken. The works of the 1980s that merge foreground and background images by multiple sharp slices (allowing for a reading of one image through another) feel tricky and decorative to some viewers. That they often combine dense floral imagery rendered in heated-up tropical colors with women's faces, as in *Flowers, Fish and Females for the Four Seasons* (1984) and *The Persistence of Electrical Nymphs in Space* (1985), only adds to this perception. To my way of thinking, however, they speak to the general tang of decadence and excess, the predilection for a somewhat suffocating beauty that was in the air at the time. Just because Rosenquist's images come largely out of the low-affect commercial vernacular doesn't insulate them from the oddness and creepiness that inhabits so much of the Surrealist enterprise. You only have to glance at the news media to find potential Rosenquists. As I write these lines, the *New York Times* reports: "According to advisors and court records, Michael Jackson's wealth is being consumed by lawsuits and an appetite for monkeys, Ferris wheels, and surgery." You can almost see the painting.

The show includes some of Rosenquist's most unsettling paintings, the "Gift Wrapped Dolls" of 1992 and 1993. Single-image works painted on 5-foot-square canvases, this group depicts dolls' heads behind a scrim of crinkly cellophane wrapping. Sometimes the wrapping is virtually transparent, as in *The Serenade for the Doll after Claude Debussy, Gift Wrapped Doll #1* (1992), or sometimes it presents itself as a nearly impenetrable maze of multicolored reflections, as in *The Serenade for the Doll after Claude Debussy, Gift Wrapped Doll #16*

(1992). In either case, our visual path is blocked. In the first painting, the right-hand side of the face is obscured in deep shadow while the left eye is whited out by a blaze of reflection; in the second, we catch an eye, some nose and half a mouth. The dolls face us directly. The image is cropped a bit at the top, which emphasizes the sense of confinement and airlessness, the claustrophobia of pushing up against the impenetrable wall of the picture plane. That they are children's dolls, with all the cuteness and pleasant sentiment that comes along with the subject, only makes the paintings scarier. This unease is intentional. Rosenquist has stated that the paintings were made as a response to the AIDS crisis. Coming a few years after the birth of his daughter, they reflected the fraught nature of the relationships that young people might expect to experience during the time of an ongoing epidemic.

**R**osenquist has never shrunk from the theatrical (or the cinematic), and often the most interesting theatrical arena is the political. Over the course of his career, he has made major paintings opposing the Vietnam War and its spread in Southeast Asia, the Cold War, ethnic violence in the Balkans, and guns and militarism in general. The threat to the environment has also engendered a number of works, among them *Welcome to the Water Planet* (1987) and *The Bird of Paradise Approaches the Hot Water Planet (Grisaille)*, 1989. *F-111*, probably his most famous painting, deals with the disturbing yet seductive nexus of consumerism and militarism. The painting has been exhibited and reproduced frequently, and over the years it has been taken to be an indictment of the war in Vietnam. The fact that the F-111, a plane developed about the same time Rosenquist painted it and with a well-known history of mechanical troubles, was used extensively in that conflict has only added to the perception. The genesis of the painting, however, was a complex one, and concern about what was in 1964 a smaller-scale engagement was only a part of the artist's motivation.

In a recent conversation I had with him, Rosenquist referred to a number of the elements that contributed to the making of the painting. Political issues were certainly on his mind, including the overdependence of the American economy on military spending. Meeting a photographer, Paul Berg, who had just come back from Vietnam, was also a factor, as was the experience of visiting an amusement park, Six Flags Over Texas, that featured a real B-36 bomber parked on the grounds. But other concerns weighed in as well, especially ones related to the perception of large visual fields. Rosenquist recalls seeing a





The left half of *The Swimmer in the Econo-mist* (painting 1), 1997-98, oil on canvas, 11 1/2 by 90 1/2 feet overall. Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin. (Work continued on next page.)

Salon-style exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where the viewing of the spread of paintings was complicated by the assertive maroon wallpaper on which they were hung. He was additionally affected by memories of painting a huge red billboard high over Times Square and looking down to see the street below suffused with green, the sign's complementary color. He also cited Monet, Newman and Pollock, and their work in elongated formats that forces the viewer's peripheral vision to play a significant role in the work's perception. Peripheral vision has been of great interest to Rosenquist, and those early, almost environmental pieces, *F-111*, *Horse Blinders* (1968-69) and *Horizon Home Sweet Home* (1970), engendered numbers of paintings over the years that imaginatively explore the phenomenon. (A multipaneled, roomlike work that periodically fills with swirling dry-ice fog, *Horizon Home Sweet Home* was exhibited concurrently with the Guggenheim show at Robert Miller Gallery's temporary annex at Annina Nosei Gallery in Chelsea.)

*F-111*'s shape and scale are of particular importance. The painting, now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, measures 10 feet high by 86 feet long. Originally exhibited in the front room of Leo Castelli's townhouse gallery on East 77th Street, it wrapped itself around the room's four walls. That configuration was duplicated at the Guggenheim, where the painting formed a freestanding room of its own—intimate, though hardly cozy. Oddly, this setup both countered the painting's formidable size by putting it in a human-scale architectural environment, and increased its intimidating effect by having the images push at the viewer from all sides.

The exhibition configuration notwithstanding, what makes this painting so strong is a device so stunningly simple I'm surprised that it has not been used more often. The problem with very long paintings is that they tend to either an overall or an episodic read. In both, a narrative situation is implied that is either too loosely sprung, in the case of the overall, or too controlling, in the case of the episodic. Either you meander or you are marched from one part of the painting to the next. In *F-111*, on the other hand, the virtually life-size image of the tactical fighter-bomber for which the painting is named runs along the entire length of the painting, forming its perceptual spine. Other images and various colors and textures are cut into, set behind or superimposed on the airplane, but at no point do you lose sight of it. Part and whole are set into balance, and the iconic and the narrative coexist in a pictorial world that both stops time and lets it spin out.

The images that play out along the length of the plane join the horrific to

the mundane. The mushroom cloud of a nuclear blast is superimposed on the roughly similar form of a gaily colored beach umbrella and is set next to a blue, cloudlike mass of bubbles escaping from a diver's breathing apparatus. The needlelike tip of the plane's nose pushes through a mass of blood-red spaghetti, like a knife through human viscera. Lightbulbs glow malevolently, and a deeply ridged snow tire seems ready to smash a piece of white angel food cake. A cute little blonde girl with white ribbons in her hair sits under an outsize metal hair dryer that resembles a warhead. (At first we take this image—arguably the most memorable in the painting—at face value, but upon reflection it becomes less plausible; we register the strangeness of a child using that sort of beauty parlor equipment, and Rosenquist combined two source photos to produce it.) Throughout the painting, Day-Glo colors jostle muted tones, expanses of wallpaperlike patterns are stenciled onto depictions of machine parts, and painted canvas is joined to shiny aluminum. *F-111* is political and visual opera—tragedy with a grin. It is one of the most recognizable paintings of the postwar years and is our equivalent of the grand history painting, a *Raft of the Medusa* for contemporary times.

While Rosenquist's theatrical impulses are always present, what keeps them under control is his bent for abstraction. This shows itself to particularly strong effect in the "Speed of Light" series, executed between 1999 and 2001. *The Stowaway Peers Out at the Speed of Light* (2000), the most ambitious painting in the series, sets into motion a kaleidoscopic whirl, 17 feet high by 46 feet long, of brightly colored, largely abstract fragments. A contemporary Futurist vision, the painting recalls Umberto Boccioni's 1910 masterpiece *The City Rises*. The blurred primary colors, the swirling, torqued movement, the speed, the ecstatic joining of human perception with the inanimate are the stuff of Boccioni's feverish optimism. Rosenquist's painting attempts to convey the experience, as Einstein's theory of relativity would have it, of observing and being observed at the speed of light. It's a mission

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